Title: Reflection in the social professions - a comparative study between Denmark and UK

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Aim

• To understand how practitioners, learn to develop their deliberative voices in social work practice

Primary objectives

• To conduct a comparative study between social worker practitioners in Denmark and UK based on the aim of gaining insights into how practitioners learn to reflect in practice
• To conduct qualitative interviews with social worker practitioners in Denmark and UK.
• To conduct focus group interviews with social worker practitioners in Denmark and UK.
• To critically evaluate relevant literature concerning reflective practice, ethics, social and political theory.

Description of PhD. study

This study seeks to gain insights into how practitioners learn to develop their deliberative voices in practice. The study will compare British and Danish practitioners’ experiences of learning to deliberate in practice. The study is interested in this type of learning at all stages from novice to expert (Dreyfus 2001). The practitioners from each country work with children at risk: a practice that requires careful reflection, deliberation and decision-making. It is paramount that practitioners in this field learn to find their deliberative voices in order to made sound and robust decisions.

I refer to deliberative practice as a type of “voiced” reflective practice. Deliberative practice cannot stand-alone but is deeply intertwined with other types of learning and reflective practices in the work place (Eraut 2008). Although there is extensive research in the field of reflective practice, we know little about how practitioners actually learn to reflect in practice (Boud 2010). Much research in reflective practice focuses on uncovering the tacit dimensions of practice (Fook 2016, Brookfield 2005, Mezirow 2002, Schön 1983, Ruch 2010, Dreyfus 2001, Polanyi 2002). The focus being primarily on informal learning (Eraut 2008). Little attention is paid to deliberative learning, i.e. how practitioners learn to “voice” their reflections in discussions and decision-making processes (Saltiel 2010, Taylor 2013).

This study is based on qualitative, semi-structured, interviews. The objective of the interviews is to generate insights into how practitioners learn to find their deliberative voices in the workplace. To do so the study will 1) enquire into concrete situations that spurned the practitioners to reflect, i.e. critical situations or situations of significance, and 2) enquire into how the practitioners articulated these
reflections and with whom, 3) enquire into any decision-making processes that practitioners have participated in. The aim is to understand, how practitioners learn to deliberate in practice. What challenges this learning and what supports it?

The practitioner’s voice is an integral part of a specific socio-cultural practice. Voice is an important medium for learning in practice (Vygotsky 1978). Practitioners do not learn to deliberate in a vacuum, but in a social space, and social spaces are heterogeneous; they are spaces of conflict (Bourdieu 1977, Foucault 2002, Smidt 1999). Deliberative practices are not reducible to the practitioner’s cognitive abilities, i.e. self-surveillance, meta-cognition, linguistic abilities. Deliberative practices are socially negotiated practices (Bourdieu 2005). By voicing opinions or reflections, the practitioner positions him/herself. A process filled with uncertainty and without the security of textbook guidelines. The practitioner who voices a specific opinion may be judged inflexible, uncooperative even disloyal by colleagues and managers, if the voiced opinion goes against the underlying values of the workplace (Åkerstrøm Andersen 2003). However, to refuse to use ones voice and withdraw into the snugness of a silent consensus is detrimental to development of expertise and professional standards in social work. Social work practices need to develop “situational expertise” (Munro 2011) and “robust cultures of decision-making” (Taylor 2013). Practitioners must learn to navigate social spaces of the work place and learn to deliberate. Firstly, for the benefit of their service users. Secondly, for the sake of their own learning, i.e. to voice difference and tackle conflict in social spaces, is a deeply educational activity (Biesta 2014, Smidt 1999, Hammershøj 2003).

Social workers interact with their clients in public spaces (Lipsky 2010). Spaces that contain a diversity of individual perspectives. From this diversity or “web of human relationships”, the practitioner must construct sufficiently complex narratives as a solid basis for deliberation and judgement (Arendt 1998). To deliberate is to consider a diversity of voices and finally arrive at one’s own voice in the struggle to articulate ones responsibility (Arendt 2005). Such deliberation falls into three phases: 1) construction of narratives based on concrete situations, 2) self-deliberation and 3) deliberation with others. Each phase carries the potential for disagreement (Arendt 2005). To deliberate is to involve oneself in the specific case at hand and take responsibility for the outcome i.e. the decisions made. The interviews in this study are based on Arendt’s (2005) three phases of deliberation.

Bureaucratization and commodification of social work has undermined professional expertise (Banks 2012, Munro 2011). Deliberative and reflective practices have increasingly become individualized and privatized practices (Bradbury 2010). Although social workers are “street-level-bureaucrats” and may use professional discretion in their work with clients, such professional discretion also proves to be a highly individualized practice (Lipsky 2010). Social workers find themselves increasingly making decisions in corporate settings (Banks 2012). Corporate settings have a clear hierarchy of command and they demand loyalty from employees (Åkerstrøm Andersen 2003). Corporate settings are individualized spaces and are often averse to public deliberation. These changes highlight the need to understand contemporary conditions for deliberative practices. How is it possible to learn to find ones voice and deliberate in decision-making processes, to articulate responsibility in a collective professional setting?

**Methodology**

This research seeks to conduct an international comparative study by comparing the socio-cultural dimensions for practitioners learning to reflect in social work practice in Denmark and UK. The overall methodology I have chosen to work with is Phenomenological Hermeneutics (Ricoeur1976, van Manen 2002 & 1997). This method is relevant when enquiring into subjective experience of concrete situations from practice; as demonstrated in many studies (Greatrex-White, 2008; Charalambous et al, 2008; Wiklund...
et al, 2002; Singsuriya, 2015; Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). Phenomenological hermeneutics is a highly appropriate method when seeking to interpret human experience at a micro and intersubjective level. Its primary focus is how humans interpret concrete experience. In spite of extensive research in the area of reflective practice, there is little knowledge about how practitioners actually reflect in practice (Bradbury 2010). As noted, this study seeks to interpret how practitioners struggle to find their reflective voices in the workplace. Such interpretations can generate important insights into the nature of reflective practices and can potentially contribute to re-evaluation/refinement of existing theory and contribute to new theory building. As noted, the study seeks to generate insights by means of qualitative interviews and focus group interviews.