Self-evaluation of Social Work Practice through Reflection on Professional Mistakes. Practice Makes „Perfect”?

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Abstract. Although criticized by some authors, self evaluation through reflective practice is of great importance in providing better professional services. Day after day social workers face situations that are largely unique and unrepeatable and for which solutions cannot be found in textbooks. For this reason the development of an adequate expertise through systematic and structured reflection is of primary importance. The result of a qualitative research undertaken in some Italian services shows that sometimes social workers „need” to make mistakes because paradoxically in many cases it is the only way to help the client in a long term perspective and to learn how to reduce negative outcomes in health and social services. The metaphor of Columbus discovering America „by mistake” while looking for a new route to India can help develop a better comprehension of the potentialities of this kind of reflection and help social workers find new ways to face the complex problems of the users. Furthermore, both intuition and rational reasoning are needed in social work practice, but they often produce systematic errors. Reflecting on these mistakes makes us better understand how we think and feel and help to correct our practice. This activity can be empowered by the use of conceptual tools like reflective frameworks (i.e. Borton’s key questions, Gibbs’s reflective cycle) and techniques of analytic or creative reflective writing. At the same time open and structured discussions with colleagues about mistakes improve the quality of „learning organization” where people can express and receive criticism using effective strategies.

Keywords: evaluation, reflective practice, mistakes, reflective framework, reflective writing

Introduction

Good social services have their roots in competent practitioners. In every field, professional skills are the main ingredient to define the quality of the help given to the users. Also in social work, reflective practice is the most effective bridge able to link theory and experience, social needs and services provided. The debate on this issue has been enriched by

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ideas from authors like Dewey, Freire, Habermas, Polanyi, Schön, Argyris, Archer and many others. From different perspectives (philosophical, psychological, educational, sociological) they have given the theoretical background to understand how we can learn while doing (Redmond, 2006; Sicora, 2010).

Being able to activate processes of reflexivity and, consequently, progressive professional development is an essential feature of any social worker who can address the challenges arising from a continuously changing environment. Such a reflexive social worker is capable of knowing-in-action and of reflection-on-action and in-action.

The “evaluation” of their work empowers the practitioners in the organization and enhances their ability to produce change and innovation. This may occur when the worker becomes able to be aware of the theories underlying the individual and organizational actions but also when, with the idea of “reflective research” as described by Schön (1983) or by use of conscious strategies of structured reflection, the social worker activates processes of systematic self-assessment and self-evaluation on his or her skills and performances.

The importance of this kind of a habit is of primary importance for the quality of the welfare system and of all organizational structures established for the delivery of personal social services. The best social services are, in fact, the ones where good practice is established and disseminated and where the reflective practice is widely used.

**Reflection vs evaluation?**

Reflect is to turn the mind, to pay attention to situations, problems, opportunities. In philosophy, reflection is a cognitive act by which the spirit or the mind, returning on itself, becomes conscious of its operations and their characters (Zingarelli, 1986). It is an activity of introspection through which the object of the mind’s operations (thinking, doubting, believing, etc.) is the mind itself and the function of which is to reveal the inner nature of reality, the unity of subject and object realized in an immediate self-consciousness.

As widely known, evaluation is “the process through which information is obtained and judgments made on whether an intended course of action is producing the desired results. Evaluation is the main source of evidence through which social work agencies decide whether their programmes and practices are effective or not” (Pierson and Thomas, 2002, 179). Palumbo (2001) distinguishes between “common” evaluation made in everyday life and scientific evaluation. This last is a cognitive activity aimed to provide a judgment on an action (or a set of coordinated actions) carried out intentionally and destined to produce external effects. This is based on the methods of social sciences research and follows strict and coded procedures.

What is the relationship between reflexivity and the professional evaluation? There are a lot of criticisms on self-evaluation, which is a kind of evaluation made by the agent in a process of finalized action. Although some value is recognized in it in social and training contexts, strong doubts remain about the plausibility of this kind of activity (Bezzi, 2003). Other elements that characterize the connection, but also the distance between evaluation and the sphere referred to “reflexivity” include the spontaneity, the formalization and the scientific dimension. Based on these criteria Bezzi (2009, 209-210, 215) distinguishes between:

- **implicit** (or submerged) evaluation which consists of a spontaneous formulation of judgments made by individuals in their daily lives. It has no scientific dimension and is filled with prejudices, unlike the spontaneous and the formal evaluation;
• **spontaneous** (or informal) evaluation is a form of informal evaluation expressed without the use of scientific criteria (as opposed to formal evaluation), but with explicit arguments (unlike the implicit evaluation);

• **formal** (or institutional) evaluation is any form of explicit and scheduled evaluation based on scientific rules, procedures and techniques. It is aimed at drawing up an evaluation report and is opposed to implicit or spontaneous evaluation.

Reflexivity can be located on a continuum between the two poles of „implicit” and „spontaneous” in relation to the degree of awareness and use of systematic methods used in the self-evaluation. The more the prejudgment is recognized and, at the same time, the underlying criteria of the implicit evaluation are brought to awareness, the more the worker is able to bring to light the knowledge guiding the choices of interpretation and action expressed in his or her professional practice. However, what seems to animate and direct reflection on personal experience is not an abstract need to achieve knowledge as „an end in itself”, but rather the attempt to weigh the pros and cons. This can bring one not only to give a meaning to the actions done and the events that occurred, but also to help one face future challenges with the conviction to be equipped with more refined „tools”.

In fact, **every evaluation is related to the analysis of the effects produced by the professional action and also to the reproduction of the action itself**. Every social worker, but also any other helping professional, self-evaluates his or her intervention because of his or her interest in the reproduction of some of the techniques and methods successfully applied to the social services users.

This is **the core of the idea of reflexive practice**: „we learn by thinking about things that have happened to us and seeing them in a different way, which enables us to take some kind of action” (Jasper, 2003, 2). In other words, it is „the ability to stand back and look critically at one’s own practice” (Pierson and Thomas, 2002, 396).

On the other hand, while performing acts, any professional evaluates his or her own action and can incorporate such a judgment in the next step. In many circumstances such a process is fed by a deeper awareness and in a systematic way that makes it possible not only to self-correct the practice, but also to express interpretations and hypothesis that can be later verified with more rigorous and scientific methods. The operation of a systematized reflection does not replace but rather upholds the process of scientific evaluation. In both cases, these cognitive operations are targeted, although in different ways, to improve the quality of services provided to the users.

**Reflection, reflective practice and social work**

Social reality is changing. It is a banal but true statement and every social worker has to deal with it. Aging society, huge migration streams, welfare state crisis, structural transformation of political systems are all phenomenon we have often met in the last two decades. Before that there were other problems and other challenges. Complexity and ambiguity are two of the main aspects that every social worker has to face in his or her daily work where there is a structural and constant need to revise knowledge and theories. **Turning away from easy certainties is essential because interventions based on them often produce inadequate performances and the failure to solve the problems of the users.**

This is one of the main reasons why reflection has to be an ever present attitude in every social worker’s action. But reflective practice is also a good medicine for a frenzy full of activity but not of results. In fact, in many services there is more attention to the process rather than the outcomes so the evaluation made is more related to efficiency rather than
efficacy. And in this case, when the practitioners work hard but without thinking too much, it is much easier to fall into a sense of uselessness and lack of meaning.

„If one does not know to which port one is sailing, no wind is favorable”, said the Roman philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca in one of his letters. To stop and reflect is surely the most important thing to do when a social worker is pursuing an intervention. So prejudices can also be revealed and the underlying and implicit criteria by which the operator looks at the users can be brought to awareness. This is the only way to bring out the knowledge that guides the choices of interpretation and action expressed in professional practice.

While reflective investigations are ongoing, it is important not only to think about what you do and how, but also to search for the conceptual assumptions that implicitly lead professional conduct.

An essential condition for the use of reflexive strategies is certainly represented by the activation of processes aimed to examine experiences and beliefs of the person thinking and acting, but also to trace the basic assumptions by which consciously or not the choices we made are warranted. All this is done in order to transform the experience, or the direct and natural way of living in the horizon of the world, in experience that takes shape as the experience becomes an object of reflection and the person knowingly appropriates it to understand its meaning (Mortari, 2003).

Walking along this path is not so easy but it leads us to recognize and make visible the multitude of connections that links the small portion of reality known to the wider context we all are living in. It’s as if, while observing a drop of water, we understand the properties of the sea from which that particle was taken. Staying in this metaphor, one could say that the social worker engaged in processes of reflexivity is similar to that observed drop and that it regards itself to capture the connections between itself and the world in which it forms a part of a sequence that leads progressively from the micro to the macro.

Such a gradual approach is well expressed by Goodman (1984) when he describes three different levels on which to conduct an analysis aimed towards a better reflexive understanding of a „case”, the action done and the results attained:

• **first level reflection**: the examination is limited to the description of the facts (history and emotions) and aims to evaluate (in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, accountability) and discuss (usually in groups and/or with a supervisor);

• **second level reflection**: by the exploration and explanation of the facts through theoretical concepts, the reflection is directed to help learn through the identification of values (individual, professional, organizational) and of the basis for action underlying the episode in question. The findings are transferable to other cases;

• **third level reflection**: here the aim is to identify the influence of factors related to ethics and social policy (for example, resources, institutional and organizational structure) of the specific situation under consideration.

The practitioners, however, not only express thoughts and evaluations, but, above all, they do actions. For this reason we speak of „reflective practice” as a practice in which experience and reflection is added to the action. Then, this action, plus the occurrence of further experience and reflection, leads to further action and so on *ad infinitum*. This cyclical process, the so-called ERA cycle (Experience – Reflection – Action) is the basis for reflective practice. This can be succinctly defined as the composition of three elements:

• what happens to the person (experiences);

• the processes of reflection, enabling the person to learn from these experiences;

• the action that is undertaken because of the new perspective gained.
Reflective practice is a concept introduced in many professions since the eighties and has had considerable development thanks to Kolb and his work on experiential learning (Jasper, 2003).

![Kolb’s Cycle of Experiential Learning (Kolb, 1984)](image)

As an important consequence of reflective practice social workers, but also the other practitioners working in health and social services, can narrow the rift between theory and practice that often characterizes the experience in the educational systems and that in the profession.

**Critical incidents and mistakes as stimuli for reflective practice**

*How can we turn from reflexivity as an abstraction to a reflective practice in health and social services?* We need to focus our attention on a specific fragment of our experience, an event that can be especially meaningful and that can help us to better understand the whole from a small part of it.

This „portion” is what Flanagan (1954, 327) called a „critical accident”, that is „any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act. To be critical, an incident must occur in a situation where the purpose or intent of the act seems fairly clear to the observer and where its consequences are sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning its effects”.

Our mistakes are a special kind of critical accident and the reflection on them and our failures is a promising field in which to develop strategies for the reinforcement of our professional skills, as social workers. Why? Because every mistake, especially those producing some forms of damage, are like open questions to our way of looking at the
world and acting in accordance to it. They urge us to answer to the question „why?”, „what can I do to reduce its negative effects?” and „what can I do not to let it happen again?” By the way, not all the mistakes are „bad”. The metaphor of Columbus discovering America „by mistake” while looking for a new route to India can help develop a better comprehension of the potentialities of this kind of reflection and help social workers find new ways to face the complex problems of the users.

But, first of all, what is a mistake? An error is an assertion, action or belief leading to a deviation that is an unintentional departure from the right from the norm. The agent does not want to deviate from what is right, correct and true.

The image of a road through a field may better help us focus on what was said above. The road is what is „right”, which leads towards a goal, a better understanding of the reality or, in social and health services, an effective help to people in need. Moving away from this „road” is an error.

Who decides what is correct and what is not? Certainly the social worker, but also:

- the users;
- the institution or the agency the social worker is a part of and where the action is activated for help;
- the wider community the social worker is a member of.

There are different opinions regarding the role played by the users: some say that the users are not sufficiently competent to judge the work of a professional and there are those who say the opposite and, moreover, state that the user must be always involved in this evaluation because he or she is the ultimate recipient of the intervention (Pignatto and Ragazzo, 2002; Bezzi, 2003). Probably a middle position could be the most correct: when you want to know if an error was committed or not, the user has to be listened to because he or she is the one that is always suffering the positive or negative effects of the professional intervention.

Another group of ideas revolves around the organization where the practitioner works. This domain is simultaneously both a constraint and a resource, but is most frequently considered the former rather than the latter. In fact, sometimes, as a form of rejection of the reversal found between the means and the aim, some social workers seek to escape from some procedures which appear more formal than substantial. Even in personal services, practices and procedures should be adjusted when they are no longer fit to the function of help which they were established for.

Inside the agency where the social worker is employed, an important factor is represented by the colleagues, belonging to the same or to another profession. They are colleagues who are sometimes critical and colleagues who are facing criticism. These criticisms are more or less benevolent, depending on the type of relationship established. Sometimes the criticism is expressed not in order to contribute to improve skills or performance of the other, but rather to be a weapon of attack/defence and more or less effective depending on the organizational contexts. This is very important especially in context of inter- and multidisciplinary work. Synergies between different professions are particularly profitable on a wide range of cross-cutting issues such as, among many, fatigue, burn-out and the sense of aid and, indeed, the error.

The last subject which may be considered is the community and this may be the scientific community or the professional body to which the person belongs. On the basis of errors made in breach of the code of ethics disciplinary proceedings may lead in extreme cases to the removal from the professional body.

Community also refers to the community according to the territory that, broadly, may coincide with the so-called public opinion through newspapers or newscasts. Another
manifestation of this dimension is that of the State expressing the legal rules that say what crime should be punished and what not.

In search of learning strategies from mistakes and other critical incidents

In order to explore how mistakes are seen by social workers and other practitioners, in October and November 2009 20 subjects working in different Italian health and social services (five for each of the following professions: social worker, professional educator, nurse, psychologist) underwent a semi-structured interview about their perception of the causes and effects of errors and the role of intuition in determining success or failure of interventions. They also had been asked to tell some episodes related to their mistakes. Moreover, the dilemma inherent about what to do when a colleague is wrong has been addressed with a specific question (Sicora, 2010).

This qualitative research was not limited to social workers, but other helping professions have been included, since problems and opportunities are widely shared in this field. Furthermore, a common reflection could be very useful to improve the quality of the help provided by teams with different training, professional skills and roles.

For this reason the group of the respondents was as more heterogeneous as possible in terms of gender, age, experience, territory and service (e.g. rest house, mental health centre, juvenile justice department, emergency unit, oncology department, municipal social services, social services for children, drug addicted, disabled adults or other kind of users).

The views expressed and the episodes narrated by the respondents cannot be considered fully representative of the varied world of helping professions. However, they can be very useful to understand the most common dynamics in the field.

The transcripts of the interviews were analysed with the help of the Weft QDA software in order to classify the experiences collected and find similarities and differences among them. Categories and subcategories of analysis (e.g. causes of mistake: time, anxiety, lack of training etc.) have been created for a better understanding of the phenomenon. A special attention has been made in the search for strategies already successfully in use for a structured reflection on mistakes.

In fact, the result of this qualitative research and the review of some strategies for a structured reflection (Sicora, 2010) show that:

1. Sometimes social workers „need” to make mistakes, because paradoxically, in many cases it is the only way to help the client in a long term perspective and to learn how to reduce negative outcomes in health and social services.
2. Both intuition and rational reasoning are needed in social work practice, but they often produce systematic errors. Reflecting on these mistakes makes us better understand how we think and feel and help to correct our practice. The dual-process model of Kahneman (2002) gives a framework for a better understanding of the whole process.
3. Open and structured discussions with colleagues about mistakes improve the quality of „learning organization” where people can express and receive criticism using effective strategies.

How to begin to learn from our mistakes? As in Philo’s law expressed by the famous humorist Bloch (2003, 8) „to learn from your mistakes, you must first realize that you are making mistakes”. Ignoring that something went wrong is much more dangerous than taking it into consideration, reflecting and taking the necessary steps.
On this issue the words of a young social worker interviewed during the research mentioned above are very significant (Sicora, 2010, 65):

There is the mistake that may be of assessment in the assessment phase, the design stage of a journey with a person, a project, for example, an individual one. There are things that perhaps could be considered. Otherwise... But, I repeat, these mistakes in the assessment will almost never be followed by a failure, are the cause of the failure. The ability to straighten the path in consequence of a deep reflection on that mistake: this makes the difference.

The project may fail when you forget it, leave gaps, lack continuity on the project, missing checks, and skip the checks. Not because of the wrong assessment made at the beginning.

For that reason, social workers cannot escape the need to reflect constantly. This is a condition that stems from the desire to find effective responses to the users’ requests and from the need to seek the reasons for the large and small failures encountered on that road. Reflection can overcome the inevitable discomfort felt when things „went wrong” and leads to a deeper level of understanding of the dynamics in the field, thus enabling a restart to obtain better results.

How can this happen? How to pass from the slogan into its realization? The reflection can be a moment of meditation on oneself, but there are many forms of reflective writing and they can be powerful and useful tools for a reflective social worker. In this way, or by registering and ordering facts, emotions and evaluations, it is possible to reconstruct a unified picture from scattered fragments of events. In other words, the construction of narratives comes from experiences linked together so to give shape to a more colourful and significant sight. The sheet in front of the operator becomes a sort of mirror in which to reach a deeper understanding of himself or herself and of his or her professional practice.

As one practitioner says:

At one point, I realized that, beyond the official record, it was necessary that I also found a space, even during the workday, a writing that somehow fell outside of what one writes in the official record. And then I started to take a small notebook and started writing down feelings and impressions produced by many situations and that I could not write in the official record. I wrote these small texts about some cases. [...] Then it becomes a kind of self-analysis [...] I think it’s a small space that should be devoted to listening to themselves in relation to another. It does not require a long time because you can do it between interviews and the other. I can do. It does not take long (Sicora, 2010, 100).

Both as a guide for reflection on oneself or in written form, questions and reflexive frameworks (i.e. Borton’s key questions, Gibbs’s reflective cycle) are of primary importance.

Every process of reflexivity starts when the subject articulates questions addressed to himself. The questions guide the research, the selection of information and the exploration into the episode you want to examine in depth.

There is often more need of „right questions” than „right answers”. In fact the „right answer” will be usually appropriate for a specific situation but not for another, while a „right question” can be applied to a wider variety of contexts. An effective question is of great value because it activates a process of analysis and review of memories of facts and emotions that may help to identify interpretive trails that were previously overlooked.

Among the many „frameworks” built to reflect on exemplary or problematic critical incidents, here can be cited the three key questions of Borton and Gibbs’s reflective cycle.
In all three cases the framework is represented by a series of questions that the subject addresses itself to deeper reflect on the experience under consideration.

The three key questions identified by Borton (1970) are:

- **What?** This question is set at a descriptive level and refers to more specific questions that all begin with „what” such as, for example, what happened? What have I done? What did the others? What I felt inside of me? What I was trying to do? What is good or bad in the experience?
- **So what?** Here the reflection goes deep beyond the experience to continue the exploration on a more theoretical and conceptual level. Sample questions are: So what is the meaning of this? So what does this mean for me? And then what more do I need to know about this? So what did I learn?
- **And now?** From the results of discussions held at the previous levels the possible alternative behaviours are taken into consideration in order to make the most appropriate choice of further action. In this context the questions asked can be: Now what can I do? And now what is the best? And now what do I need? And now what shall I do? And now what might be the consequences of this action?

Gibbs’s reflective cycle (Gibbs, 1988) has achieved the status of a seminal theory in reflective practice and it would be difficult to find any paper or textbook on reflective practice written in recent years that did not draw on his work in some way. Gibbs’s cycle consists of six stages that guide the practitioner through the reflective process by asking a series of clue questions.

For each of these stages Gibbs made a set of questions used to examine in detail the episode under scrutiny.

As said before, Reflection can be done to oneself, which is basically on a mental and meditative base, or verbally, that is talking with others about a significant event. There is
a further scope for the development of reflexivity and this is represented by writing. Writing can be defined as „reflective writing” whenever there is a deliberate use of writing strategies as a way of reflection and learning from the experience (Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper, 2001).

*The main methods of reflective writing strategies can be divided into analytical and creative strategies.* The first category is characterized by greater reference to objectivity: the social worker starts from the description of the facts to arrive later to more personal and emotional components. The separation between the narration of emotions analysis and reflection itself, and the use of imagination and metaphors characterizes the creative strategies.

*Reflective frameworks can also be used in reflective writing.* Some of the other most important analytic strategies are (Jasper, 2004):
- journal;
- critical incident analyses;
- dialogical writing (creating a conversation through questions and answers);
- „making a case” (exploring the alternative perspectives of an issue);
- creating an on-going record.

SWOT analysis (a strategy that involves identifying the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats within an experience):
- identifying three-a-day, e.g. three things I have learnt today or from this mistake are... or, three tips I have learnt from this shift are...;
- page-a-day record of experiences;
- writing a word limited summary;
- learning outcomes from an experience;
- identifying new competences.

Examples of creative strategies are (Jasper, 2004):
- writing a letter or an e-mail (without sending it);
- writing to someone (i.e. to your mother or a close friend);
- writing as if you were another person;
- writing as if you were a journalist;
- telling a story, possibly a fictional story;
- writing poems.

Is reflection an activity to be conducted alone, shut in a real or metaphorical room? The answer is definitely negative. Because the less alone the practitioner is, the less he is exposed to frustration from failures that occasionally occur and could lead to burnout. Furthermore, all forms of dialogue, that is when the social worker receives and offers advice and criticism on the errors committed or observed, can expand the „visual field” of the daily practice and bring one to a better understanding of all the important elements in the practice of the helping professionals.

The social worker does not act alone but is part of a network of relationships with other professions. This network is extended in the service and in the whole organization. Furthermore, what the single person learns is part of the organizational learning. This is not the simple sum of knowledge of individuals, but is the process and the product leading the organization to develop strategies to carry out actions directed to itself and its environment. The so produced organizational culture, then, interacts with the choices of all the professionals working in the organization itself.
This is also the reason why strategies to develop better communication, supervision and sharing of knowledge are of special interest for a higher quality of social services. One interesting field is related to the treatment of criticism among colleagues as suggested by Hathaway (1990) and others (Sicora, 2010).

Conclusions

Work in the world of human needs, discomfort and suffering appears anything but a lightweight enterprise. The complexity faced by the helping professions stems in large part by the uniqueness of people and situations. Dealing effectively with them is not possible using only the theoretical concept and categories of users and issues described in textbooks and emerged as a result of detailed scientific investigations. Every social worker is asked to face his or her daily work by building bridges between theory and practice through the constant implementation of reflective practice.

Reflection, and above all reflection on our mistakes, is not only technically possible but is also ethically desirable because it improves the quality of services provided by us social workers.

Activity is fed by a permanent tension to achieve something impossible: that is the total elimination of any mistakes or the attempt to reach the unreachable horizon. It is a journey that may not lead to any goal, but the ultimate destination of which is undoubtedly our personal and professional development, the achievement of sharper eyes to look at reality in a more pervasive way and of more capable hands to shape more effective interventions (Sicora, 2010, June).

Note

1. The word is in quotation marks to distinguish its most informal meaning given here from the evaluation with scientific criteria, as later specified in this paper.

References


