

Troubling ‘Reflection’ in Social Work education, practice and research



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Summary

A paper by Harry Ferguson in 2018, 'How social workers reflect in action and when and why they don't: the possibilities and limits to reflective practice in social work' acted as a trigger for the authors to re-evaluate the efficacy of 'reflection' in and for contemporary UK social work, educational practice and research. Working within increasingly prescriptive professional requirements we suggest social work has embedded an understanding of reflection that has become increasingly [re] aligned to the 'technical-rational activity' that Schon's theorisations had, in the first instance, set to challenge. Indeed, we suggest, current dominant constructions of 'reflection' individualise and de-politicise the process itself; and as such, have become unsupportive and dismissive of practitioners experience, serving to reinforce notions of subject responsibility allied to Foucauldian notions of governmentality.

We suggest that knowledge created by practitioner 'reflection' is undervalued, diminishing its transformative potential for workers, and those they work with, to contribute towards meaningful, purposeful change on an individual and systemic level. In this paper we introduce an alternative optical metaphor, 'diffraction' (Karen Barad, 2014) as we segue towards proposing the autoethnographic turn as a next step for students and practitioners to draw upon to describe and analyse their personal experiences and those of others.

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Introduction

Within this piece, we build upon an assertion shared with Ferguson (Ferguson, 2018) that ‘Reflection’ is currently considered a primary mechanism by which meaning is established in social work, concerning itself as it does with revealing common origins (homologies) and comparing the similarities of things (analogies) and that the teaching and development of reflective capability remains orthodoxy for even the most progressive, critical pedagogic practice (Adamson, 2011). We accept that reflection can be effective with finding out what happened and how, what could have been done differently, what an experience meant for people and how might it be explained; essentially a methodology seeking to establish and understand, what has or what is occurring. We also acknowledge, like Ferguson, that there are limitations and, whilst we still envisage a place for reflection (and reflexivity), we are questioning the dominant expectation within Social Work education and practice, that the more and better the individual reflects, the broader and deeper will be the personal insight and understanding.

We are therefore challenging what we consider to be the contemporary status quo of both practice and academia which assumes knowledge stemming from practitioner reflection, on and in practice, only exists to further inform and expectantly ‘improve’ their practice. Paradoxically, and most critically, knowledge emerging from the reflective turn is relegated to the oft viewed inferior realms of feelings and opinion, rather than contributing to evidence based practice.

Ferguson’s research captures the consequences for practitioners of this within his analysis of the ‘fractured’, ‘defended self’ and, most critically, the implication that the individual psyche of social workers is threatened, under attack, or at worst, actually

injured. Whilst not explicitly referring to the 'Resilience' discourse in social work, concerning itself as it does with practitioner responses to workplace stress (Adamson et al 2014) or to new public management more generally (Joseph, 2013), Ferguson does suggest developing approaches towards managing, what he describes as the, 'difficult circumstances' arising from practicing social work that impact on a social worker's capability to think and feel what it is they can and should achieve. His is, primarily, a response framed by psychodynamics seeking to reveal how practitioners 'contain themselves', and further suggesting that improved 'internal supervision' along with external support must be organised around the reconnection of "feelings and sensory experiences that may have been split off in action and thought" (Ferguson, 2018, p. 11)

Ferguson's paper provided fertile ground from which to proffer a wider conceptualisation of containment, one conceived by Jaques (2001), as a 'social defence' whereby according to Long (2006) (as cited in Whittaker, 2011, p. 482) "unconscious collusions or agreements within organisations [tend] to distort or deny those aspects of experience that give rise to unwanted emotion", and where social defences are not only psychodynamic in nature but also "the result of poor organisational structures" (Whittaker, 2011, p. 482).

Findings from our research on the place and meaning of resilience in practice reveal emerging connections between individual worker pathology, as described by Ferguson and the structural systems of oppressive and neo liberal governmentality currently challenging social work practice and education (Macías, 2015) wherein the "the creative development of social work as a political activity concerned with social justice and individual and social change" (Bellinger, 2010, p. 2451) is being undermined.

Ferguson (2018) wisely urges us to view the limitations of reflective practice articulated through the individual body of the practitioner. Yet, by using the optical metaphor of 'Reflection', we appear to be searching for a theory and approach to practice that simultaneously explains and enables the complex and politically charged intersections between subjectivity, agency and affect to be understood and resolved, critical or otherwise, in a manner that remains largely within the cognitive rational processing abilities of the practitioner.

Troubling Reflection

Norman Fairclough (1992a) argues 'when we signify things through one metaphor rather than another, we are constructing our reality in one way rather than another. Metaphors structure the way we think, and the way we act, our systems of knowledge and beliefs, in a pervasive way' (p.195).

In the realms of both education and practice 'reflection' is structured around a number of metaphors related to individualised, and un-politicised, notions of the professional 'self' and 'the self in practice' where (Schon, 1983. p. 49) suggests 'our knowing is in our actions' (cited in Ferguson, 2018, p. 5).

Knowledge created by the critically reflective practitioner is only to be used to inform their practice, as through the metaphor of 'evidence based practice' their reflections are filtered through text and language which constructs a particular vision of 'reflective practice'. In this context, knowledge gleaned by reflective processes is viewed negatively and not deemed 'valid' enough to meet the parameters of what is considered 'research' or valid 'evidence' to be included in evidence based practice.

Aligned with (Ferguson, 2018) we advocate for both space and validation being found to acknowledge the fullness of these reflections as embodied processing and

knowing. Furthermore, we argue that the diminution of practitioner ‘knowing’ gleaned from reflective practice contributes to the knowledge produced being conceived as superficial ‘knowing’ and as such, not sufficiently robust to count as evidence or data in social work practice, education and research. It appears reflection has only a partial contribution to make in further developing a methodology for creating and producing knowledge in and for Social Work.

Significantly, such surface thinking about the place and meaning of ‘reflection’ across social work practice, education and research is maintained within the metaphor of ever evolving ‘regulatory requirements’, such as the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) (BASW 2018) and standards outlined by Social Work England (2020), which state:

Reflection encourages a review of a professional experience to help inform future practice. Critical reflection moves beyond this and encourages the social worker to examine their approach, judgements, decisions and interventions, as well as the steps taken to provide objective support, free from the social worker’s own values, views and beliefs. (4.6; 4.8)

The language, and associated discourse, appear to adopt two main strategies. The first operates to minimise deeper structural analysis, and secondly, to maximise the emphasis on the individual in taking responsibility for their action, thus leaving the practitioner with limited space to use their newly created knowledge, and, more worryingly, no ‘voice’ to challenge contemporary practice at a structural level. This begs the question, whose interests does this serve?

Such discourse does not work alone but is intertwined with ideology, and both may be perceived as facilitating the enactment or legitimation of power (Dijk, 2009, p.

33). For example, we suggest contemporary notions of professional identity are increasingly emerging from exposure in particular to the ideology and discourse of neoliberalism, which increasingly informs activity in both higher education and social work promoting a “technical rationality” (Grant & Radcliffe, 2015 pg 187), which in turn supports a positivist and modernist conception of what knowledge is, or is not. Reflective practice within such an ideological environment has the potential to become no more than the standardised and supposedly measurable ‘domains’ of the PCF and SoP’s.

Comments from participants in Ferguson (2018) research are very much aligned to these domains, which is to be expected given in both higher education and in social work practice critical reflection is increasingly formed in discrete packages of assessment rated against measurable ‘outcomes’ to meet prescribed notions of academic and professional competence. Such an approach dictates to all, whether academic, social worker, student or service user how they will demonstrate competency using strategies ‘imbued with “technical rational” assumptions which ‘frames the world of professional education and practice in terms of well-formed instrumental problems that require specific techniques, strategies and algorithms to solve them’ (Schon,1987) (cited Grant & Radcliffe, 2015, p. 817).

Horkheimer, Adorno, and Noeri (2002) highlight the potential threat of such an approach when suggesting technological rationality leads us to view the structures of the existing social world as fixed and anything that cannot be incorporated into modernist/positivist systems appear as politically unrealistic. In this context transformative change becomes a matter of technological progress supported by objective rationality rather than the knowledge created via critical reflection and any

emotional response of individual practitioners. In terms of reflective practice, when performed within a technical rational framework, the factors above appear to be shaping practitioner social cognitions and those of institutions like health and social care and academia (van Dijk, 2009). Comments by Angela (Ferguson, 2018, p. 7) for example, focus almost exclusively on the self, linked to a notion of 'productivity'.

This positions the practitioner's reflections, and subsequent knowledge, in a particular way as social subjects (Althusser, 1971), not just as ideas but as social practices in social institutions. Grant and Radcliffe (2015) describe the conventional forms of language use and interaction associated with particular social institutions or communities of practice (Bakhtin, McGee, Emerson, & Holquist, 2010) troubling for example, how professional standards and requirements within social work are communicated within teaching and learning strategies, academic papers and textbooks. In the context of 'reflection' a central feature of contemporary practice is that reflection is communicated via a standardised genre. Genre is of significance as it ensures the role and meaning of 'reflection' in social work practice and education is sufficiently standardised by basing it 'on a set of mutually accessible conventions which most members of a professional, academic or institutional organisation share' (Norman Fairclough, 1992b, p.115).

The language used by practitioners in Ferguson's (2018) research draw on such standardisation, where the inclusion of a 'contained self', and exclusion of emotion and the structural, is pivotal to what professional 'reflection' should be. Expression of emotion and structural critique occurs covertly within the realm of 'offloading' in the car or to colleagues in the office. Participants do not appear to question this process and their reflections remain constrained within its current genre. In effect, whilst incredibly

valuable, their emotional and cognitive labour is underutilised as there appears there is nowhere for this to go, in a wider sense, outside of themselves or within discrete conversations that remain held within their organisational context.

This is to be expected given related texts outlining the role of ‘reflection’ in the profession, such as the PCF and SoPs, and their enactment through employer policy and procedure, can be understood as not just a product of government and organisations but also part of a process; a form of social interaction involving different formats for different readers/listeners leading to an ongoing process of interpretation, that has a particular ‘style’. The notion of style here refers to how ‘discourse figures alongside bodily behaviour in constituting particular ways of being, particular social, personal and professional identities’ (N. Fairclough, 2003, p. 26), which is clearly demonstrated in Ferguson’s (2018) research.

We suggest, the contemporary discourse, supported by language in relation to social work education and practice, has conflated ‘reflection’ with regulatory requirements and associated, emergent conceptions of ‘professionalism’. It has become not just about communicating knowledge but about the enactment of a ‘rhetorical strategy used within a professional culture to organise knowledge in the form of professional action’ (Bhatia, 2004' p. 179) to achieve ideological objectives. However, we also suggest genres are not fixed, or single entities, and social change is partly brought about by changes in conventional interactions, in other words through changes in the use of metaphors, genres and genre chains.

Diffractional thinking, reflection and autoethnography

Ferguson’s plea for the profession to acknowledge the concept of reflection as having limits could not be more pertinent at this point. We would go further and suggest

that these limitations effectively render reflection redundant in contemporary social work and are acting to impoverish both the individual practitioner and those they work with. We are suggesting we embark on journey to elsewhere to seek something other than what we have, to lift the 'veil of ignorance' (Rawls, 2005) and participate in a thought experiment exploring the alternative optical metaphor of 'diffraction'.

Diffraction occurs when a wave passes through two or more gaps in a barrier and the emerging waves interfere with each other in constructive and destructive ways, producing new and unpredictable 'diffractive' patterns. A solid reflective surface simply and predictably sends back to us what we send towards it. We are imagining the opening up of spaces in the reflective surface allowing ideas to pass through, like waves, to produce diffractive patterns of thinking on the other side. In the context of this paper we suggest this produces different patterns of understanding that will, in turn have the potential to create new possibilities for practice education and research.

This can be seen in the work of [Maksymluk](#) (2017) who for example redesigned the assessment mode of a first year undergraduate social work module that had previously followed a traditional academic textual format, with student writing predictably reflecting back the academic genres currently informing common assessment strategies in social work education. The re design, based on multimodal assessment principles, created opportunity for students to submit work such as a drawing, a collage, a poem and/or a piece of music. Additionally, the students were introduced to writing in the first person and, encouraged to do so.

These steps appear to have successfully provided students with the space necessary to allow their ideas to flow through the rigid barrier of academic genre, not follow a prescriptive academic genre, but rather, make their own choices, illuminate

their thinking and create new diffractive patterns of understanding and expression. This example we feel reveals the diffractive metaphor as having the potential to move social work education toward a creative and dynamic relationship with complexity and uncertainty in a manner that challenges the static reflection of self in practice.

We are suggesting, ‘diffractive’ thinking signals potential for social work practice, education and research methodologies in “extending reflective and reflexive practice in ways that foreground entanglement, co-production and the relational qualities of practice” (Keevers & Treleaven, 2011, p. 518). Diffraction offers a tool for educators to create spaces that not only enable new or alternative genres, language, ideology and discourse to support social workers to explore and process experiences of uncertainty, risk and vulnerability because...

“...diffraction does not produce "the same" displaced, as reflection and refraction do. Diffraction is a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction. A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where the effects of difference appear.”

(Haraway, 1992, p. 301)

We are proposing that diffraction, blended with Autoethnography, provides a conduit to facilitate and channel knowledge that is illuminating, informing, outward looking and rigorous created by subjects who are actively engaged in its production. Within this approach, we are interested in how diffraction can be a productive tool for thinking about methodological approaches seeking to understand entangled phenomena and experience that are socially and culturally constructed, non-representational and performative without abandoning the political (Evans & Reid, 2013).

We are questioning the validity of reflection that acts to locate itself as a process solely within the realms of individual prowess, be this cognitive or intuitive, which simultaneously de-values the knowledge created by individuals instructed to engage in the process. We are suggesting possibilities that may be applicable for [re]positioning the individual, resilient yet restricted social worker as one that is collectively resistant (Strier & Bershtling, 2016) and agential re-orientated around a self 'encumbered' by relationships and context (Webb, 2003) we imagine a re-embodied rather than a re-constituted social worker?

Fergusons (2018) research has illuminated the positive and negative impact of reflection, introducing the acceptance of 'feeling' and 'emotion' as part of practice today. For us this has clearly highlighted the negative impact of expecting practitioners to engage in myopic reflection, as well as then restricting them in analysing and sharing this knowledge with a wider audience. Within Fergusons research we see key moments where practitioners clearly seem frustrated by the limits of current reflective practice thus:

"The reflecting side of things I find quite important and I do quite a lot of that, almost to the point a bit, where it's like, you know, you're going to have to let it go (laughs). And like you can't, you can over- analyse or worry about, you know, there's always things that you could have said differently or missed out, or you know, but you can't ..." Amy (2018:5)

Ferguson (2018) also suggests there are moments when practitioners need to disengage, perhaps compartmentalise their experience "It's basically that you don't open yourself up too much so that those projections don't have an impact or don't come onto you (Angela) (2018:7)"

We suggest these are moments that are in fact, potentially productive and insightful moments for practitioner, service user and the profession. However, current practice, organised around 'Reflection', demands students and practitioners demonstrate engagement by showing their able-ness to follow short circular processes. These processes are very much aimed at altering individual action via processing individual perception as established models such as Gibb's Reflective Cycle (Gibbs, 1988) and Kolb's Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984). We tend to be asking students to act in a very prescriptive manner and as such, mimic a positivist belief that if we can observe it, it clearly exists.

However, despite the best efforts of the Social Work practitioner to engage in these observable, reproducible activities, there is not a clearly defined route within the profession, to utilise the findings of this activity as an agent for change. In response we advocate for the use of Autoethnography within Social Work education, practice and research. We suggest a shift from encouraging students to reflect, as in engaging in the constant reflex of governmentality, towards embracing a wider acknowledgement that every moment is a sensory interaction whether or not we wish to consciously engage with it or not. In pursuance of this, practitioners could move towards an acknowledgement of how their experiences provide valid data that can be rigorously analysed as part of enquiry, one that can provide both framework and forum to generate research material and influence how the profession develops; encouraging students and practitioners to view personal experience as valid data to inform social work enquiry is the first step in 'doing' auto ethnography.

Increasingly models are emerging for undertaking Autoethnography despite its continuing need to be considered 'rigorous'. If we look at a definition of auto ethnography, we can see points of alignment and divergence with critical reflection;

"... research, writing, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social. The form usually features concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection ... Thus, autoethnography, acknowledges subjectivity rather than viewing it as an irritant, and can be distinguished from simply remaining within the realm of biography or memoir by its commitment to rigorous cultural interrogation and analysis" (Ellis, 2004, p. xix).

Curiously and crucially, it is critical reflection, rather than auto ethnography which restricts itself to the personal:

"... sometimes in critical reflection the social and political dimensions of the individual's problems are neglected and emphasis is placed on individual skills and intra-psyche processes. What seems to be missing is the way in which our "thinking and sense making are influenced by social, historical and political factors" (Ixer 1999) cited in Pease and Fook (1999, p. 16)

Autoethnography is therefore bolder than reflection, the next step, as the autoethnographic process uncovers how we construct knowledge ourselves, our biases, and crucially, ideological interests. Auto ethnography is a methodology that has as its starting point a commitment to the illumination of how every situation and event is politically and socially influenced. This clearly and unremittingly, forces the subject towards considerations of how knowledge, identity and relationships of power impact & interconnect.

When we undertake autoethnography, we return to our data (as every practitioner examines their experience within the process of reflection) in order to

interrogate it as part of a rigorous process of analysis. We may choose to undertake a thematic analysis in order to make our findings fully known to us. Our findings are valid knowledge and as such we need to share these with our colleagues in order to contribute towards how we all understand the world we inhabit and the Social Work we undertake. Because of this crucial difference between autoethnography and reflective practice, we advocate for a departure away from critical reflection done well, (and we purposefully use technocratic language here), towards the utilisation and embedding of autoethnography as an everyday methodology for Social Work education, practice and research. Autoethnography provides a process for students and practitioners to see the fullness of every event and feed their findings into a wider pool of collated knowledge. In this way, auto ethnographic practice is not an individualised activity, rather it holds potential for connection and collective transformation.

Conclusion

Within this paper, we have strived to illuminate how metaphor, language, ideology and discourse situate the process of reflection within professional texts and practice environments, suggesting these may reproduce dominant ways of utilising reflective technique which may not fully serve the interests of practitioners, or those who seek require services.

In terms of Social Work education relating to ‘reflection’, we suggest there is now a need to work towards the adoption of a different metaphor, one that is far more encompassing and embracing of current complexity. We consider reflection and reflexivity hold, as Karen Barad (2007, p. 7) suggests, too much potential to perceive, “the world at a distance”. Donna Haraway(1992) argues that we need to move beyond

reflection as it does not reliably reveal or create perspectives that account for, nor locate, the infinite ways in which ideas and experience ‘interfere’ with each other. Indeed, Haraway (1992, p. 295) promises diffraction as producing “...not effects of distance, but effects of connection, of embodiment, and of responsibility for an imagined elsewhere that we may yet learn to see and build here”.

We are aiming to embed autoethnographic exploration within aspects of the Social Work curriculum at our higher education institution, to evolve the threshold concept of reflection and to enhance student experience; to provide fuller and richer forms of assessment and crucially; to provide a potential creative productive outlet for our future practitioners which may result in research that informs social work education practice and research.

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1

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