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Practice

SPECIAL THEME ISSUE

**Reflecting on What? Addressing sexuality
in social work.**

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Abstract

This article is written by five women from different settings in social work and academia, who are all qualified social workers. Their personal experiences and sexual identities are also different, but they hold a coherent commitment to improving social work practice by addressing sexuality issues in their work. The article considers a number of areas of relevance and interest to social work practitioners, managers and researchers, all focussing on issues around sexuality. Using an amalgamation of personal narratives and practice reflections, the authors combine these with evidence from the literature, to raise a number of key difficulties about reflection as a tool for social work practice. By including heterosexual perspectives alongside lesbian ones and by highlighting some of the parallel difficulties, the paper begins to uncover some of the pathologising and patronising perspectives often adopted in social work practice.

Keywords: sexuality, reflection, personal, professional relationships, invisibility, safety

Introduction

This paper is one of a series of publications produced by a small group of social work practitioners and academics who hold a shared commitment to improving social work practice in relation to sexuality. This forum adopted an auto-ethnographical perspective to researching sexuality issues in social work practice and education (Trotter *et al.* 2006). Whilst working on a small project about sexuality, as part of a larger venture on Post Qualifying Education (Trotter *et al.* 2007), five of us began to think about the notion of 'reflection' and its part in our practice as social workers, practice teachers and researchers. According to the General Social Care Council (GSCC), 'all awards within the Post Qualifying (PQ) framework contain a core requirement for candidates to provide evidence of skills in critical reflection' (GSCC 2006, 32), defined as:

'the circular process which starts with critical thinking about practice, leads on to new learning, which should facilitate improved practice, which is reflected upon, and so on' (GSCC 2006, 32).

This not-so-helpful definition highlights the potential for over-simplification of a complex notion, and also explains some of the confusions that many have found when exploring this so-called 'skill' (Lovelock and Powell 2004; Thorpe 2004; Amobi 2005; Trelfa 2005; Russell 2005). However, its popularity has increased in UK social work over the last few years; one publisher has launched a new series of 'Reflective Readers' (Learning Matters 2006) and one key text alone has 29 separate index listings (under 10 different sub-headings) to reflection and reflexive subjects (Adams, Dominelli and Payne 2005).

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At one of our meetings we reflected on our own sexualities in practice and very quickly seemed to agree on three key points:

- Our appreciation of being in a women-only space;
- The complications around being open about our lesbian sexuality;
- The difficulties around being private about our heterosexuality.

This led us to appreciate the usefulness of our forum where it felt 'safe' to be open (about our sexualities) and talk about social work practice. It also highlighted the value and importance of auto-ethnographical discussion groups as a research methodology (Trotter *et al* 2006). These reflections also revealed a crucial gap in social work's knowledge base around sexuality – the management and presentation of one's own/personal sexual identity.

This major omission in social work's knowledge base is deftly illustrated by our noticing the marked distinctions between openness and privacy, and how these seem to have been overlooked in our training, practice and supervision. For heterosexual people, used to sharing information about their personal relationships (often displaying their family photos, engagement rings and other symbols of heterosexuality like badges) the key point identified is one of maintaining privacy. For gay and lesbian people, the opposite is often true. After years of caution and reticence in the face of prurient curiosity or hostility, the key point appears to be one of initiating openness and honesty in practice situations.

Despite these central themes of sexuality and safety being crucial to us personally and to our own practice, none of us have reflected on them publicly. Despite our experiences in practice for many years (collectively over 40 years), and in

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academia (undertaking dozens of education/training courses and writing numerous essays, dissertations and papers), none of us had written about this in any personal way before. How many other social work practitioners, who like us, have been required to 'reflect' on our practice, have overlooked or avoided such important and relevant issues? How many of us, as social work educators and practice teachers, have encouraged, expected and even taught our students how to do this, yet have not done so ourselves?

This paper attempts to redress some of this imbalance. Drawing on some of our own experiences and ideas, the paper will begin by considering some of the social work and education literature about reflection and sexuality, and refer to UK policy documents about social work education and its requirements. Using material quoted directly from our own discussions, the article will then raise a number of key difficulties about reflection as a tool for practice around sexuality issues.

What is reflection?

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), which provides general guidance about the nature and characteristics of social work degrees in the UK, suggests that graduates in social work should be able to 'reflect on and modify their behaviour in the light of experience' (QAA 2006, 18) and *reflect on their own*:

'performance - a process in which a student reflects on past experience, recent performance, and feedback, and applies this information to the process of integrating awareness (including

awareness of the impact of self on others) and new understanding, leading to improved performance' (QAA 2006, 19).

Bleakley (1999) suggests that "reflective practice" is in danger of becoming a catch-all title for an ill-defined process' (Bleakley, 317) and is employed as though it were 'intrinsically worthwhile activity, even a moral imperative' for any self-respecting and up-to-date practitioner (Bleakley, 320). However, despite such misgivings, other authors continue to emphasise its long-established and personal importance. According to Rai (2006), reflective practice has been a 'cornerstone of social work education since its early psychotherapeutic roots' (Rai, 787). Trevithick (2005) suggests that its key element is ourself - our own effect on the processes of experience, understanding and action:

Reflection involves more than thinking things out carefully. It allows us to acknowledge that we are experiencing the situation we seek to understand and are a part of the interventions we are involved in providing (Trevithick 2005, 252).

Ruch (2005) suggests that reflective practice acknowledges a range of knowledge sources; 'practice wisdom, intuition, tacit knowledge and artistry as well as theory and research' (Ruch 2005, 116) and carefully applies it to 'self-understanding', emphasising the value of subjective sources of knowledge. Similarly, Adams (2002) talks of the 'reflexive cycle' of critical practice, which includes 'engaging with ourselves' (Adams 2002, 84). But what is **critical** reflection, and might it be some academic way to avoid more personal self-scrutiny?

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According to Singh (2006) critical reflection is an indication of deep/higher learning and he argues that 'in addition to the possession of expert knowledge, critical reflection is the very bedrock upon which professional status is accorded' (Singh 2006,, 6). He goes on to suggest that in order to critically reflect, social workers must 'find some space and time ...find somebody else ... and foster a sense of safety and openness' (Singh 2006, 6). Achieving these last requirements, fostering safety and openness, seems far from easy for lesbian and gay workers enduring heterosexism and homophobia in the UK (Brown 1998; McGhee 2005) and elsewhere (Messinger 2004; Hylton 2005). Others side-step any necessities for time or space, whether safe or otherwise, by focussing their definitions of critical reflexivity on creative and experiential learning in the workplace (Gould 2004) and on transformative theoretical constructions of power (Fook 2004).

Despite all the different understandings and applications of the term 'reflection' in social work, all seem to agree that it has at least something to do with **personal** endeavour, and that it is usually far from easy. What the literature does not seem to agree on is whether the subject or content of what is being reflected on should be about personal issues, and there is no consensus on the relevance of sexuality.

Sexuality in social work

Recently, in the UK, there have been changes in the legal framework in relation to lesbians and gay men, some of which (for example, the Adoption and Children

Act 2002, the Equality Act 2006 and the Sexual Orientations Regulations 2007) may help practitioners and educators grapple with issues of sexuality (Brown & Kershaw 2008). There has also been some development in social work practice and knowledge around sexuality. In the last few years there have been a number of conferences and interest groups established. There have been special issues of journals and key texts published (Trotter *et al* 2008; Fish 2006; Myers and Milner 2007; Jones and Bywater 2007) and a number of further texts linked to particular client groups (Abbott and Howarth 2005; Kehily 2002) or health (Wilton 2000; Ingham and Aggleton 2006) have also been produced. All these are indicative of improving practice and analysis:

The 'taken-for-granted' assumptions about sex and sexuality that permeate society generally are reflected in the ways in which it is possible to forget, marginalize or discriminate in everyday social work practices ... Broader thinking about sex and sexuality enable social workers to practise *reflexively*, that is, to consider how their actions are producing particular constructions of sex and sexuality that have consequences for people.

(Myers and Milner 2007, 169.)

However, few of them address personal issues around sexuality or address heterosexuality in any detail. Only Wilton (2000) explores the relevance of workers' own sexualities and none reflect in any depth or detail on the impact these have on practice relationships.

The neglect of personal and relational elements of heterosexuality in social work texts (as well in research and practice) is a complex phenomena, particularly as so much of social work knowledge is concerned with relationships and families.

Indeed, 'the family', an institution that has come to symbolise one particular type of ideal heterosexual relationship – lifelong and monogamous – is the cornerstone of social work's agenda. This focus and hegemony may be one of the key reasons for heterosexuality being under-scrutinised; even a cursory critique would expose many flaws and reveal a rich diversity of circumstances and experiences (Hockey *et al* 2008). Such revelations would pose innumerable challenges to long established and fiercely defended social hierarchies – so much easier to focus on and pass judgment on lesbian and gay relationships and issues such as homophobia.

In social work literature and practice sexuality is usually equated with lesbian and gay issues and often confined to addressing discrimination and homophobia. Jeyasingham (2006) pointed out how sexuality and homophobia are understood as both 'a matter of private concern and a minority issue'. Indeed, this seems to be so, as many of those authors who have recognised and grappled with the difficulties of addressing personal issues in social work, often do not speak of sexuality. For example, Fook (2000) argues that it is crucial for students, teachers and practitioners to recognise and accept that our own 'ordinary, everyday' experiences of family are diverse and although we have learnt about diversity, it is often 'othered and devalued, the personal becomes silenced' (Fook 2000, 109). Similarly, Ferguson (2005) points to social workers' fears which, he argues, are often irrational and inherently complex psycho-social processes, and must be understood and addressed.

However, although personal processes and issues are being addressed (by some) in social work, they do not always include sexuality and rarely explore or critique heterosexuality. Those that do address sexuality are often for, and about, educational settings and audiences (Logan *et al* 1996) and point to a range of important problems. Hicks (2006) questions social work education's 'dominant version of sexuality' which is concerned with lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transsexual people, but rarely with heterosexuality. As a result of sexuality being taught using an 'ethnic identity' model, Hicks also argues that there are a limited number of specific places and 'obvious' situations in which sexualities are addressed, and that 'addressed' often equates to a search for 'needs'. One of the dangers of selecting examples from our own experiences was that we might encourage a similar kind of restricted, labelling and needs-led thinking. The authors attempted to resist what Hicks refers to as a heteronormative position, and tried to avoid presenting an 'understanding' of ourselves as 'different' and as objects of knowledge (Hicks, 2006).

One of the key tensions in social work practice and education around sexuality (and knowledge about sexuality) is invisibility. Some aspects of sexuality are 'easier' to see and assess than others, in terms of concrete and measurable variables. For example, pregnancy is fairly substantial evidence of heterosexual intercourse (but incorrect assumptions may still be made) and reflex anal dilation is evidence (though not indisputable) of anal penetration (Trotter 2003). However, not all sexual behaviours are as discernible as these examples and neither are they evidence of a person's sexuality. Indeed, sexual behaviour sometimes masks sexuality as the large numbers of married men who have sex with men

implies (Crosier 1996). More often, such phenomena are invisible and unknowable to the social worker. It is likely that the sexualities of many lesbian and gay clients and practitioners will remain hidden as long as homophobia prevails and heterosexuality remains un-scrutinised.

Personal narratives and practice reflections

Our own discussions illustrated such 'hidden' phenomena and highlighted some of the associated dilemmas:

- This is how I wanna be, do you know what I mean? I don't want to be ... cos I'm not like ... I'm just not like that.
- like what?
- like 'out'. Like outwardly like that, do you know what I mean?
- but you don't need to be either. I don't go around saying, I am this person.

This conversation about 'being like' or appearing to be gay illustrates the tenuous but fundamental issue of visibility, and our reluctance even to name what we are. Often this presents dilemmas for us in our relationships with each other, with our colleagues and students, as well as with clients and carers:

- well ... for me, its about ... I'm, I'm expecting the young person to be open and honest with me, yet I am keeping a big side of me away to protect myself probably.

Lishman argues that genuineness and authenticity, 'being oneself', are essential elements of good communication and effective practice (Lishman 1994, 46) and goes on to suggest that they are imperative for focused relationships.

... while it is possible to hide behind roles or tasks (and may be necessary sometimes for self-preservation) the strain of maintaining a false self would be untenable, clearly perceived by the residents, and render the worker impotent to engage in purposeful work (Lishman, 1994, 47).

It is interesting that Lishman refers to the effort of keeping up an artificial appearance and that this would be 'clearly perceived' by others - which may well be so. However, in terms of sexuality, a person's 'true' sexual identity may not be seen clearly. What is much more likely is that assumptions will be made. This is more of an issue for gay and lesbian workers than for those who are heterosexual – indeed, it is simply not necessary for heterosexual people to maintain an artificial appearance because of the assumptions made about (hetero)sexuality generally. Lishman's ideas about 'hiding', how it is sometimes necessary for self-preservation, and how difficult it is to maintain, are well understood by lesbian and gay workers.

The private and often very secret nature of lesbian and gay workers' own sexuality is important; fears about secrets being uncovered may deter us from speaking freely or honestly. However, many heterosexual workers may also have fearful secrets about sexuality (which could have huge implications on our practice) that we do not speak about. As Brown (2006) points out, trends in the UK towards over-bureaucratisation and management-by-administration compound these tensions, and often result in faulty assumptions, hasty

categorizations and misuse of evidence. Sometimes, when we are aware that our clients' have incorrectly assumed our sexualities, we allow the mistake to continue and end up feeling dishonest. Two of us talked about our interactions with clients and how this dimension, and the associated feelings of deception, were never raised in supervision or training:

- I know, with some young people their response ... my relationship with them would probably change.
- but I don't ever talk about how my sexuality affects my relationship with clients ... in that I find that I feel a bit kind of I'm not being honest about me.

Being honest about our sexualities might not always mean speaking about them, but the possibility that the subject will be raised is always just around the corner:

- I don't think I need to say 'yes I am a gay woman', but I just think when ... we have that relationship with them, that always becomes a barrier. Not because there's anything wrong with our relationship, but because it's thinking 'god, what question are they going to ask me today?' ... if a young person queries am I married, have I not got children ... its about being open and honest about who I am as a person – I struggle with that.

However, this is often very different for heterosexual practitioners and clients who, though they may well have secrets about homosexual desires or illegitimate sexual experiences they fear being discovered, can more easily hide behind heteronormative assumptions and conventions:

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- it's OK to have a bit of a chit-chat if you're straight isn't it? It's ok to say, you know, 'my partner or my husband ...'

Ideas about privilege can be helpful here, though these do not usually address sexuality. Badwell and colleagues (2004) show how members of 'dominant' groups can choose whether or not to stand against the discrimination and oppression their colleagues and clients experience, how they can 'allow' each other this choice, "not to be involved in the change processes, or to step in and out of it as needed" (Badwall *et al* 2004, 160). We agreed that heterosexual colleagues can sometimes be very sensitive and circumspect, especially when they know of our interests and identities. However, they are not consistent and most of them make their heterosexuality known at quite regular intervals.

We talked about the accidental and every-day interchanges that reveal our sexualities, about how we present ourselves to colleagues and clients, and how we try and manage this:

- I haven't got a sexuality at work
- well, me too, d'ya know what I mean? Some people know ... some of my close ... obviously people I work with now know that I am but ...
- I really struggled with it
- I don't, I just don't deal with it

Another of us recalled how difficult it was, when moving to a new team, keeping her heterosexuality private:-

- my plan was not to tell them I was straight but they just kept on and on ... asking me if I was married, did I have children ... in the end I just gave in and told them.

Brown and Bourne (1996) suggest that our relationships with colleagues are affected by personal circumstances like age, race and sexuality, and this can be particularly important in supervision. They acknowledge how hard it is to discuss 'difficult interpersonal issues', or to create enough confidence and trust in supervision, and provide an interesting illustration about challenging negotiations for two gay men around privacy and respect (Brown and Bourne 1996, 97-99). Given the circumstances that we had experienced, it is probably not surprising that none of us had discussed our sexualities in supervision.

Discussion

If, as we surmise, sexuality is indeed crucial to social work practice, then the notions of what is and should be public or private must be addressed. All workers should do this, not just those who have (or are deemed to have) 'an interest' in sexuality. Workers need to examine their own identities and how these are performed and portrayed in order that they can more honestly and accurately relate to others. Revisiting memories of growing up and of developing and acquiring sexual identity, as well as questioning the meanings ascribed to these experiences, may foster a more substantial self-knowledge and greater capacity for empathy and understanding of others. Heterosexual workers are less likely to have explored these areas than their lesbian and gay colleagues, and are therefore also likely to be less skilled.

Reflection and reflective processes may be helpful in thinking about our sexualities and about how these influence our understandings and relationships with clients and colleagues. Supervision might be an appropriate place for this. However, from our experiences, this is not the case: supervision allows very little time for reflection and when it does -

- it rarely addresses personal (let alone sexuality) issues,
- it could be dangerous for lesbian and gay workers and
- is regarded as 'irrelevant' for heterosexual workers

Yet, as noted earlier, sexuality is neither a private concern nor a minority issue. Indeed, it is not even an issue. Sexuality is a fundamental aspect of all of us and influences everything we think and do. It is crucial for us all, whatever our sexuality, to acknowledge this and to begin to address it in our reflective learning and professional practice.

This paper has highlighted some of the ideas from the literature about sexuality in social work and about reflection. Referring to some of our own stories and experiences, we have explored some of the difficulties around invisibility and safety in practice, and what might be 'relevant' in terms of personal issues. It is hoped that this paper might provide a starting point to begin reflecting on sexuality. The formation of small, 'safe' research groups to explore and share 'stories' and examples from experience may provide a useful way of beginning this work.

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ⁱ In order to maintain some anonymity, individual authors will not be identified in the extracts used.