Reflection, Participation and Professional Power: Considerations from Analysing Reflective Practice

Outline

What is Reflective Practice?

Who participates in Reflective Practice?

Context
Reflective Practice:  
What is it?

- ‘Knowing for Doing’ (Ixer, 1999, p.514)
  - A Process of tacit knowledge production formed from self-analysis of previous personal and professional experiences, which can then be transferred into skills for future practice.
  - Tacit Knowledge
    - ‘a spontaneous and skilful actor, who just knows how to act’ White/Stancombe (2003, p.17)

- Roots:
  - Dempsey et al., 2001 attributes it to:
    - Dewey’s (1933) reflective inquiry
    - Kolb’s (1984) learning cycle
    - Reflection-in-Action & Reflection-on-Action

- Uses: To Illustrate Competency
  - Social Work/Education/Nursing…
  - Supervision/Social Work Education ~ Learning Journals/Portfolios
  - Actors: Supervisors & Supervisees in the professions/Educators & Students

- ‘A Cult Following’ (Ixer, 1999)

  **Benign and Progressive**
  **Or**
  **A Buttress of Professional Expertise?**
Participation
In Reflective Practice

• Raw Material of Reflection:
  o Interactions with Clients
  o Mediated through internal thoughts, feelings and experiences of professional
  o Meaning-Making removed from the practice situation & actors involved especially clients into the professional realm of supervision/education

• Defining feature is its exclusionary participative model
  o Validates Professional interpretations & has no mechanism for voicing client perspectives ~ invisible

• Why are Client Perspectives ‘Irrelevant?’
  o Social Work’s Knowledge-building Project

  “I [Client] enjoy the excitement of discovery about his [professional] knowledge.” (Schon, 1991, p.302)
  o Discourses informing it: eg. Professional ‘Boundaries;’ individualist theories; pathologising of active clients
  o Reduction to Professional Competency compromises its analytical focus

Why has participation within Reflective Practice been limited?
The Context of Reflective Practice

- Managerialism & Consumerism

  o Increased Efficiency & Competition within Welfare Provision drains complexity from Social Work Role (Harlow, 2004)

  o Strengthened regulatory role as accountability shifts from process & input to outcomes & outputs (Harlow, 2004)
  ~ Consequence: a task-centred Practice

  o Social Work reduced to ‘patching up’ role rather than broader social change ~ detached from theoretical base in Social Sciences & Social Movements

  ‘a piece-meal patch-up work with no hope of a better tomorrow.’ (Healy, 2000)

  o Social Workers as producers of welfare commodities & deliverers of neo-liberal policies ~ residualised welfare (‘targetted’)/shift from ‘carrot’ to ‘stick’ (Penna et al, 2002)
  Eg. Case Management; Manufacturers of Care Packages

  o Clients reinvented as consumers ~ only active in terms of their ability to ‘choose’ [read receive] welfare products but not active in needs assessments & welfare construction ~ clients as passive

Reflective Practice:
Companion or Challenger of Managerialism?
Reflective Practice in a Managerialist Context

• Potential to analyse this paradigmatic shift impeded by:

  o Its exclusionary model of participation (reinforces client passivity/lack of access to Reflective Process silences those best positions to critique neo-liberal welfare)

  o Competency ~ reduced to information-gathering technique to be used in assessment & care package design

  o Dominant discourses utilised: lack of socio-cultural lens (Susan White); emphasis on professional’s personal process

• An Alternative View:

  Fook (1999) more optimistic re its potential to challenge practice context ~ practitioners questioning their assumptions
  A vehicle for Empowerment?
  Empowerment as ‘the capabilities to interact’ (Beck et alt, 2001, p.313)

_Contextual trends that shape the form of Reflective Practice_
Reflective Practice & Uncertainty

• Current Problematising of Uncertainty ~ modernity &
globalisation debates
  Apparent collapse of grand narratives & distrust of
  professionals grows

  o Social Workers as Certainty-Creators eg. Child protection
    Fits with neo-liberal residualised & regulationary welfare

• Two Reponses: Evidence-based Practice & Reflective
  Practice
  Postivist/interpretive

  o Complementary or Competitive?
    Evidence-based Practice dominant model in managerialist
    framework ~ shifts emphasis from ambiguity & politics of
    practice to a ‘what works,’ problem-solving practice
    Both feed into value of competency & add to professional
    stature
    Evidence-based Practice – claims of objectivity.
    Reflective Practice – proving validity
    Including marginalised perspective of clients
    Debates between both – maintain focus on the
    professional’s knowledge
Concluding Thoughts

Methodology

• Based on MSW thesis on Student Experiences of Reflective Practice where Client exclusion was viewed as its defining feature

• Methodology: post-structural emphasis on social world as constructed through discourse & the regulatory role these normalising truths play

• Aim of research intentionally political ~ open up Reflective Practice to critical interrogation

• Analysis based on Literature Review and a Focus Group interview of eight participants ~ student sample Irony ~ no clients involved

• 3 research umbrella questions – what is Reflective Practice; what informs it; how clients can be included in it

• No claim to neutrality ~ no definitive answers. Exploratory ~ promote critical discussion
Some Readings


**Additional Readings**

Foucault, M., 1984: The History of Sexuality; Great Britain: Peregrine Books.