Skills for Social Work Practice

Second Edition

EDITED BY
ANDY MANTELL

Updated with the Professional Capabilities Framework for Social Work

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Contents

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Acknowledgements

Introduction

Social work skills define the distinctive nature and determine the effectiveness of social work practice. Many of these skills are generic and can be transferred to a wide range of social work practice settings. Whether you are working with young people or an older person you are usually working with families and their life cycle. However, each area has its own distinctive challenges that influence the skills that social workers need to develop. Unlike social work with younger people, social work with adults is guided by a complex raft of legislation spanning over half a century. Practice has evolved, and continues to follow and to shape policy, which has shifted from paternalistic protection to promoting rights and choices.

The personalisation agenda offers a significant challenge to social workers' skill sets. It requires a change from directing to empowering. This will necessitate the development of new skills but also provide the opportunity to rediscover aspects of social work neglected within the era of care management.

Public inquiries into the tragic consequences of policies and practices not working effectively can play a reactive role in shaping practice with children and adults. Yet they can also provide pause for thought, to reflect on our expectations of public services and workers. An emphasis on procedures and targets may serve organisational imperatives, producing outputs far removed from the outcomes that service users seek. This book focuses on those skills that are required for working alongside and for empowering children, young people and adults.

Social work skills are required not just within direct work with carers, service users and other professionals but also in constantly managing and updating our own practice. This fully revised second edition is written primarily for the student social worker and explores the range of skills that are essential in social work and that will be useful across the whole of your programme of study. It has been expanded from the first edition to cover work with children, young people and adults. There is a particular emphasis on how to apply these skills, with the aim of enabling you to gain an understanding of ways to meet current challenges in the field that will also be invaluable in subsequent years when you move into practice as a qualified social worker. Likewise experienced social workers will also find the book provides an overview of social work skills and discussion of a range of perspectives that can inform and refresh their practice.

Book structure

This book is written by staff of the Childhood, Social Work and Social Care Team, University of Chichester, the University of Winchester, Glasgow Caledonian University and colleagues

from the West Sussex Social Services, Hampshire Social Services and Kingston-upon-Thames. As you will see below, the book is divided into four sections. It starts where any social worker's journey must begin, with themselves. After considering reflective practice we explore how to present yourself in person and in writing and skills for self-management. Having looked at *managing self*, we then move on in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 to *building relationships* with others. Our emphasis is on developing empowering and meaningful relationships through engagement. We then explore the nuts and bolts of communication. In looking to self and how we relate to others, these first six chapters provide essential foundations for empowering social work practice. We then focus on particular aspects of *working with others* in Chapters 8, 9 and 10. The need for better collaboration, multi-disciplinary and multi-agency working is emphasised in most recent public inquiries and legislation relevant to social work. Group work by contrast has become neglected, yet is at the heart of how we manage the dynamics within multi-disciplinary teams and a valuable therapeutic tool for working with children, young people and adults. Negotiation skills are, like collaborative working, viewed as essential, yet are often taken for granted, belying their complexity. In the final four chapters we try to unravel how we *make sense of a complex world*, from using the, at times, byzantine legislation, the thorny issues of assessing needs and risks and our ever evolving decision-making processes.

Part 1 – Managing self

Chapter 1 explores how to develop reflective practice, the essential component of competent and safe practitioners. It provides an overview of its main elements and what it means in social work practice. It considers some of the potential benefits from using this technique and offers you practical ways that you can develop your reflective thinking.

Chapter 2 focuses on how workers present themselves. However, it moves beyond simply considering your physical appearance to explore the impact of your behaviours, thoughts, belief systems and values on your practice. Self-presentation is considered as part of your developmental journey, where your destination is becoming a competent, empathic and reflective practitioner.

Chapter 3 considers written presentations of self, for example through the report writing and recording skills required of all social workers. This neglected area of social work practice has been the subject of numerous reports from public inquiries that have highlighted the need for better case recording. This chapter identifies the attributes necessary for effective case recording, what should be included and what to avoid. This exploration situates written communication in the context of the societal, organisational and professional significance attached to documents and ethical and value considerations such as confidentiality and the power of documents.

Chapter 4 considers the skills required for self-management. The pressures of current social work practice require students/practitioners to be efficient and effective at managing their time, often needing to respond to competing priorities. This chapter considers some of the skills relevant to your 'survival tool kit' in the changing social work environment. At the heart of the chapter is the concept and implications of the 'psychological contract' between the employer and the employee, informed by the Social Work Reform Board 'Standards for Employers of Social Workers in England and Supervision Framework' (2010).

The chapter also looks at practical approaches to reduce stress issues concerning time management, and an exploration of the management of change.

Part 2 – Building relationships

Chapter 5 explores the attitudes, knowledge and skills necessary to promote empowerment and participation. It then considers how social workers can act as advocates, identifying the tensions and practice dilemmas and the need to explicitly recognise the social worker's power. This chapter addresses the difficulties social workers can face in promoting anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice, with particular reference to the social model of disability, the experience of people with learning disabilities and empowering practice with children and young people.

Chapter 6 examines the essential interpersonal skills involved in the process of engaging with others. The chapter particularly focuses upon creating effective one-to-one relationships. It explores establishing rapport, listening, developing trust, being clear about the aims of our interventions, maintaining momentum and managing endings.

Chapter 7 builds from Chapter 6 to explore the communication skills necessary for nurturing effective relationships. It applies the skills that promote open one-to-one communication to challenging areas of practice. Particular attention is paid to situations that may challenge our attitudes, may be distressing or can be threatening. In doing so it illustrates the importance of non-verbal communication, silence and reflective practice.

Part 3 – Working with others

Chapter 8 identifies the components of good collaborative practice, including: valuing roles, knowledge of different contexts, building trust and credibility, managing boundaries, and conflict management.

Collaboration as a practice action is explored while other language and terms often used interchangeably are clarified. Key policy and legislation, general protocols and practice requirements are critically reviewed and barriers to collaboration are considered. During the chapter attention is paid to ethical frameworks to aid anti-oppressive and appropriate social work practice.

Chapter 9, after identifying the range of groups within which social workers find themselves, discusses the nature and roles of group working. It highlights the process involved with groups, their life cycle and dynamics. The significance of each stage, from first beginning to managing ending, is emphasised. Factors that encourage or inhibit group development are discussed, with planning recognised as an essential precursor to successful group work.

Chapter 10 reviews the negotiation skills necessary for effective social work practice. Negotiation is an integral but often overlooked aspect of social work. This chapter will provide an exploration of the skills that can be utilised to facilitate and influence negotiations. In so doing it highlights the risks, conflicts, ambiguity and ethical dilemmas that can accompany negotiations.

Part 4 – Making sense of a complex world

Those new to using legislation often focus on 'the facts' of the law, but neglect the significant skill that is required in applying it. Legislation can offer an illusion of certainty which ignores such subtleties as the difference between the spirit and letter of the law. Chapter 11 explores the interface between your understanding of the principles of the legislative context in which you are working, and applying your knowledge of the law effectively and ethically on behalf of service users. This includes recognising how and when to seek legal advice, being confident in your professional expertise in your field and making decisions, with management support, based on that advice.

Chapter 12 examines the assessment process and how it is linked to the broad repertoire of social work skills. Assessment of need is considered within the complex legislative framework for adults, and for children focuses on section 17 of the Children Act 1989 (section 47 is considered in Chapter 13). The chapter highlights the contentious nature of assessments and how they can be led by procedures, needs, rights and risks. This chapter should be considered in conjunction with Chapter 13 and vice versa.

Chapter 13 looks at risk assessment, which has arguably become the key preoccupation and core activity of social workers in statutory settings. When assessing need (see Chapter 12), it is the degree of risk that is often the deciding factor in resource allocation. This chapter will explore what is meant by risk, its impact on social work practice and the skills social workers require to assess and work with risk. It also includes a more detailed exploration of section 47 of the Children Act 1989, which relates to children at risk of significant harm.

Chapter 14 explores the building blocks for effective decision-making in social work. It considers the impact of competing evidence and opinions and emphasises the importance of values and anti-oppressive practice in shaping effective decisions. It aims to equip you with an understanding of the skills necessary for appraising and applying evidence in complex decision-making situations and provides pointers for how to care for yourself in this often stressful process.

Learning features

This book is interactive, drawing on practice-based examples and research to aid your learning. You are encouraged to work through the book as an active participant, taking responsibility for your learning, in order to increase your knowledge, understanding and ability to apply this learning to your practice. You will be expected to reflect creatively on how your immediate learning needs can be met in working with children, young people, adult service users and carers. It is also essential to look beyond your immediate needs to how your longer-term professional learning can be developed in your future career.

We have devised activities that require you to reflect on experiences, situations and events and help you to review and summarise learning undertaken. In this way your knowledge will become deeply embedded as part of your development. When you come to practise learning in an agency the work and reflection undertaken here will help you to improve and hone your skills and knowledge.

This book intends to develop your skills in social work, but we realise that there are many other sources of information that you may wish to access that provide more detailed information on specific aspects of your work and we have suggested further reading at the end of each chapter for you to follow up.

This book has been carefully mapped to the new Professional Capabilities Framework for Social Workers in England and will help you to develop the appropriate standards at the right level. These standards are:

- **Professionalism**

  Identify and behave as a professional social worker committed to professional development.

- **Values and ethics**

  Apply social work ethical principles and values to guide professional practice.

- **Diversity**

  Recognise diversity and apply anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive principles in practice.

- **Rights, justice and economic well-being**

  Advance human rights and promote social justice and economic well-being.

- **Knowledge**

  Apply knowledge of social sciences, law and social work practice theory.

- **Critical reflection and analysis**

  Apply critical reflection and analysis to inform and provide a rationale for professional decision-making.

- **Intervention and skills**

  Use judgment and authority to intervene with individuals, families and communities to promote independence, provide support and prevent harm, neglect and abuse.

- **Contexts and organisations**

  Engage with, inform, and adapt to changing contexts that shape practice. Operate effectively within your own organisational frameworks and contribute to the development of services and organisations. Operate effectively within multi-agency and inter-professional settings.

- **Professional leadership**

  Take responsibility for the professional learning and development of others through supervision, mentoring, assessing, research, teaching, leadership and management.

  References to these standards will be made throughout the text and you will find a diagram of the Professional Capabilities Framework in an Appendix on page 251.

Part 1

Managing self

Chapter 1
Reflective practice
Terry Scragg

Introduction

This chapter will introduce you to the concept of reflective practice, which is an essential skill you will need to develop during your social work course. It will also provide definitions of reflective practice and describe its roots and the different techniques that can be adopted to enhance reflection. Examples of how reflective practice can be used are illustrated through activities and case studies, with recent research findings. Particular emphasis is placed on the supervisory relationship, whether with a practice educator or practice supervisor.

What is reflective practice?

Reflective practice has long been seen as an essential part of social work education at qualifying and post-qualifying levels, as it is in other professions such as nursing and teaching. Reflection is formalised in academic assignments and in

activities undertaken while on placements, with the intention of enabling you to critically examine your practice. At its most straightforward, reflection plays an important part in helping you learn from the experiences of different interventions and other significant events. This is particularly important in enabling you to make links between what you actually *do* when you are working with a client and what you hope to achieve by a particular intervention and, importantly, your feelings about yourself in the practitioner role. In making the connection between these aspects and analysing your thoughts, actions and intentions you can, particularly with support from your tutor or supervisor, gain greater understanding of your own performance and refine your future practice. With these foundations reflection can become an integral part of your everyday practice and part of your lifelong learning as a professional social worker.

Definitions of reflective practice

We have seen that reflective practice is an essential part of your development as a student social worker and, to help you understand more fully what this involves, the following two definitions capture the essence of reflective practice:

A general definition by Boud *et al*. (1985, p43) states that:

> *Reflection is an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull over and evaluate it. It is this working with experience that is important in learning.*

A more recent definition from the Social Work Benchmark Statements, which focus on the activities of the social work student, states that:

> *Reflection is a process in which a student reflects critically and evaluatively on past experiences, recent performances, and feedback, and applies this information to the process of integrating awareness (including awareness of the impact of self on others) and new understanding, leading to improved performance.*

> (QAA, 2008)

These definitions help to focus on what are seen as the essential elements of reflective practice: returning to a past experience, thinking about what took place in a particular intervention and reflecting on your thoughts and actions, and identifying what you might do differently in the future. The definitions suggest that reflection is also a process that leads to learning and improved practice.

ACTIVITY **1.1**

Think back to an event while you were on placement where you were asked to undertake a particular task for the first time and where you felt uncertain about your ability to complete the task effectively.

Comment

You will probably find yourself thinking about recent experiences, particularly if they were new or novel, or where you were concerned about your ability. These could be described as common-sense reflections and do not necessarily promote learning. On the other hand, if your reflection is structured, through the use of a reflective diary where you record your thoughts and feelings, or through dialogue with your supervisor, then it can be an active and critical process with the potential to improve your performance in the future.

Roots of reflective practice

An early exponent of reflective practice was John Dewey, an educational philosopher. Writing in the twentieth century, he identified in reflective thinking many of the key elements that we still use today in the reflective process. For Dewey, reflection is particularly important when we are confronted by a problem that perplexes us or about which we feel uncomfortable. We then reflect on the problem to develop a fuller understanding of it and its possible solutions. We do this through critical reasoning and testing our understanding in practice (Dewey, 1938). In using this approach Dewey argued that it enabled people to avoid becoming trapped by routine thinking and actions driven by external forces or authorities. We can relate this latter view of Dewey's to those social work organisations where emphasis is placed on following standardised procedures, which practitioners find stifles creative work with clients.

Dewey's work laid the foundations for the later seminal work of Donald Schön (1983), who sought to understand how practitioners developed their knowledge bases and then applied this knowledge to their practice. He described the person who consciously thinks about his or her practice as the 'reflective practitioner'. In exploring the work of different professions he described two types of reflection. The first, *reflection in action*, is where you think on your feet while you are engaged in an intervention, drawing on experience and theories, and improvise and modify your practice to achieve a better outcome. The second type is *reflection on action*, where the process is undertaken retrospectively, away from the event, starting with recall, a description of what happened, and leading to the integration of theory and practice to better inform future practice through critical analysis of the event.

Schön's work demonstrated that practitioners often encountered situations that were complex, messy and challenging – the 'swampy lowlands of practice', as he described it – where theory or standard procedures were of little help in making sense of a situation. He recognised that reflecting on their practical experience and applying this learning allowed practitioners to 'revise, modify and refine their expertise' (Finlay, 2008, p4). Through this process practitioners developed 'professional artistry', with an ability to integrate the knowledge gained through reflection with formal scientific theories.

A missing element in Schön's work, according to Greenwood (1993), is the important preparatory element of reflective practice where the practitioner

pauses to think before acting in order to avoid errors. *Reflection for action* takes place prior to an intervention, with the practitioner planning what they intend to do and how they will do it. Thompson and Thompson (2008) see value in the practitioner thinking ahead to what they might encounter, and what precautions they need to take (for example, in meeting a client who has a history of unpredictable behaviour), so that they are much better prepared when they meet the client. This stage of reflection is helpful in that the practitioner anticipates potential difficulties, leading to a greater sense of control and confidence, with the consequent positive effect on morale and motivation.

Of course, *reflection for action* can be helpful at any stage in your development as a student, but it will become more useful as you gain experience of different interventions. You will then be able to look back to previous experiences as your knowledge and understanding grow and you become more confident about what you might anticipate in a particular situation and the steps to consider before you act.

Before we leave the roots of reflective practice it is important to briefly consider the term *reflexivity*. You may see this term used sometimes interchangeably with reflection, but although they are related terms there are important differences between them. Fook (2002) sees reflexivity as taking into account as many different perspectives in a situation as possible, whereas Jude and Regan (2010) see reflexive thinking as the basis for developing multiple hypotheses, as opposed to a fixed, unchanging view of a situation. According to Finlay (2008), reflexive practitioners engage in critical self-reflection: critically reflecting on the impact of their own background, their assumptions and feelings, as well as wider organisational, ideological and political dimensions. Finlay suggests there are contentious issues about how much practitioners should use reflection to focus on themselves as individuals rather than on the larger social context. Considering the fact that the majority of people who use social work services are in receipt of state benefits it is essential that the wider social and economic context is fully explored when reflecting on work with clients (Walker and Walker, 2009).

Creating conditions for reflection on your practice

In order to develop your skills as a reflective practitioner it is important to have a 'personal reflective space' where you can engage with the process of reflection without distractions, focusing on your own thoughts and feelings that you experience during practice interventions and other significant practice events. This means both the physical space and sufficient time to spend on reflective activity. This is where the support of your practice supervisor can be helpful in ensuring you have the facilities and time to use for reflection. You may also need to negotiate for personal reflective space in your personal life, particularly if you are sharing accommodation with others. Sometimes this space will mean time when you are travelling or doing domestic tasks. This form of reflection is described by

Finlay (2008) as *introspection* and is seen as the dominant model of reflection. It means you are taking personal responsibility for making time to reflect on your practice and becoming more confident as a reflective practitioner.

Because you are using an introspective approach when you are reflecting in your personal space, it is important to ensure that you adopt a critical stance. This means recognising the importance of self-awareness (Thompson and Thompson, 2008). It includes identifying what impact you have on a situation, for example, when working with a client where you have been dissatisfied with your performance, or where the situation has left you with uncomfortable feelings. By using these questions as a starting point when you are in your personal space, you can begin to explore what they mean for you in terms of more effectively developing yourself and your practice. The more honestly you can explore these questions, and it may mean some discomfort (Taylor, 2006), the more the reflective process will challenge your thinking about your practice.

Reflection in a supervisory relationship

Although reflection in your personal space will be the main approach to thinking about your practice, your development will be enhanced by working with a skilled and experienced supervisor. This will normally be your practice educator and/or practice supervisor, who is able to facilitate your learning through reviewing your work with clients, challenging you as you describe your practice, giving you feedback on your practice, and identifying future learning needs. For supervision to be effective it relies on the quality of the relationship and open communication between supervisor and student, undertaken on a regular basis, where there is sufficient time, in an appropriate setting, with conditions of privacy and without interruptions.

To create the right conditions for reflection your supervisor needs to be familiar with your practice, understand the main social work theories and the processes involved in reflective practice. They also need to be able to ask the right questions – the *who, what, where* and *when* of practice – that will help you analyse your practice in a way that leads to greater insight into and understanding of your actions and those of others. You should not expect them to have all the answers to practice issues, but rather to be able to facilitate an increased awareness of the range of possible approaches that you can test out in the future.

Your supervisors should also ensure that there is clarity about the purpose of reflection, that it is an activity concerned with professional learning and development, that personal issues are only addressed in so far as they affect your professional practice, and that you are comfortable discussing your performance (Fook and Askeland, 2007) within carefully established boundaries (Hunt, 2001). In a supportive and trusting learning environment, disclosure about aspects of your performance where there is personal discomfort, if managed sensitively by your supervisor, can offer the potential for enhancing learning in a non-judgmental environment.

To ensure that you are able to use the opportunity to reflect with your supervisor it is helpful to do some preparatory work before you meet. Think about the

experiences you have had, review them in your mind so that you are prepared for the session, and offer suggestions for experiences you would like to use for reflection. Here it is helpful to keep a reflective diary, as you are unlikely to be able to rely on your memory for the details of the event, particularly if you have undertaken subsequent work with other clients. If you record in your diary what took place, as soon after the event as possible, you are more likely to capture the issues that are important to take into the supervision session.

Working with your supervisor needs to take place in an atmosphere where you feel safe to express your feelings about your practice. You should be able to acknowledge what you feel are weaknesses in your practice, and where you feel you have made mistakes, so that these can be discussed without any feeling of recrimination. In these conditions you can begin to develop confidence that the feedback you are given, although challenging, is essentially supportive and enables you to develop your practice skills and help you become more self-aware. With the right conditions reflection can be a constructive process and help enhance your confidence and skills, but where conditions are inappropriate then these can inhibit self-development (Yip, 2006).

Creating a suitable environment for learning

It is understandable that you will feel anxious at times during your placement, and while this can be a positive factor in enhancing performance, too much anxiety can inhibit your learning. Anxieties can arise from a number of sources, including adapting to an unfamiliar environment, taking on a new role, establishing a relationship with your supervisor and being responsible for working with clients. You also have to cope with the feeling of being observed and assessed by your supervisor. To help you deal with this anxiety the following conditions should be present in your placement:

- Your supervisor creates a supportive learning environment.

- Your supervisor models appropriate professional behaviour.

- Your supervisor communicates any problems about your performance as soon as they are identified.

- You receive honest feedback that is supportive and provides clear guidelines for improving your performance.

- You are given clear and realistic targets.

- Your supervisor achieves a balance between support and appropriate challenge.

(adapted from McClure, 2002)

These conditions are more likely to be met where the student–supervisor relationship is based on openness, caring, mutually meeting each other's needs, honesty, tolerance and respect for each other.

You are more likely to experience these conditions where the organisational culture values learning and development and encourages its staff to engage in reflection about their own practice (Gould and Baldwin, 2004). An organisation that values feedback on its performance, particularly from those who use the service, and is non-defensive in its evaluation of practice is likely to provide greater opportunities for reflection by its staff.

Reflective techniques

There are a range of different techniques that you can adopt when developing your skills as a reflective practitioner. These will provide you with different opportunities to use different reflective processes and each has its own strengths and limitations.

Reflection for action

Our starting point is *reflection for action*: this is where you gather information through discussion with your supervisor, read case records to try to anticipate the issues you may face, and become aware of the skills and knowledge you will need to feel confident in meeting a client for the first time. This is essentially about thinking ahead and anticipating the important things that you need to be aware of when you meet the client.

Reflection in action

The next stage is *reflection in action*, which involves reflecting on a situation as it occurs, for example, when meeting a client for the first time. In this situation you make connections between your feelings and what social work theories inform you about the situation. When you are engaging with a client and building rapport it is particularly important to be aware of your feelings as this will enable you to be more in touch with the power of the client's emotions (Shulman, 1999). The more you can recognise clients' emotions, particularly around power, status and anxiety, the more successful you are likely to be in your practice (Morrison, 2006).

CASE STUDY

John is visiting Bernard, who has a severe physical disability. As Bernard describes how he manages many aspects of his life, with limited support from a personal carer, John is made aware that severe disability does not mean the person is necessarily restricted in living their life as normally as possible. John also recognises that he has tended to place too much focus on Bernard's physical impairment and how this impinges on his life, and has failed to see him more holistically. John also begins to realise that the seminar he attended on the social model of disability now makes sense as Bernard describes his life experience and how he manages his disability.

Comment

When you are faced with a new situation you are observing and listening to what the client is saying and this begins to influence how you view the person and their needs. It can also trigger thoughts about theories that you have read that begin to make sense when you reflect on the experience, and influence how you view similar situations in the future.

Maclean and Harrison (2009, p121) suggest that reflection in action involves:

- thinking ahead ('Right, if that happens, I need to . . .');

- being critical ('That didn't seem to work very well . . . ');

- storing up experiences ('I could have dealt with that better; next time I'll try . . .');

- analysing what happened ('She is saying that to test me – I think I should . . .').

Of course, reflection in action is taking place continually if you are focusing on being as effective as possible in an intervention and this helps you develop an awareness of the needs of clients and your practice. As Maclean and Harrison (2009) point out, there are limitations. You are only seeing things from your own perspective and the timescale can be extremely short, with decisions having to be made quickly. The scope for reflection may be limited and you may have to exercise judgment in a fast-changing situation and often under extreme conditions (Ixer, 1999).

CASE STUDY

Ben is a student on placement in a learning disability service and has been asked by his supervisor to visit Graham, a client who has recently moved into his own flat and is being supported to live independently for the first time. When Ben meets Graham he feels unsure about how he should respond as Graham speaks very slowly and is difficult to understand. Ben remembers what he has read about communicating with a person with a learning disability and, 'thinking on his feet', he slows down, using short, simple sentences and giving Graham time to respond. He also focuses on what Graham is saying and what he is trying to express through his non-verbal gestures. Ben becomes more relaxed, waiting for Graham to answer and is slowly able to understand what Graham is saying and begins to form a picture of how he is coping in his new flat.

Comment

This situation demonstrates the value of reflection in action, where you can pause and rethink your approach, drawing on previous experience (in this example, discussion with your supervisor and reading about the needs of people with learning disabilities). It is all too easy to be overwhelmed by the situation and

forget what you have been told or read when you are sitting in front of the client thinking, 'What do I say next?' Pausing to rethink your approach helps you begin to refine your practice and, most importantly, improves your response to the needs of the client.

Reflection on action

In contrast, *reflection on action* is undertaken subsequent to the intervention. The main difference is that you are no longer under pressure to respond in a particular way and have more time to reflect on the intervention. Here you are able to explore why you acted in the way you did and what was happening during an intervention. When you are reflecting on the action with your supervisor you overcome the limitation of only seeing your practice from your own perspective. Working with another person who can clarify and challenge your assumptions about your practice adds a further critical dimension to the process of reflection.

CASE STUDY

Sarah is completing her placement in a local authority children and families service and she has been asked to work with Lindsay, a single parent, whose daughter Leah is the subject of a Child Protection Plan. Lindsay has a history of substance misuse, but has been abstinent for some time following a Drug Rehabilitation Requirement imposed by the court. Sarah is visiting her to ensure that Leah is not at risk of neglect due to her mother's history of substance misuse. Lindsay is very guarded in her responses to Sarah, who is trying to build her relationship with Lindsay in order to work more effectively with her and support her, so that she doesn't slip back into using illegal substances. During the interview Sarah feels inhibited in asking specific questions about Leah and is frustrated at not being able to make a more effective judgment about Lindsay's care for her daughter. When Sarah subsequently meets her supervisor she reflects on the intervention and voices her concern that she has not achieved the correct balance between engaging effectively with Lindsay and recognising how much Lindsay is working to manage her addiction, and at the same time asking more questions and probing more deeply into the care of Leah. Sarah is concerned that she is not able to ask more challenging questions that would enable her to understand whether Lindsay is being evasive about her lifestyle and her daughter's care. Sarah acknowledges that she has strong feelings about women who use illegal substances and who have childcare responsibilities.

Comment

Through the process of reflection Sarah is able to explore her feelings about substance misuse and her ambivalent feelings about Lindsay and her care for her daughter. Through a series of questions from her supervisor she is able to understand how her feelings might be inhibiting her in adopting a more positive relationship with Lindsay and consequently a more effective way of working with

her that recognises the progress that Lindsay has made to manage her addiction. Challenging her to explore her personal beliefs, assumptions and biases about people who use substances can help Sarah to be a more effective social worker. Her supervisor also suggests that she rehearse some of the challenging questions (reflection for action) she would like to use when she next visits Lindsay so that she can develop a more informed understanding of the quality of care that Leah receives.

Using a framework to aid reflection

When you are reflecting on action you are thinking back to an experience, to what happened and how you felt. This means going beyond simply recalling and describing the event to thinking critically about the different aspects of the experience. Using a framework to guide your reflection can be important as it provides a structure which, with time, can become an established part of the reflective process. There are many similar frameworks in the literature on reflective practice that are intended to help you order your thoughts when thinking about an experience you want to use for reflection. A model of structured reflection based on Johns (2006) should help you to focus on the essential elements that you need to consider when reflecting on a particular experience.

Description of the experience

Stage 1: Reflection

- What was I trying to achieve?
- What were the consequences of my actions?
- How did I feel about the experience as it was happening?
- How do I think the service user felt about it?
- What worked well and what could have been improved?

Stage 2: What factors influenced the way I acted in the situation?

- My thoughts and feelings?
- Knowledge and information I considered?
- The reaction of the service user?
- Other external factors?

Stage 3: Future action

- How might I act differently next time?
- What might be the consequences of a different approach for myself and for the service user?
- What factors might inhibit my acting in a new way?