Exploring the Development of Reflective Capacity in Young People

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People use reflection and reflective practice for many different reasons, including for self-care and to make sense of their experiences. In this study, social workers spoke about how they learned to be reflective, with many participants describing activities in their childhood that developed their reflective capacity. The aim of this article is to apply these ideas and examine the factors that enhance reflective capacity in children and young people. This research was part of a PhD study that involved interviews with 35 social workers in USA, Canada, UK and Australia. This exploratory study found that activities like story reading and asking children to reflect on their behaviour are early steps in the process of becoming reflective, but this needs to be followed up with conversations that deconstruct assumptions to make sense of experiences and explore multiple perspectives. This research is important for health and human service workers and others who want to develop reflective capacity in children and young people, particularly for children subject to disadvantage who need to overcome trauma and adversities.

■ **Keywords:** reflective practice, critical reflection, learning reflection, childhood development

Introduction

There is increased emphasis in undergraduate education and professional development on reflective practice as an important aspect of continuous learning and ongoing professional development. In this article, we will focus on reflection and reflective practice, why it is important, how reflective abilities are developed and the importance of developing reflective capacity in children and young people, particularly those facing disadvantage. This is an important issue for children and young people experiencing disadvantage because they may find it hard to overcome unless they learn how to reflect and make meaning from their experiences.

What is Reflection and Reflective Practice?

Most writers trace the origins of reflective practice to the initial work of Dewey (1910), which was further developed by Schön (1983), Argyris and Schön (1996) and Mezirow (1990). In Schön's (1983) seminal work, he described reflective practice as a way of understanding practice at a deeper level. Schön (1994) later distinguished between *reflection in action* and *reflection on action,* suggesting that reflection *in action* is the thought we take as we are involved in a situation, and reflection *on action* is reflection that takes place at a later time when we consider the experience. Terms like 'reflection',

'reflective practice', 'critical reflection' and 'reflexivity' are contested in the literature and are often used interchangeably, without definition or explanation about what makes them different (Hickson, 2011; Redmond, 2006). However, reflection is something that we all do, often without noticing, as we think about our experiences and interactions with other people.

Critical reflection is often described as an advanced method of reflective practice, that involves more than just thinking about an experience (Hickson, 2013), and which involves a critique of the assumptions and the meaning we attach to experiences (Fook, 2002; Fook & Gardner, 2007). The 'critical' in critical reflection involves reflection through the lens of critical theory, which involves analysis of the context of knowledge, power and reflexivity to understand how assumptions are influenced by social and structural assumptions (Fook & Askeland, 2006). Brookfield (1995) argues that reflection by itself is not enough – we need to include critical thinking, which examines how personal experience is influenced by social and power arrangements.

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This research was conducted within the social work domain, which is part of a continually developing field and is influenced by many factors. A strong and valued element of social work practice is the depth of reflective practice wisdom expected of practitioners. Social work authors (Fook, 2002; Fook & Gardner, 2007; Redmond, 2006) argue that reflective practice is not purely a social work process and is integral to various disciplines with an assortment of language, definitions, frameworks and methods espoused. Indeed, writers in other health and human service disciplines regularly purport the value of reflective practice in a broad range of disciplines, including physiotherapy (Donaghy & Morss, 2007), medicine (Aukes, Geertsma, Cohen-Schotanus, Zwierstra, & Slaets, 2007) and education (Pollard, 2002).

How do People Learn to be Reflective?

Learning theories suggest that adults learn in different ways, have different preferences and learn best when they are actively involved in their own learning (Cornelius, Gordon, & Ackland, 2009; Ruey, 2010). Some people will prefer to learn by observing another person undertake the task, while others will prefer to learn by reading about it, hearing about it or doing it for themselves. Kolb (1984) describes four stages of experiential learning and suggests that people need a concrete experience, to reflect on the experience, to conceptualise the experience to gain new ideas and to apply these ideas to new situations.

Some writers, including Alerby and Elidottir (2003), suggest that the ways people prefer to reflect is influenced by the ways that they learn and process information. For some people, talking about an experience will be their preferred way of making sense of it. For others, quiet reflection time is required to cogitate. Baldwin (2004) explains that, as the understanding of learning styles and preferences has developed, so has the idea that reflection is considered an important aspect of adult learning; crediting Boud and Garrick's (1999) model for learning for highlighting the significant part that feelings and emotions can play to either promote or to hinder learning, and noting (p. 43) that 'learning is often about letting go of fond and long held beliefs.'

How Children and Young People Develop Reflective Capacity?

Learning to be reflective is an important aspect of life cycle development. Reflective functioning (Fonagy et al., 1995) is described as the way that people interpret and make sense of behaviour and responses in themselves and others, and is a foundation of reflective parenting programs. These ideas build on Erikson's model of psychosocial development and stages of learning and Bowlby's theories about the importance of developing secure attachments in early childhood (Pittman, Keiley, Kerpelman, & Vaughn, 2011). Fonagy and Target (1997) argue that reflective capacity is a significant factor in children's social relationships and developing secure attachments and is essential for children to recognise and respond to other people's feelings and behaviours.

Children who are encouraged to express their views are more inclined to take responsibility for their behaviour and actions (Barnett, 1987; MacCoby, 1980). This is particularly important for vulnerable and disadvantaged children, because resilience, wellbeing and self-esteem and self-efficacy are influenced by a sense of control over what is going on (Bandura, 1982; Dewar, Servos, Bosacki, & Coplan, 2013; Murphy, Steele, & Steele, 2013; Slade, 2005, 2007; Taarvig, Solbakken, Grova, & Monsen, 2015).

Developing reflective abilities is considered by many authors as a protective function of childhood development. Enhancing parental reflective functioning or reflectiveness of parent or child carer is a protective factor for children who are vulnerable, at risk or involved with health and welfare organisations (Ruch, 2012; Sadler et al., 2013; Stacks et al., 2014). The establishment of attachment and security has lifelong consequences for the child's ongoing mental and physical development (Ordway, Sadler, Dixon, & Slade, 2014).

From birth, the human animal is primed to observe and be curious about the world. This is first manifested through the development of the senses (National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC), 2009), but is swiftly accompanied by cognitive development and the capacity to respond with emotions (Shore, 2012, 2015). In the first six months, there may be very limited understanding of language – symbolic meaning – but within a couple of years, children begin to attempt expression in language (Anisfeld, 2014). Disturbances to attachment with significant carers are known to delay development and a lack of nurture can result in withdrawal of curiosity, confidence and social interaction (Crittenden, 1992). At this stage, reflection is limited and often simplistic in terms of early beliefs about attribution. However, with nurture and stimulation by parents/carers, children maintain curiosity and exploration of their world. Over the ensuing years, rapid development includes the physical, cognitive (including emotion management) and social capacities. By the early teens, this is supported by greater consciousness of moral principles based on values and growing ethical understanding about right and wrong (Gibbs, 2014). Thinking consciously is now a major part of both formal and informal education and the building of knowledge and skills; and this leads to being able to see the world through the eyes of others, the development of independent thinking and recognition of influence of self and of others (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012).

While the stages of human development tend to flow across the first 24 years at which point most brain development has occurred (Simpson, 2008), there can be interruptions, re-visiting of earlier behaviours, sudden spurts in development and other features of development precipitated by context and circumstances. For children and young people in care there have often been traumatic events that affect neurological development (Porges, 2015) and for

children exposed to disadvantage through displacement, loss of community and culture through refugeeism or war, or exposure to disaster there is often concern for mental and emotional wellbeing (Fazel, Reed, Panter-Brick, & Stein, 2012; Murphy, 2010). Part of overcoming such disadvantage relies on being able to make meaning of the experiences which aids re-adjustment to changed circumstances (Theron & Theron, 2014; Wexler, DiFluvio, & Burke, 2009). Re-establishing reflective capacity can be a means of recovery and moving on for these children and young people.

There are many different ways that people use reflection and reflective practice. The aim of this article was to identify the factors that enhance reflective capacity in young people.

Method

Study Design and Method

This qualitative research was part of an exploratory study that explored how social workers learn and use reflection. There were 35 participants (12 men and 23 women), who were located broadly, in a geographic sense, in Canada (n = 2), USA (n = 4) and UK (n = 1), although most participants were located in Australia (n = 28). All participants identified as social workers and represented a range of experience from 8 months to over 40 years in the profession.

Qualitative research methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) were used to inform a study design that would reveal the diverse ways that social workers learn and use reflection. The principles of narrative inquiry (Mischler, 1986; Riessman, 1993) and critical reflection (Fook & Gardner, 2007; Morley, 2008) were used as a platform for the construction of this research. Narrative scholarship supports a post-modern approach to research (Riessman & Quinney, 2005) and encourages researchers to adopt reflexive perspectives (Elliott, 2005; Larsson & Sjöblom, 2010). Similarly, critical reflection in research methodology involves the researchers explicitly analysing and questioning the values and assumptions of themselves as well as the participants (Morley, 2008). Post-modern approaches to research are based on the notion that there are multiple truths and diverse perspectives which are all valued and acknowledged. The aim is to delve into the different stories and to capture the various points of view, exploring the elements of the stories to which the narrator ascribes significance.

A semi-structured interview question guide was developed that consisted of open questions about the participants' experiences with reflection and reflective practice. Participants were asked general questions that were designed to elicit stories about how they understood reflection and their experiences of using reflection. The interview schedule did not specifically include questions about childhood but asked participants about what helped them with learning to be reflective. Individual interviews were conducted via face to face, telephone or email methods. One researcher (HH) conducted all interviews, which were then transcribed. The interview transcripts were imported in to QSR Nvivo-10 and

analysed by one researcher (HH) to identify using potential themes (Sarantakos, 2005). These themes were discussed by the research group and refined and confirmed by the other researchers before coding was completed. The research was approved by the La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee (FHEC 11–52).

Discussion of Findings

Adults who remembered developing reflective capacity during their childhood reported that they found it easier to be reflective as an adult. Childhood is a time of learning and discovery and the development of cognitive processes are essential to develop reflective capacity (Fonagy & Target, 1997; Kolb, 1984). Children can use their developing thinking and talking skills to deconstruct events that have happened, including events that they have personally experienced, heard about or imagined. This deconstruction is best conducted as part of a trusting relationship with another person, who can help the child to wonder about what has happened and why, to explore the different perspectives of the characters involved and to think about how things could be different in the future. Many children are naturally reflective and can recite or recall what they have seen or heard. When the ability to be critically reflective has been developed, it can become a protective factor for children who might otherwise be at risk of being seduced into believing their negative thoughts. While the term 'seduced' might seem to be incongruous with negative self-talk, it is a useful way to think about how children can challenge their thoughts and self-talk in a more positive manner. However, children will often need the support of a critical friend to develop the skills to deconstruct experiences and reconstruct different ways to respond in the future.

What Influenced Learning to be Reflective?

Half of the social workers interviewed (n = 17/35) suggested that learning to be reflective was something that developed during their childhood with their family. For many, this started as a childhood curiosity and interest in observing and understanding how things work, or reading books that provided the stimulus for thinking, deconstruction and discussion about characters in the story and the storyline. For some, this was after misbehaving when they were told to sit in the corner and think about what they have done. This was evident in comments such as these:

> I've always felt very confident to reflect because in my family I learnt how to do it right from a little girl. Home was a place where there was lots of discussion about something that may have happened. They would give me a forum where I had a voice and it was safe to reflect on difficult things. I learned by having that type of modelling in my home right from when I was a little girl and seeing the grown-ups do it around me. A3
>
> We had a fairly quiet home life, we didn't have a lot of people around, and I read a lot as a kid and enjoyed talking

with my family about the characters in the story and what they were doing. A20

Learning as a curious observer – interested in understanding how things work. Since I was little, I like to know everything about everything. A5

If I think about my family, my family talk about things, reflect on things, ask why, ask how, ask those sort of conceptual questions, like how did you get to decide to do that? A2

I learnt it in the family home . . . just thinking a bit deeper about things and why did that happen and how could it have been done differently. A4

There is a common theme here for these participants as children about being encouraged to articulate what they were thinking and feeling and to question what was happening, to explore more deeply the hows and whys? This seemed to generate an enjoyment of the reflective process and an expectation that it would be both safe and beneficial to reflect. From this base, social workers who identified as reflecting in their childhood found that learning about reflection as part of their undergraduate social work education was enjoyable and they were easily able to incorporate a framework of reflection into their practice. Several described this as being like 'having a framework dropped on top of what I already do' and commented that discovering reflective practice theory was 'the icing on the cake'.

The other half (n = 18) of the social workers in this study reported that they learned about reflective practice during other times in their life. This included as part of their social work studies at university, during social work practice or supervision, after a critical incident in their life or in response to searching for ways to make meaning of their experiences.

Learning to be reflective is influenced by a range of personal factors, including the individual's personality and emotional intelligence, their culture and whether 'being curious' is encouraged or inhibited. Participants in this research described a variety of temporal opportunities to learn to be reflective and the factors that influenced whether the person engaged with the opportunity to learn to be reflective or whether they allowed the opportunity to pass. For example, children might be invigorated by an enthusiastic early childhood teacher who encourages them to search for multiple meanings within a story book, and this helps them to be aware of different perspectives and multiple truths. Other children will listen to the same teacher, yet a lack of readiness may mean that they are not interested in exploring these aspects.

Why is it Important to Develop Reflective Capacity in Children and Young People?

Learning to be reflective is important for children and adults as it provides a way to make sense of experiences, learn from things that have happened and develop resilience in the context of their individual social structures. Teaching children and young people to be reflective is important because it

encourages them to explore the multiple meanings of their interactions and experiences; and to understand the way their assumptions can influence the ways they make sense of experiences. Importantly, reflective functioning or reflectiveness of the parent or carer is a protective factor for children who are vulnerable, at risk or involved with health and welfare organisations.

People caring for or working with young people can use critical reflection to deconstruct knowledge, agency and reflexivity to consider power imbalances between themselves and the children. Critical reflection can be used to make sense of what they know about children, child development and discipline and how they developed these ideas. This will help carers and workers to consider power inequalities and create opportunities for children to ask for what they want. Childhood carers and educators can use critical reflection to explore the decisions they make and how and why they came to make these decisions. They can consider what children know and how they have learned it, whether they can express their thoughts, feelings and hopes for the future, whether they feel confident to ask for what they need. This is important for those who are working with or caring for children who are vulnerable or from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It is essential to notice when children or parents are responding differently, engage in critical reflection (e.g., knowledge, power and reflexivity) and contemplate the resources that are available to assist, so that reflective capacity can be developed.

How to Develop Reflective Capacity in Children and Young People

Throughout this research, many participants expressed the view that they had always been reflective saying 'it is part of who I am'. This was clarified to mean that participants felt that being reflective was an intrinsic part of them. About half of the participants interviewed stated that they learned to be reflective during childhood. Whilst there is no definitive time that is best to learn reflective skills, it appears that social workers who learned to be reflective during their childhood were more easily able to incorporate the framework and structures that were provided during their social work education and during social work supervision and practice. They had a foundation to build upon and were empowered to express their views. Social workers who were not familiar with reflection before their social work education found it more challenging to translate and integrate the theory of reflective practice from the classroom into their social work practice.

This leads us to consider how best to encourage children and young people to develop reflective capacity and how it might be embedded in their care context. There are many ways to develop the reflective capacity in young people and critical reflection provides a simple framework for deconstructing and making sense of experiences, but perhaps a practice scenario provides the best way of illustrating this.

Practice Example

> Mindy has reported that she has experienced bullying at school. The first instinct for the parent, teacher or carer might be to encourage Mindy to ignore the comments and not to take any notice. Critical reflection provides a framework for considering multiple perspectives and to deconstruct knowledge, power and reflexivity. By thinking about the scenario and discussion with a critical friend, the adult could begin to better understand the issue from the perspective of the child, help the child to make sense of the experience and to develop strategies to manage the situation if it should happen again.

Critical reflection involves deconstructing the experience and explicitly looking for the influence of knowledge, power and reflexivity. This involves thinking about and talking about the following questions: Who has power and how is it being exercised? What are Mindy's options to respond to the bullying and how is this best achieved? What does she think is happening here? Why does she think this is happening? How would she describe the incident and how does she perceive the person or people doing the bullying? What has she observed about when and how this happens? What ideas does she have about how she or others could respond that would help? Why? Does she feel comfortable speaking up for herself or does she need support with this? Why? Is there an opportunity for other children to learn from this experience? How? What message does ignoring the bullying send to Mindy? Are there assumptions about gender, culture and values that need to be considered? What are the long-term outcomes for Mindy if the bullying is not addressed and how are they different if Mindy or the adult intervenes?

Critical reflection provides protective elements for children like Mindy, who might otherwise be at risk of believing the negative thoughts and comments of the bully. Mindy needs the assistance of a trusted adult (a critical friend) to deconstruct the experience, understand why it was hurtful and to reconstruct strategies to deal with the situation if it occurs again. This will assist in locating the bullying in a wider context, taking into account the context of the bullies, the implications for the school and violence in the community. Hence, the first step is to encourage and support the young person to think about and talk about the stimulus (story, photograph, drawing, film, song, experience). These media could be used both to stimulate stories about experiences and as a medium for the young person to express their thoughts and ideas. Conversation with the young person can be used to build on existing skills and knowledge and connect with past experiences. It is important to develop understanding of the different perspectives present in any situation by asking questions such as why did the character do this, what were they thinking, how do you know, what might have helped, who else could have helped, what would happen if....?

Reflective thinking can be developed when children are encouraged to express their thoughts and feelings: what they like and dislike, why and how they know what they like, their interests, strengths, abilities, aspirations. Children can also be encouraged to use a journal or reflective diary to record thoughts, feelings, stories, drawings, photographs, tickets from special events. Older children might prefer to use a blog or online method, but need to be careful about protecting privacy and access.

Critical reflection encourages deconstruction of assumptions and the exploring of multiple perspectives. This leads to a broader understanding and analysis of an experience than would be achieved by reflection alone. The outcome of using a critical reflection approach can be an appreciation of the wider context of the experience of the individual, the social and structural assumptions for the family, implications for policies and procedures at the school and broad conversations about safety and violence in the community.

Limitations and Future Research

There were limitations with this research, including the international variations about the definition of a social worker and the educational requirements. This might mean that there are unintentional variations in the educational standards and qualifications of participants in this research. For example, whilst all participants identified as a social worker, the qualifications of each worker were not checked and this could have resulted in participants holding varying levels of qualifications and experience as a social worker. Further, the intent of the project was not to learn about the development of critical reflection in childhood, per se, but the findings suggest further study of the development of critical reflection for children and young people, especially in disadvantaged circumstances, is a topic worthy of further attention. It would also be interesting to know if we could find clear evidence that children and young people who have had the opportunity to develop critical reflection are able to cope better with adversity.

There are opportunities for further research about how social workers engage with reflection and how this is used in their work with children and young people. How are social workers who are familiar with reflective practices using this knowledge to promote reflection by carers of children and young people? With the introduction from Europe of social pedagogical approaches to out-of-home care in the UK (Stein, 2008) and beyond, is this approach to working with children and young people developing their reflective capacities as well as emotional and social wellbeing? We need to know if the type of reflection that is learned in childhood is the same as reflection that is used in professional practice. Is there a difference between personal reflection and professional practice reflection? Future research should evaluate the impact on service users of social workers who use critical reflection in their practice.

Conclusion

Critical reflective practice can lead to outcomes that are inclusive of multiple perspectives from workers, parents,

young people and children. The findings of this study resonate with that of other research about how we learn to use reflection, but it is not enough to just think about what has happened – we need to go further in order to learn and use reflection, and engage with critical reflection by deconstructing knowledge, power and reflexive aspects of our situation. There are implications for health and human services workers, early childhood educators, parents and carers emerging from this research. Encouraging children and young people to develop their reflective capacity is important because it encourages them to explore multiple meanings of their experiences and understand the way their assumptions can influence the ways they make sense of experiences. Using critical reflection provides a framework to deconstruct these assumptions; and to make sense of these experiences and develop resilience. People who reflect are more aware of their own values and beliefs and what influences their decision making. This can then be applied in a variety of different situations as reflection in action to improve practice and outcomes but, more importantly, reflective practice can lead to more inclusive environments for children and their families because workers, children and parents are able to see the situation from many different perspectives.

Conflict of Interest

None.

Contributions

HH designed and conducted this research as part of her PhD. JL and FG were PhD supervisors. HH drafted the article and FG and JL provided analytical and conceptual advice. All authors edited and approved the final manuscript.

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