

Towards Reflexive Practice

by

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Abstract

This article invites the reader to consider the importance of reflexivity in the practice of Social Work and outlined three conditions for reflexive practice to flourish in any social service agency.

When I started out as a social worker, one of the questions that created a certain level of distress within me was, “What is your assessment?” The source of my distress was that I did not really know what constituted an assessment. Numerous attempts to make assessments were rebuffed with thoughts that the statements I made were not considered ‘proper’ assessments. I started to wonder if there was a certain template to writing an assessment.

At the same time, I observed that many social workers would use the term, assessment, when they discussed their cases but I wondered if they all had a consensus over what an assessment constitutes. I also wondered (in a manner somewhat akin to discourse analysis) whether the use of the word, assessment, gave weight or legitimacy to what social workers are trying to say about their cases? When we call something an assessment, does it then give us a sense of *certainty* about our cases?

Having to make a statement of assessment also obliged me at the beginning of my career to commit to a dichotomous view of ‘right’ or ‘wrong,’ rather than take a position of

considering how a certain view may or may not fit with my clients. I was also unsure how I could make a statement of assessment and at the same time remain tentative about my assessment.

Hence, I created a working definition of what I think an assessment is and this definition has helped me achieve a certain level of clarity and direction in my work with clients. Doing so was also an attempt to have a handle for myself to hold on to as I began my journey as a social worker.

I define assessment to be a professional view of a client's/family's situation relating to the presenting problem that is informed by theories that guide intervention. Within this definition, there are three guiding principles:

- a. It should relate to the presenting problem

There can be many things to think about when it comes to a case. However, it is important for us to pay close attention to the presenting problem as that is the issue that the client is most motivated to have addressed. We could have hypotheses about many other things, but we have to ask ourselves, "How does the hypothesis relate to the issue for which the client is coming here to seek help?"

- b. It should be informed by theories and literature

There is a lot of muddling up between words like frameworks, theories, and perspectives. Theories usually have descriptive, explanatory and predictive power, while frameworks usually help us to organize information; but the way in which frameworks organize information usually has an implicit theoretical underpinning. Perspectives are usually espoused preferred positions or stances that one would like to take in relation to working with clients, with theories of human nature and what facilitates change being held implicit.

c. It should inform intervention

When we form an assessment, we need to ask ourselves, “How would this inform me about the client?” It is my opinion that we should avoid assessments that are “what Bateson called dormitive principles” (as cited in Kenney, 1983, p. 33). An example of a dormitive principle would be, “He is violent because he has a violent personality.” Such statements are merely a “form of circular description” (Keeney, 1983, p. 33), where we use an abstract term to describe what we are observing but it does not explain anything. Such assessments do not necessarily inform practice or give the social worker ideas about what can be done to address the client’s issue(s).

I found that by adhering to the above three guiding principles, I was pushing myself to be rigorous in my thoughts about my cases and at the same time, they were helping me to reflect on *what*—behaviours, thoughts and interactional patterns—was maintaining the problem, *why* the problem exists, and what my thoughts are about *how* the problem could abate. I was seeking clarity on *how* I am thinking about the cases.

I think it might be useful for me to say that there is a difference for me between being clear and being certain. One can be clear but uncertain—tentative if you like (I don’t mean clearly uncertain)—and another person, interestingly, can be unclear and yet be very certain. If we are unclear and yet certain in our work with cases, we would be like a bull in a china shop. We would trip over all the rules of the families and we would miss all the nuances and subtle messages or alternative ways of doing things that could have been so informative to us when we are working with the individual or the family.

When we have clarity, I believe we are then better able to examine our own biases, be they personal or theoretical. We have preferred ways of seeing and we also have preferred ideas and theories. I guess by thinking about what our preferred way of seeing and thinking is, we would be facilitated to think about the effects of our preferences on the way we work and the effects of our preferences on our clients' responses to our work, and whether these effects are intended. If the effects are not intended, they would invariably lead us to think about whether there are alternative ways of constructing the story or other ways of seeing or thinking about the same situation. As we think about other ways of seeing or thinking, it would lead us to think about other possible courses of action which we have previously not considered. This constant and circular process of examining the links between our personal self, thoughts, emotions, theoretical biases, actions, effects and intended effects would be what I describe as reflexive practice.

Reflexive practice allows us to develop an irreverent stance in our practice (Cecchin, 1992) as we could discard or modify our therapeutic options without having to pledge undying allegiance to a certain method, approach or technique (Burnham, 1992). Reflexive practice also speaks of being collaborative as social service providers. We do not see or fear our theories as esoteric ideologies placed on pedestals, but rather, as tools that help us to work with clients. In the event that these tools do not fit with the clients or their situations, we could explore other tools that might be useful. This idea is akin to the idea of travelling light (Lowe, 2004), an analogy which reminds us to meet our clients with minimum "theoretical baggage" (p. 7) so that we could connect better with our clients. This would mean that we learn one or two approaches really well so that we can apply them flexibly in multitudes of situations or scenarios, instead of learning by rote many different approaches and insist on clients fitting into our worldview.

My second point about being reflexive is to have a commitment towards the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2012) and not attributing blame. As social service practitioners, we, with at least 15 years of education, are often more highly educated and schooled than most of the clients we serve at social service centres. Most of us are relatively more eloquent and have grown up with socio-cultural backgrounds that may be quite different from our clients. As such, often while we think we might know something about working with the client group at hand, we don't really know everything. We have some expertise but we still may not be the experts of our clients' lives.

As we don't really understand the lived realities of our clients, it is inevitable that we are often frustrated with what we do not understand. It is during these moments that we need to exercise our commitment not to attribute blame and describe our clients as "manipulative," "undeserving" or "resistant." We have to realize that our descriptions are always prescriptive (Keeney, 1983). We will often act in accordance to our own descriptions of our clients and hence unwittingly reproduce behaviours in our clients consistent with our description. Madsen (2007) describes it as, "What we see is what we get" (p. 46) and he beseeches us to examine the effects of our assumptions, the context of our assumptions and our constraints to preferred directions in life.

Lastly, to be reflexive, I believe we need a management culture that empowers frontline workers and at the same time encourages innovation. It is with such a management culture that social service professionals will be encouraged to constantly reflect on their own practice and pre-established ways of seeing and doing to keep exploring alternative and/or innovative ways of addressing the concerns of our clients. We need to realize that social

change brings to us and our clients new complexities and new challenges, and hence such challenges would often require us to re-look within and sit with the discomfort of uncertainties that what we don't understand. This will be what Cecchin (1992) would describe as being *irreverent* as we constantly look and re-look at our pre-established ways of thinking and doing at multiple levels.

References

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