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Reflexivity: A Concept and its Meanings for Practitioners Working with Children and Families

By

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Abstract

Reflexivity is a concept that is increasingly gaining currency in professional practice literature, particularly in relation to working with uncertainty and as an important feature of professional discretion and ethical practice. This article discusses how practitioners working in child and family welfare/protection organisations understood and interpreted the concept of reflexivity for their practice, as one of the outcomes of larger, collaborative research project. This project was conducted through a series of workshops with practitioners. The overall research that aimed to expand practitioners’ practice repertoires from narrowly-defined risk assessment, to an approach that could account for the uncertainties of practice, included the concept of reflexivity as an alternative or a complement to instrumental accountability that is increasingly a feature in child welfare/protection organisations. This article discusses how the
concept of reflexivity was explored in the research and how practitioners interpreted the concept for their practice. We conclude that while concepts like reflexivity are central to formal theories for professional practice, we also recognise that individual practitioners interpret concepts (in ways that are both practically and contextually relevant), thus creating practical meanings appropriate to their practice contexts.

Introduction

Reflexivity is a concept that is increasingly gaining currency in professional practice literature, particularly in relation to working with uncertainty (Parton & O’Byrne, 2000a; 2000b) and as an important feature of professional discretion and ethical practice (Fook 1996, 1999; Taylor & White, 2000). In an earlier article (D’Cruz, Gillingham & Melendez, 2007), the authors critically reviewed the social work literature to explore the many meanings of the concept of reflexivity for social work theory, practice and research. In our previous article, we demonstrated how terms such as ‘reflexivity’, ‘reflectivity’ and ‘critical reflection’ are used by different authors to mean very different things (sometimes interchangeably) (for example, Jessup & Rogerson, 1999, p. 176; Leonard, 1999, p. vii; Pease & Fook, 1999, pp. 13, 17, 231; Boud, 1999; Briggs, 1999; Rea, 2000; Mosca & Yost, 2001). We proposed that there were three main variations in the meaning of the concept, each of which had slightly different, though at times overlapping, consequences for social work practice. These variations are summarized below.

In the first variation, reflexivity is regarded as an individual’s considered response to an immediate context and is concerned with the ability of service users to process information and create knowledge to guide life choices (Roseneil & Seymour, 1999; Kondrat, 1999; Elliott, 2001; Ferguson, 2003, 2004). In the second variation, reflexivity is defined as a social worker’s self-critical approach that questions how knowledge about clients is generated and, further, how relations of power operate in this process (White & Stancombe, 2003; Taylor and White, 2000; Parton & O’Byrne, 2000a; Sheppard, Newstead, Caccavo & Ryan, 2000). In the third variation, reflexivity is concerned with the part that emotion plays in social work practice (Kondrat, 1999; Mills & Kleinman, 1988; Miehls & Moffat, 2000; Ruch, 2002).

We surmised that the diversity of meanings that emerge from a critical analysis of terms such as ‘reflexivity’ and ‘reflection’ is indicative that such concepts are relatively new to social work and their meanings for the profession are still being debated. Further, that the diversity of meanings increases the possibilities for expanding practice repertoires and debate should be encouraged rather than some form of closure sought.

In this article we discuss how practitioners working in child and family welfare/protection organisations understood and interpreted the concept of reflexivity for their practice, as one of the outcomes of a larger, collaborative research project. The overall research aimed to expand practitioners’ practice repertoires from narrowly-defined risk assessment, to an approach that could account for the uncertainties of practice through a range of concepts (D’Cruz, et al., 2004; D’Cruz and Gillingham, 2005; D’Cruz et al., in press). Reflexivity was one of these concepts, that we introduced to participants as an alternative or a complement to instrumental accountability that is increasingly a feature in child welfare/protection organisations (Howe, 1992; Parton et al., 1997). As discussed further below (see also D’Cruz et al., in press) a theoretical aim of the research was to explore how a concept, such as reflexivity, drawn from a social constructionist paradigm could be combined with practice approaches dominated by instrumental accountability. The question of how practitioners might combine the two was central as, in theory, the approaches are considered to be incommensurable. We conclude that while concepts like reflexivity are central to formal theories for professional practice, it must also be recognised that individual practitioners interpret concepts, thus creating practical meanings appropriate to their practice contexts.
Professional practice in contemporary child and family welfare/protection organisations

From the mid-1980s to the end of the 1990s, child and family policy and practice in many western countries such as the UK, the US and Australia became increasingly proceduralised and bureaucratised (Howe, 1992) following coronial and public inquiries into the deaths and serious injuries to children in the care of their parents/caregivers. Risk management through risk assessment checklists was the preferred approach that aimed to minimise “practice mistakes” (Walton, 1993) seen as consequences of professional discretion and autonomy, and “subjective” decision making (Reder, Duncan & Gray, 1993). Risk assessment criteria as prescriptive checklists represented rationality that could manage the uncertainty and unpredictability associated with ensuring the care and protection of children living with their parents (Parton, 1998), and thus minimise or eradicate “practice mistakes” (Walton, 1993). Professionals including social workers were expected to adhere to procedures, with “substantive accountability” to clients (children and families) replaced by “instrumental accountability” to the organisation (Bauman, 1987).

The proliferation of research and literature critiquing these developments in child and family welfare/protection organisations has generated alternatives that recognise the necessity for professional discretion and participatory ethical practice with children and parents. These alternatives include the recognition of both the “dangers” and “opportunities” presented by protective practice (Ferguson, 1997), the importance of critically-reflective practice and “dialogue” (Parton & O’Byrne, 2000a) between parents, children and practitioners, and reflexive practice that foregrounds the connections between professional knowledge and professional power in situated practice (Taylor & White, 2000). The theoretical perspective informing many of these critiques and practice alternatives is social constructionism, that offers justification for re-introducing professional discretion and autonomy, on the grounds that all social practices including professional practice, involve people making meaning through social processes (Parton et al., 1997; D’Cruz, 2004). This perspective challenges the implicit assumption of instrumentalist risk assessment approaches that there is an objective truth about the care and protection of children that can be established if prescribed assessment procedures are followed. In some contexts, such as in Britain, these critiques have influenced changes in child and family policy and practice so that instrumentalist forms of risk assessment have been replaced by broader family-focused approaches (Ferguson, 1997; Parton, 1997). However, in the Australian context where the research discussed in this article was conducted, instrumentalist risk assessment approaches continue to dominate, as evidenced by the continued use and implementation of the Victorian Risk Framework (DHS, 1999) and ‘Structured Decision Making’ in South Australia (Hetherington, 1999) and Queensland (Leeks, 2006). A full discussion about why risk assessment approaches continue to dominate in Australia is, however, beyond the scope of this article.

Exploring an expanded practice repertoire: a summary of the research

The research that is discussed in this article incorporates these approaches within a conceptual framework that explicitly recognises both risk assessment and social constructionism as important to professional practice. We have not dismissed the necessity for risk assessment in some form, nor do we believe it is productive to dismiss the organisational contexts in which practitioners work. Instead we have explored the possibilities of an approach that accepts the practical, ethical, professional and legal bases for risk assessment, and the opportunities for the space of practice that is silenced organisationally and for individuals – namely, the discretionary aspects of practice.

This research emerged from the first author’s PhD research, which explored how meanings and identities were constructed in child protection practice (D’Cruz, 1999; 2004), rather than...
being predictable outcomes as absolute 'realities' achieved by heavily proceduralised and instrumental practice informed by the risk paradigm (Howe, 1992; Parton et al., 1997). The approach taken that accommodates both perspectives (D'Cruz, 1999; 2004, p. 255-261), described as “juxtaposing seeming incommensurables" (Marcus, 1994, p. 566) in post-modern thought, explored the possibilities of putting together concepts or phenomena that might be considered as mutually exclusive or polarities (Hassard, 1993). For example, ideas of “realism” (as absolute, objective reality) and “relativism” (reality is relative, being constructed by participants) (Edwards, Ashmore & Potter, 1995) are usually seen as mutually exclusive and oppositional concepts. This approach is known as “dualism” (Heap, 1995), that accepts a physical reality that may generate a variety of plausible, and relative explanations and meanings depending on the situated positioning of participants (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, p. 6). For child welfare/protection, a dualist position allows for an acceptance of children’s lived experiences that include material disadvantage, oppression and trauma, and the necessity for ‘risk assessment’, while also acknowledging that these experiences may be explained and understood from many, competing perspectives (D'Cruz, 2004; D'Cruz et al., 2004). Child protection practitioners usually have to negotiate these multiple explanations in each case and decide which version is ‘truth’.

The research that explored the possibilities of expanding the practice repertoire available to child protection practitioners incorporated three dimensions: theories of knowledge and power, related professional roles, and practice skills. The second and third dimension are beyond the scope of this article and here we focus on one part of the first dimension, the concept of reflexivity. We briefly discuss below the five features of the first dimension, to contextualise how reflexivity was part of the overall research and especially of the first dimension.

The first dimension, theories of knowledge and power, draws on assumptions about knowledge and the practitioner’s relationship to knowledge represented as practice decisions informed by the risk paradigm and social constructionism. This dimension begins from the position that the risk paradigm and social constructionism are represented in theory as mutually exclusive, each with particular defining features. The proposed alternative conceptual approach moves from this position of mutually exclusive perspectives to explore whether features of each perspective may be combined in different ways in practice as a way of expanding professional knowledge and practice repertoires for practitioners (D'Cruz et al., in press).

Overall, the five features of the first dimension of the conceptual framework related to how theories of knowledge and power may be represented in regard to views about ‘reality’, ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’ and expertise and authority. For example, whether knowledge is objective and absolute (real) or an outcome of alternative, contestable meanings (relative); and the relationship of knowledge to the speaker/author/knower (privilege/positioning). Instrumental rationality and reflexivity were the first feature of this dimension and, as explained below, reflexivity seemed to have the greatest resonance for the practitioners in terms of how they could relate it to their practice.

**Methodology**

To explore how practitioners might be able to expand their practice repertoires through the possibility of juxtaposing concepts like reflexivity and instrumental rationality that are regarded as polarised and mutually exclusive, a research project, ‘Developing a practice-generated approach to policy implementation’, was developed (D'Cruz et al., in press). The aim was to develop an alternative approach for child protection practice that would account for ethical, legal and bureaucratic demands while providing “child centred, family focused” services (e.g. Ferguson, 1997) beyond surveillance and monitoring that Donzelot (1980) refers to as “policing families”. Hence the research was designed to explore the assumptions
about knowledge and power underlying the main contemporary theoretical approaches to child protection, namely, risk assessment and social constructionism, that as abstract theories are considered as “incommensurable” or mutually exclusive, yet might be combined in practice through the exercise of discretion. In this article, we focus specifically on how practitioners who were research participants were engaged in regard to the concept of reflexivity as either an alternative to or complement for instrumental rationality that was/is the norm in their organisational contexts.

Generally, “incommensurability” is taken to mean that different paradigms cannot be compared as each has self-contained criteria that include what is relevant to the paradigm and simultaneously demarcates what is not (Feyerabend, 1975; Lee, 1994; Jacobs, 2002a; 2002b). Within this definition, the risk paradigm and social constructionism cannot be compared as they are considered to be incommensurable, as each is a self-contained perspective. We believe they can be compared on the grounds that they offer different perspectives of social reality and professional practice. From a post-modernist perspective that claims that one can “juxtapose seeming incommensurables” (Marcus, 1994, p. 566) we have taken an approach that does not claim to combine entire self-contained paradigms. Instead, we have identified a few key features of each paradigm as being important for professional discretion and ethical practice and have incorporated these into our overall conceptual framework. This approach also draws from Feyerabend’s (1975) conceptualisation of the need for “pluralism” of apparently conflicting theoretical perspectives so that theories can better explain/understand “realities” that may not be adequately addressed through single approaches.

Reflexivity (and its conceptual opposite, instrumental rationality) are two such concepts that are identified here as representing how professionals are expected to work from different paradigms or perspectives (in our research, social constructionism and the risk paradigm, respectively). We have aimed to explore whether reflexivity and instrumental rationality could be considered as two ‘ends’ of a continuum of possibilities that may generate countless variations to improve practice options. The idea of a conceptual continuum from a professional practice perspective, is similar to the “grey areas” of practice that are well known to practitioners, as the vast majority of cases do not fit neatly within prescribed official categories and related theories (Parton, 1991). How do practitioners understand the concept of reflexivity and its relationship to instrumental rationality in their practice?

Research Participants and Procedures

The research was conducted in 2002 and 2003. There were ten participants in the first cohort, and seven in the second. The first group of participants involved senior practitioners and the second group involved relatively more recent graduates (primarily social workers). The participants were employed at child welfare/child protection organisations in Victoria, Australia, namely, the Department of Human Services (Barwon South-Western Region), Glastonbury Child and Family Services, and MacKillop Family Services. Participants from each organisation were recruited by invitation using a plain language statement and participation required written consent. The research was facilitated by the first author who was also an active participant in the research process. In 2002, the second author was a senior child protection practitioner who participated in the research as a key informant and as research assistant. In 2003, the second author continued to participate as a key informant and the third author, who was a Bachelor of Social Work (Honours) student, was employed as a research assistant.

The particular challenges and opportunities of conducting collaborative research across a range of agencies are discussed more fully in D’Cruz & Gillingham (2005), as are the ethical and practical dilemmas of (and the particular insights gained from) the multiple roles occupied by the researchers. Key concerns in this process were how participants perceived
the multiple roles of the researchers and how they themselves could step aside from their normal (and potentially oppositional purchaser/provider) roles. In order to address these concerns, rules about the confidentiality of comments made and written were clarified at the beginning and during the workshops. The participants were also drawn from an area where practitioners move from one employer to another and so have to accommodate the changing roles of colleagues. Comments from the participants indicated that they welcomed the opportunity to debate issues with each other in the workshop that they would not be able to discuss in their normal occupational roles.

Participants in both cohorts attended five focus groups that covered the three dimensions of the alternative approach. These were referred to as “workshops” in order to reflect the collaborative and dialogic nature of the research and the participation, rather than just facilitation, by the researchers in the sessions. The first workshop (half-day) introduced the research and explored participants’ perceptions of the context in which they worked, and the extent of discretion and professional power they believed they had (and sought to exercise) in their organisations and in relation to clients. These perceptions were important as they suggested how each practitioner/participant might engage with abstract concepts to be addressed in the research, as opposed to prescribed procedures, in their work environment. Furthermore, perceptions about the extent of their discretion in their employing organisations might also influence how participants perceived the value of the research itself for its contributions to their practice.

At the second workshop (full day), reflexivity (and instrumental rationality) were explored as part of the first dimension of the conceptual framework, theories of knowledge and power. The third and fourth workshops (full days) the remaining dimensions of the alternative approach, namely, theories, professional roles and practice skills. At the end of the fourth workshop, participants were asked to apply any aspects of the approach to their practice and document it along with critical comments (Stringer, 1996; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Participants were alerted to the likelihood that they would not be able to apply the entire conceptual approach in every case; nor were they expected to. This advice was given because the facilitator recognised from her own practice experience that specific cases do not fit tidily within the generalities of formal theory – hence the tensions between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ (Fook, 1996; 1999; Camilleri, 1996; 1999). At the fifth and final workshop (half-day) participants discussed their examples of how they applied the approach to their practice and offered critical feedback.

Methods of Inquiry

Each workshop discussion relied on plain language definitions and semi-structured questions that had been mailed to participants prior to the workshop to facilitate their engagement with particular dimensions of the alternative approach. The conceptual features of each dimension and their plain language definitions were refined in discussion between the Principal Researcher (also first author) and the second author who, at the initiation of the research, was employed as a senior child protection practitioner in a large statutory organisation. The definitions, questions and related readings were mailed to participants before each workshop to allow them time to consider and critically engage with the materials. Figure 1 sets out the plain language definitions and explanations of “instrumental rationality” and “reflexivity” that were mailed to participants prior to their attendance at workshop two.

Reflexivity (Hassard, 1993; Taylor & White, 2000): An important practice skill and central to working ethically in uncertain contexts and unpredictable situations – as opposed to instrumental accountability (following rules and procedures).

- Critical self-awareness by the practitioner, in how he or she understands and engages with social
The following questions were provided to facilitate practitioners’ engagement with questioning their practice assumptions and their interpretation of the concept of reflexivity:

I. How do I know what I think I know about this person and their problem?
II. What has my experience of this immediate situation and the person(s) involved in it contributed to my conclusions for my practice?
III. Is there at least one other way of understanding this situation and the people involved?
IV. Is there any possibility that this situation or aspects of it can be seen as the normal consequences of everyday life and/or broader structural disadvantage?
V. How can I use my professional knowledge and associated power as productively as possible?

Figure 1: Plain language definitions and critical questions about “reflexivity” and “instrumental accountability”

During the workshops, data were generated by engaging the participants in discussion about the questions (in Figure 1). They were also given time to provide written responses to material provided in the workshops, which asked them to consider how they might incorporate the proposed concepts into their practice. In 2002, the workshop discussions were tape-recorded and transcribed but this proved to be less than satisfactory. A particular problem was that participants, in the heat of the debate, tended to speak over each other (and at the same time), making the transcription fragmented and difficult to follow. Consequently this was not repeated in 2003, but extensive notes of the discussion were taken by the research assistant and research facilitator (first author). During the workshops in both 2002 and 2003, an electronic whiteboard was used to capture salient points during the discussions with the participants at the workshops and these were printed off. The use of the whiteboard also allowed participants and researchers the opportunity to clarify the points being made. Participants were encouraged to comment on whether the researcher using the whiteboard had adequately captured their meaning, This approach to data recording, known as “member checking” (Rubin & Babbie, 2005) was concerned with the point that “(t)he central meanings attached to objects or relations should reflect the beliefs that the insiders hold about these” (Kellehear, 1993, p. 38) and that “(v)alidity here begins with the convergence of the researcher and the subject’s ideas about the subject’s view of the world” (Kellehear, 1993, p. 38).

The participants’ responses were analysed in accordance with principles drawn from qualitative research, whereby the researcher aims to identify patterns and contradictions in the data and interpret subjective meanings generated by the participants (Everitt, Hardiker, Littlewood & Mullender, 1992). “Open coding” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used to start analyzing the data and involved reading through the range of documents generated by participants through their written responses and the discussions. Themes in relation to how participants defined reflexivity in relation to their practice were then identified, as they emerged from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), and categorised according to the interpretations of the researchers. Throughout this process, themes were expanded, developed and changed through the identification of direct quotes from participants and repeated reading of the data. This process continued until no new themes emerged.

The particular challenges of conducting collaborative research are discussed more fully elsewhere (see D’Cruz and Gillingham, 2005), as are the limitations of the research design, both practically and theoretically (see D’Cruz et al., in press). Particular limitations can be
summarised as follows. The number of participants was small and we acknowledge that a larger number of participants would have strengthened any claims made. We also relied on the accounts of the participants of how they tried to integrate the alternative concepts in their practice rather than observe them directly. We also acknowledge that the findings of the research are closely linked to the context in which it was conducted, a context which changes (and has changed since the research was conducted) continually and sometimes swiftly.

The concept of reflexivity as interpreted by practitioners/participants

Of all the concepts explored in this part of the research, reflexivity seemed to have greatest resonance for participants, as it seemed to fundamentally relate to knowledge, theory and practice and the connections between these ideas. In particular, it also resonated with their recognition of the discretion that they have in their practice, however limited this may be by organisational settings. (The other concepts that had greatest resonance for the participants seemed to relate more specifically to the other two dimensions that have not been addressed in this article, namely, professional roles and practice skills.) In fact, the richness of the data related to reflexivity enabled us to develop a detailed analysis (D'Cruz et al., 2004), which we now present below. Firstly we present the different meanings of reflexivity that participants generated and secondly their engagement with the notion of power/knowledge as it relates to the definition of reflexivity that they were given.

We were able to identify six themes that represented the participants’ conceptualisations of reflexivity in relation to their practice:

as self-reflection, distinct from reflection
as a way to combine objectivity and subjectivity
as a critical appraisal of action and knowledge creation, in the moment
reflexivity as a tool for practice/an introspective process
reflexivity as a learning tool/critical practice approach
as a process of critical reflection on policy (D'Cruz et al., 2004)

These six themes are considered in more detail below. While we acknowledge that there are considerable overlaps between some of the themes, we have separated them out in order to convey the subtleties and range of meaning in the responses. Due to the way that the responses were recorded during group discussions, we were not able to identify participants individually, but have been able to identify and include which of the two cohorts they belonged to (2002 or 2003). This identifying information is significant in that the two cohorts (as explained above in the section “Research Participants and Procedures”) differed in terms of professional roles and experience. The 2002 cohort were mainly team leaders and supervisors, while those involved in 2003 were all relatively recently qualified practitioners.

Practitioners’ Meanings of Reflexivity

as self-reflection, distinct from reflection
Some of the participants defined reflexivity as the use of intuition or tacit knowledge (Polyani 1967) to make sense of a situation and also as a way of combining the use of the intellect and the emotions to do so. The inclusion of self (including emotional responses) in the critical approach to knowledge creation are conveyed by the following quotes:

reflection is kinda looking out and looking at everything whereas reflexivity is doing that but including yourself in that. (emphasis added) (2002)

Need to be aware of internal (emotional responses and “gut feelings”) and external (things go on around us) factors. . . (2003)
(2) as a way to combine objectivity and subjectivity
The participants engaged with the idea of a continuum between instrumental rationality and reflexivity as a way of combining objectivity and subjectivity, of moving between the two and legitimating both approaches to knowledge creation in practice, as demonstrated by the following quotes:

I sort of saw it as combining objectivity and subjectivity... So you can be both, objective and subjective in the same context... (2002)

[At the instrumental accountability end of the continuum] the assumption can only be... [that] if you're objective then you can't be subjective... whereas it's actually contextually okay to be both. And it's realistic to be both. (2002)

reflection is kinda looking out and looking at everything whereas reflexivity is doing that but including yourself in that (2002)

These interpretations of the concept of reflexivity, in relation to instrumental accountability resonate with one of the original aims of this research, which was to investigate whether and how two seemingly polarized approaches to social work practice in child protection can be combined. Though we do not have these participants' definitions of objectivity and subjectivity, it appears from the context of the discussion that they identifying the 'instrumental rationality' end of the continuum with 'objectivity' and the 'reflexivity' end with 'subjectivity'. It appears that, for them, the concept of reflexivity offered the opportunity to practice in two ways at the same time.

Another participant, however, saw reflexivity as a way of acknowledging his/her personal emotional response and then distancing him/herself from this response in order to increase his/her objectivity:

This helps me make sense of my responses to what I am being told. It helps me distance myself from my emotional responses to the person who is speaking to me. . . . If I figure out that my emotional response is mirroring theirs, or that I am being convinced by their presentation rather than anything else, then I change my emotional response, or put it aside, to become more objective. (2003)

(3) as a critical appraisal of action and knowledge creation, in the moment
For some participants reflexivity allowed questioning of what is a 'fact' and a broadening of what might be considered pertinent to an assessment:

Reflexivity for me means being able to more broadly consider the client's experience of the world rather than through the narrow confines of accountability through procedures (sic) facts and bottom lines. (2003)

One participant gave the example of when the application of reflexivity allowed for alternative explanations for a mother’s behaviour in a domestic violence situation.

Although (I was) very much aware of theory re DV and cycle of violence, the information, context and presentation of mother were quite confronting. Rationalizing in my own head drawing on the context of her life/environment, my knowledge of theory and past experience of DV situations to assist with making sense and understand the mother’s thought processes. . . (2003)

This application of the concept led to a reassessment of the situation rather than the mother’s behaviour being considered as just a breach of procedures. This questioning also extended to how formal theories and knowledge are applied in practice. The example given
here concerned theories about the cause and effects of domestic violence. The questioning of ‘fact’, knowledge and theory is exemplified by the following:

valuing and holding fairly highly, the practice of conducting reflexivity. . . bring that sort of ‘third eye’ stuff. . . you keep making explicit the fact that that’s what you’re doing. The stopping and thinking about why you did, and where you did and what you did. And that navel gazing I guess is the notion. (2002)

The reference to ‘navel gazing’ in the above quote could have quite negative connotations in that it could be read that applying the concept of reflexivity could lead to endless, or at least time-consuming, introspection and a lack of action.

(4) reflexivity as a tool for practice/an introspective process

Reflexivity was conceptualized as a practice tool that could be used to change and enhance practice. As in version three, reflexivity was conceptualized as an introspective process, something that a practitioner can engage with on their own:

It’s about change, it’s about changing your own practice in some subtle way or changing something outside the practice which is why we are actually talking to someone. . that the internal conversation goes on . . (emphasis added) (2002)

valuing and holding fairly highly, the practice of conducting reflexivity. . . bring that sort of ‘third eye’ stuff. . . you keep making explicit the fact that that’s what you’re doing. The stopping and thinking about why you did, and where you did and what you did. And that navel gazing I guess is the notion . . (emphasis added) (2002)

Reflexivity is an ongoing ‘live’ process going on internally as the outside world impacts on me. (2003)

(5) reflexivity as a learning tool/critical practice approach

Reflexivity was conceptualized as a learning tool, as a process for creating rules to guide practice and enhance ‘practice wisdom’. Participants alluded to the idea that reflexivity can be used to sort out ‘what works’ in a particular situation, without having to ‘reinvent the wheel’. This is encapsulated in the following quote:

. . . reflexivity creates a helpful rule in the context, then you might have a . . . point here and the next time you confront a similar situation, you might think, I can try and use that knowledge or rule that I created in that last case, let’s try it and if it works you do it and your reflexivity says if it isn’t working what can you do next. . . (2002)

This quote also refers to the use of reflexivity as a continual and critical process of questioning how knowledge to guide practice is created.

However, reflexivity as a critical approach and as a learning tool was not considered to be easy and generated a level of discomfort:

But even if you don’t say anything about it, you’re just doing the reflecting on yourself, it kind of, it’s not a comfortable feeling for people. (2002)

The process of practising reflexivity and moving to that end of the continuum was considered as also being ‘scary’, while the instrumentalist end of the continuum was associated with safety:

I mean it is that balance between it being scary and discomfort and I mean, I think there is probably a lot of staff that would sort of just tell me what to do, how to do, what is the rule
here, what is (sic) the rules to follow, how do I interpret this, whatever else’ and if you go back to them and take them through a different process, but I think it also has, I suppose the other side to that is that it is also rewarding in the long term. (2002)

The extent of challenge in practising reflexively might also be linked to levels of professional experience and expertise:

I think it also has to do with the individuals, where they are at. . . personal development and professional development. (2002)

I think it’s a level of confidence and. . . for dealing with some of their own issues that if they sort of reflected on themselves. . . (2002)

Despite the challenges that reflexivity might pose, it was also considered to be rewarding in the long term:

So the other side of this is the rewarding, for some people it is a difficult process to go through with that, yeah, the mastery that goes with that. (2002)

(6) as a process of critical reflection on policy
Some participants also interpreted the concept of reflexivity as critical reflection on the policies set by their agencies that inform and guide their practice:

. . . you look at policy, you build in reflexivity in individual practice relative to clients, relative to program, relative to annual reviews. It’s at all those different levels. (2002)

I guess I don’t see policies or whatever as set in concrete. I think you still need to keep reflecting on them and seeing if they are still useful because I guess I have seen policies that are being useful to support workers in their practice and if they are not, well then you need to be relooking at them. (2002)

Again, as this quote shows, reflexivity was used as a critical approach to practice, offering a process of engagement with organisational instrumental rationality (rules and procedures) that shapes and guides practice.

Participants also described adopting a reflexive approach to practice as rewarding and as promoting growth and trust in relations with clients. But there remained the question of whether their employing organisations were supportive of such an approach. For example, in that the participants questioned whether organisational culture provided sufficient safety and permission for them to adopt a reflexive stance in relation to their practice:

It is about a culture as well isn’t it, it is the culture that allows that. (2002)

Yeah, I think it is back to the ideal world in a way and it is a thing about how do you fit in organisational culture that allows. . . a relationship to happen rather than the task centred stuff that says we just want another chapter and verse and we don’t really care what your interpretation of that is. (2002)

In the next section, we focus on how the participants engaged with the concept of power, as it relates to their roles and the process of knowledge generation.

Reflexivity as Knowledge/Power in Practice
We have acknowledged previously (D’Cruz et al., 2007) that the concept of reflexivity has been offered as a constructive (Parton & O’Byrne, 2000a; 2000b) and critical (Fook, 1996; 1999; Taylor & White, 2000) approach to social work practice, particularly recognizing the relations of power in the generation of situated professional knowledge. Consequently an
important dimension of how the participants in this research engaged with the concept of reflexivity was how they conceptualized and acknowledged the operation of power in their practice.

In engaging with the formal definition of reflexivity as an integral relationship between knowledge and power, participants identified three different forms that power could take in their practice which we have categorised as: (1) constructive power, (2) coercive power, and (3) institutional power.

**Constructive power**
The participants acknowledged that power enabled them to:

*empathize where the client is at … [knowledge/assessment] should not merely be a conflict of views* (2003)

*Power was also considered as constructive in relation to dealing with the seemingly inevitable conflicts that arise in work with children and families:*

*Practice starts off with [the] assumption of a power struggle. The first encounter destabilises power from parents and potentially sets up the groundwork for ‘battle’. Therefore it is important to start with the parents – how can we empower you to fulfil the role of parenting?* (2002)

The giving of knowledge or information was also seen as a way of empowering clients (parents) and reducing what was considered to be a power imbalance between professionals and families:

*Just an equalizing kind of thing, using your own knowledge in a constructive way to help people understand.* . . . (2002)

It is also worth noting that participants considered the parents as clients rather than their children when they were asked to reflect on the operation of power in practice.

**(2) Coercive power**
The participants acknowledged the operation of power, in relation to the generation of knowledge, in the relations between themselves, their supervisors (or supervisees) and clients. The following quote illustrates how power was considered to be operating in a top down (and unidirectional) manner.

*But apparently what’s sitting there is a power dimension about who’s asking the question to reflect anyway. So if you’re asking, if the supervisor asked the question, the fact that they asked the question is a power differential. That fact that we go out to a client family. . . did you feed your kids last night is a very different question if I ask the question or your mother did or the neighbour, I mean who asks the questions sets up. . .* (2002)

Statutory power was also considered as a last resort:

*at some point power needs to be used – there are things we can do on the way to avoid reaching this point* (2003)

**(3) Institutional power**
The operation of power as oppressive and as located in the rules and procedures of employing organisations which produce rigid solutions to problems was also identified by the participants, as:

*a fixation on appropriate course of action for clients [as defined by the organisation] – often*
results in neglecting clients’ real needs. (2002)

In summary, power was considered by the participants to be operating in both constructive and oppressive ways in their practice. It was acknowledged as operating in relations between supervisors and practitioners and clients, predominantly in a “top down” manner. Power was also associated with statutory duties. With reference to the process of knowledge creation, at least one of the participants acknowledged the importance of the hierarchical status of the person asking the questions, again with power operating in a “top down” manner. Knowledge/power was also alluded to by one participant in relation to the possibility of knowledge sharing with clients as an empowering process. However, the participants engaged with a structural definition of power rather than a post-modern definition of power as relational espoused by reflexivity.

Participants’ interpretations and the literature

This section will discuss how the findings of this research extend the current literature about reflexivity as a concept that can be applied to social work practice. In order to consider the creative and varying ways that the participants in this research related the concept to their practice, we draw on our critical review of the literature on reflexivity as a concept (D'Cruz et al., 2007) to provide an analytical framework to locate these emergent meanings. In our critical literature review (D'Cruz et al., 2007), we identified three variations in the meaning of reflexivity: as an individual’s considered response to an immediate context, as a critical approach that questions how knowledge is generated and as an approach to practice that is concerned with how emotion is implicated in social work practice. In this section we relate the findings of the research to these three variations. We aim to understand the practitioner/participants’ interpretations within these broader conceptual frameworks in order to bring together “formal theory” (expressed in academic literature) and “informal theory” (as emergent and grounded in the experience of practitioners) (Fook, 1999; Camilleri, 1999).

The First Variation: Individual’s choices in context

In our critical literature review (D'Cruz et al., 2007), the first conceptual variation of reflexivity is regarded as an individual’s considered response to an immediate context and is concerned with the ability of service users to process information and create knowledge to guide life choices (Roseneil & Seymour, 1999; Kondrat, 1999; Elliott, 2001; Ferguson, 2003, 2004). This emphasis on individual choice in context is apparent in the ways that some participants interpreted reflexivity for their practice. They saw it as a means (or skill) for making sense of the situations they faced in practice and deciding on action that they could then take. However, their responses did not suggest that they considered reflexivity to be a skill that can be taught to clients to assist them to make sense of their worlds and to take action to further their own interests (Ferguson, 2004). Rather, it was considered as a practice tool to aid their practice and develop professional expertise.

The Second Variation: Self Critical Professional Practice

In our critical literature review (D'Cruz et al., 2007), the second conceptual variation of reflexivity is defined as a social worker’s self critical approach that questions how knowledge about clients is generated and, further, how relations of power operate in this process (White & Stancombe, 2003; Taylor & White, 2000; Parton & O’Byrne, 2000a; Sheppard, Newstead, Caccavo & Ryan, 2000). This variation in the literature was apparent in the ways that the participants defined reflexivity as a critical approach to their practice, the knowledge generated in practice and the rules and policies that guide practice. As in the conceptual variation in the literature, power was considered as part of the definition of reflexivity, particularly by one participant, in relation to the identity of the knower.

The Third Variation: Emotion, Cognition and Social Work Practice

In our critical literature review (D'Cruz et al., 2007), the third conceptual variation of reflexivity
is concerned with how emotion is implicated in social work practice (Kondrat, 1999; Mills & Kleinman, 1988; Miehls & Moffat, 2000; Ruch, 2002). The meanings of reflexivity generated by participants in our research also identified emotions as being an important part of the process of knowledge creation. Participants spoke of their emotional responses when they attempted to apply a critical approach to the generation of knowledge to guide their practice. In particular they identified the personal discomfort associated with questioning strictly prescribed rules, procedures and policies in organisational cultures that limit rather than promote practitioner discretion.

Discussion

Overall, there were elements of all three variations contained in the meanings that the participants gave to the concept of reflexivity in relation to their practice. Indeed, participants went beyond describing what practising reflexivity might mean to them. A key point that emerges from this research with practitioners is the descriptions of how they might engage with the concept of reflexivity in a context that prescribes instrumental accountability. They described the difficulties and discomfort in incorporating a reflexive approach to practice and the easier option of resorting to the relative safety of following rules and procedures. A certain amount of self-confidence is required to engage in critical or reflexive approaches to practice, with confidence associated with practice experience and levels of expertise. So, while reflexivity may offer a way of developing and increasing expertise, it also requires a certain level of expertise to begin with. It is worth noting that it was the 2002 group of participants, the more senior practitioners, team leaders and managers who reflected on this more than the less experienced 2003 group. This also mirrors the conceptualisation of professional expertise and its development by Fook, Ryan and Hawkins (2000), who argue that whereas "novices" in professional practice tend to follow rules, "experts engage with theory in a critically self-reflective process" (p. 189). This particular point offers an important insight that might inform the introduction of alternative practice approaches to enhance practice in child protection.

The participants did not engage quite so fully with the concept of power as it relates to knowledge creation in the definition of reflexivity provided to them. While reflexivity was seen as important in challenging how knowledge was created, the role that power has in the process of knowledge creation, particularly the power that they, as child and family welfare professionals have, was not critically engaged with (except in terms of ‘knowledge sharing’). We conceptualized their versions of power as constructive, coercive and institutional and acknowledged more as an entity or possession than a process that operates in all interactions, namely, a structural version of power. This conceptualisation of power may be associated with the location of the practitioners in human service organisations which are structured as bureaucracies in which ‘legal authority’ is the most evident form of power, and which, in Foucauldian terms establishes a pervasive system of governmentality through hierarchical surveillance (Foucault, 1980). Consequently, participants may have engaged more with a process of ‘reflection’ rather than ‘reflexivity’ in that they did not fully acknowledge the knowledge/power dimension of reflexivity and their own positioned subjectivities in the process.

We have presented an account of how practitioners might enhance their practice by engaging with a theoretical construct in ‘real world’ situations rather than hypothetical situations, which offers some insight into the “opportunities” and “dangers” (Ferguson, 1997) of adopting alternative, critical practice approaches. We have shown that it is possible for practitioners to combine an alternative practice approach based in the social constructionist critique of current child protection practice with the “risk paradigm” and that the two approaches are not necessarily “incommensurable” (Marcus, 1994). The consequence for practice is that it offers hope that alternative “constructive” approaches (Parton & O’Byrne,
2000a; 2000b) to child protection practice that aim to move beyond the “policing” (Donzelot, 1980) and “surveillance” (Parton, 1991) of families can be integrated into child protection practice and that their development should continue. The possibility that such alternative approaches might be well received by practitioners has also emerged from this research, as demonstrated by the enthusiasm with which the participants in this research engaged with the concept of reflexivity.

Conclusion

This article has discussed how the concept of reflexivity was applied by practitioners in the field of child and family welfare to expand their current practice repertoires. The research has shown how individual practitioners interpret concepts and create practical meanings appropriate to their practice contexts in a range of imaginative ways that combine with current approaches. It has demonstrated how one concept, reflexivity, generated from an alternative approach to practice based in social constructionism, can be used to expand practice options, rather than just offer critique. Consequently this research supports the further development of alternative approaches to practice in child protection that extend beyond forensic approaches that focus on the identification and management of “risk”.

References

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