

# 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
  - Donald Schon: The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals think in Action (1991)  
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:
    - Interactions with Clients
    - Mediated through internal thoughts, feelings and experiences of professional
    - 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
    - Validates Professional interpretations & has no mechanism for voicing client perspectives ~ invisible
  - Why are Client Perspectives ‘Irrelevant?’
    - Social Work’s Knowledge-building Project
- “I [Client] enjoy the excitement of discovery about his [professional] knowledge.” (Schon, 1991, p.302)
- Discourses informing it: eg. Professional ‘Boundaries;’ individualist theories; pathologising of active clients
  - Reduction to Professional Competency compromises its analytical focus

***Why has participation within Reflective Practice been limited?***

# The Context of Reflective Practice

- Managerialism & Consumerism
  - Increased Efficiency & Competition within Welfare Provision drains complexity from Social Work Role (Harlow, 2004)
  - Strengthened regulatory role as accountability shifts from process & input to outcomes & outputs (Harlow, 2004)  
~ Consequence: a task-centred Practice
  - 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)
  - 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
  - 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:
  - Its exclusionary model of participation (reinforces client passivity/lack of access to Reflective Process silences those best positioned to critique neo-liberal welfare)
  - Competency ~ reduced to information-gathering technique to be used in assessment & care package design
  - 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 al, 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
- Social Workers as Certainty-Creators eg. Child protection  
Fits with neo-liberal residualised & regulatory welfare
- Two Responses: Evidence-based Practice & Reflective Practice  
Postivist/interpretive
- 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

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