

Analysis and critical thinking

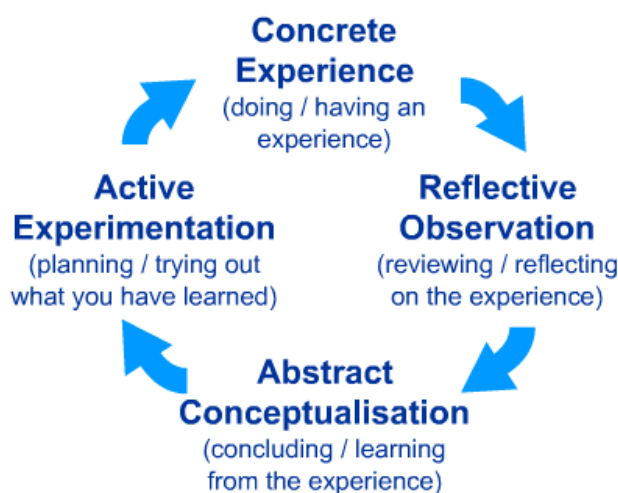
Overview

The importance of analysis and critical thinking as a key component of practice, and of professional development, is recognised in the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) Standards of Proficiency for Social Workers (HCPC, 2012), the Knowledge and Skills Statements (KSS) for Social Workers in Adult Services (DH, 2015) and the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) (TCSW, 2012). All three frameworks stress the need for practitioners to take every opportunity to reflect on their understanding of a situation or case, analyse the information gathered, test out varying hypotheses and be clear about *the reasoning of any conclusions reached and recommendations made, particularly in relation to mental capacity, mental health and safeguarding situations* (DH, 2015).

Much analysis and critical thinking, including reflection on and clarification of information, takes place outside of the conversations with person being supported. For example, during supervision or when writing up case notes and records. This can be the case particularly with newly qualified or less confident practitioners. However, it is as important to ensure that this also happens during the conversation, whilst you are with the person and able to include their views - reflecting the conversation back to them and clarifying whether your analysis and critical thinking reflects their thoughts, views and feelings appropriately. This will become second nature, unconscious competence, with application in practice.

There is much written on analysis and critical thinking and the reflective thought processes which form part of this (Schon, 1983 & 2000; Moon, 2004; Yip, 2006; D’Cruz et al, 2007; Knott and Scragg, 2016;).

Key is the message that, whilst reflection is central to good social work practice, it is only effective if change, learning and/or action results from it (Knott and Scragg, 2016 citing Horner, 2004). The Kolb Cycle is useful here (Kolb, 1984)



Reflection and clarification in the context of the conversation can be facilitated by summarising or giving feedback on what the person has said, either paraphrasing and/or restating their words. But also by asking questions, prompting the person to expand on what has been said or, where conflicting messages have been given gently challenging. It is important this process reflects on includes the feelings and words of the individual and any relevant non-verbal messages to ensure clear understanding of meaning.

The reflecting affords both the practitioner and the person time to think and highlight any areas not already covered.

Reflecting on a conversation:

- Allows the person to “hear” their own thoughts and to focus on their situation, the impact of this and how they feel about it.
- Shows the person that you are listening, trying to get a clear picture of their circumstances and doing your best to understand their thoughts, views and feelings.
- Encourages both parties to reflect on what has been said, start thinking about what this means and, if needed, to revise, add to or expand on things.
- Allows both parties to consider any strengths and assets that have been identified as well as any needs, building an understanding of the impact of these on the person’s quality of life whole.
- Allows both parties time to check for any missing pieces of ‘the story’ and/or to identify areas not already covered.
- Facilitates identification and clarification of any possible misinterpretation or misunderstanding on the part of either, for example where there is conflicting information or where verbal and non-verbal messages do not correspond.

Practice Development Exercises

1. Listen to the audio clip of [Jo, with Eric and Yvonne Battersby.](#) After listening to the clips discuss:
 - a) What thought processes is Jo using in his conversation with Eric and Yvonne? What thought processes is he prompting Eric and Yvonne to use?
 - b) How is Jo using clarification to ensure he is clear about any conflicting information or views that Eric and Yvonne are communicating?
 - c) What skills in reflective practice is Jo using to explore their feelings in what each is saying?

2. Identify a situation you encountered in work that you feel could have been dealt with more effectively. Use the Kolb Cycle to reflect on this either as an individual or being supported by one or more others. (N.B. If in pairs or a group, those supporting can ask questions to gather information about the experience or clarify facts but these should be open questions wherever possible):
 - a) *Describe (Concrete Experience)*
What were the facts, what was it that happened, when and where did it happen?
 - b) *Reflection / Observation*
What went well? What went less well? How did you/others react? What thoughts did you have? How did it make you feel? Were there other factors that influenced the situation? What have you learned from the experience?
 - c) *Abstract conceptualisation*
What can you conclude from the experience? What theories or hypotheses can you draw from it? What might have made it different / better? What might change how you felt? How did the experience match with your preconceived ideas? i.e. was the outcome expected or unexpected? How does it relate to any formal theories you know? Is there anything you could say or do now to change the outcome? What action can you take to change similar reactions in the future? What behaviours might you try out?
 - d) *Experimentation*
If possible, identify an opportunity to test out your hypotheses in the same or similar circumstances. Plan carefully how you will use the learning from your reflection, try and prepare for the experience. Once you have had an opportunity to put the learning into practice use the cycle to reflect again...

Relevant research, references and further reading:

D'Cruz H, Gillingham P and Melendez S (2007) *Reflexivity, it's meaning and relevance for Social Work: A Critical review of the Literature*. British Journal of Social Work 37, 73-90

Department of Health (DH) (2015) *Knowledge and Skills Statement for Social Workers in Adult Services*. DH: London.
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Kolb D (1984) *Experiential Learning*. New Jersey: Prentice Hal.

Milner J and O'Byrne P (2000) *Assessment in Social Work* Basingstoke: Palgrave

Moon J (2004) *A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning*. London: Routledge Falmer.

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Schon D (2000) *From technical rationality to reflection -in-action* in Harrison R, Reeve F, Hanson A and Clarke J (Eds.) *Supporting lifelong learning: Perspectives of learning*: London Routledge

Skills you Need (undated) *Reflective Practice Webpage*. [Accessible on line at <https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ps/reflective-practice.html> - Accessed 07/03/2017]

Knott C and Scragg T (2016) *Reflective Practice in Social Work 4th Edition*. Sage Publications / Learning Matters: London

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Yip K (2006) *Self-reflection in Reflective Practice: A Note of Caution*. London: The British Journal of Social Work.