The Understanding and Use of Reflection in Family Support Social Work

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ABSTRACT

Previous research emphasizes the need for reflection in complex, dynamic practices, like social work. However, increased governance of the public sector and welfare state has caused a reform, which in turn has affected the layout and conditions of work. Private sector control ideals and ideas from the auditing system have led to a new focus. It is argued that we should subordinate practice approaches – characterized by reflection, proven experience, and tacit knowledge – to manual-based treatment, evaluations, and assessments. This study aims at understanding the role of reflection in social work by investigating its use and valuation by family support social workers. Opportunities and resources for reflection are another focus. Focus group interviews (n = 40) were used to produce data. The need for reflection to conduct highly qualitative social work became evident. The question is not whether to reflect or not, rather how this best can be done, given current time constraints. Reflection was considered a coping mechanism, offering a sense of professional legitimacy. Organizational changes seem to impact on time for reflection. However, when enabling process, learning, and development, it can be argued that reflection is beneficial for several parties. Therefore, reflection requires continued emphasis, highlighting its potential benefits.

Previous international research portrays reflection as both a vital part, and a useful tool in challenging, difficult practices like Western social work, in which practitioners are required to make uncertain judgements, to be flexible, and to deal with complex problem-solving (e.g., Gambrill, 2010; Ingram, Fenton, Hodson, & Jindal-Snape, 2014; Mantzoukas, 2008; Schön, 1991). Additionally, reflection is described as being useful for learning and development at work and for improving the quality of services provided in human services professions (e.g., Avby, 2015; Boud, Cressey, & Docherty, 2006; Ellström, 2001, 2006; Kolb, 2015; Nilsen, Nordström, & Ellström, 2012). However, in times of increased governance of the public sector and welfare state, social work practice appears to be changing, in turn affecting practitioners’ working conditions (e.g., Liljegren & Parding, 2010). It is furthermore argued that this is a change that has led to an increased demand for external evaluations, the measuring of practice, an economically effective use of resources, and the favoring of manual-based approaches to practice, like evidence-based practice (EBP) (e.g., Guransky, Quinn, & Le Sueur, 2010; Liljegren & Parding, 2010; Ponnert & Svensson, 2016; Webb, 2001). Those who argue for the use of EBP assert that it provides the best possible care with the client’s interests and needs incorporated, improves practitioners’ decision-making and effectiveness, fosters the use of evidence, and promotes knowledge-acquisition and learning (e.g., Gambrill, 2010; Mullen, Shlonsky, Bledsoe & Bellamy, 2005). Nevertheless, EBP is both criticized and questioned in the field of social work, and is a hotly debated concept (e.g., Avby, 2018; Ruch, 2002). Often EBP is accentuated as “best practice,” due to its “base in knowledge.” Such a proclamation is, however, degrading to practitioners’ proven experience, intuition, tacit knowledge/“know-how,” and common sense (“gut feeling”), reducing the importance of these qualities and depicting them as “risky” and not reliable as the basis upon which decisions are made and practice is carried out (e.g., Avby, 2018; Otto, Polutta, & Ziegler, 2009). With proven experience and tacit
knowledge not rarely being grounded in reflective practice, the procedure of accentuating EBP as best practice also subordinates reflection. If you look beyond the controversy, however, many of the (positive) characteristics attributed to EBP can be found in positive attributes assigned to reflection. One example is its capacity for improving decision-making and actions as well as avoiding risks and making mistakes (e.g., Avby, 2018; Sicora, 2017). Just as theory-based knowledge and EBP are argued to promote life-long learning (e.g., Mullen et al., 2005), it is similarly argued that reflection is needed for effective learning from experiences, in turn contributing to the identification of knowledge gaps for continuous competence-development (e.g., Mann, Gordon, & MacLeod, 2009). Another similarity between EBP and reflection is that process is characteristic for both. Rather than one-time applications, processes are iterative with a capacity of improvement in line with use.

Previous and ongoing changes have obviously led to a differentiation between various approaches to practice. One example is organizational and occupational professionalism. With different views of knowledge, logic, tools, and grounds for control, bureaucratic contra professional legitimacy is being advocated (Liljegren & Parding, 2010). Another example is the “new” contra “traditional” professional style, found in a study by Barfoed and Jacobsson (2012), which follows the same logic. A gap between formal theory/research and practice-developed theory and knowledge, and realities of practice (creating inconsistency), appears to have emerged, where different parties tend to favor one over the other (D’Cruz, Gillingham, & Melendez, 2007; Nilsen et al., 2012). However, it can be argued that so strongly differentiating between practices and approaches might be problematic. Instead, focus should be on the combination of both for creating knowledge beneficial to social work practice (e.g., D’Cruz et al., 2007; Otto et al., 2009). This aligns with the idea of practitioners basing their thinking and acting in both practical experience and theory. Practice informs theory about as much as theory informs practice and reflexive abilities are as, if not more, important than science-based knowledge for coping with everyday complexities (cf. Gursansky et al., 2010; Otto et al., 2009; Schön, 1991). Characteristics of one approach must not be in contradiction to another. For example, standardization is often mentioned in relation to, e.g., bureaucratic management, and is criticized as being a way of gaining control, limiting practitioners’ autonomy and reflection, and affecting their professionalism in favor of industrial uniformity (e.g., Avby, 2018; Måkitalo, 2012; Ponnert & Svensson, 2016; Timmermans & Epstein, 2010). But, is it really that simple? Undoubtedly, standardization plays a pivotal role in the functioning of organizations; this is, however, of varying degree and character (cf. Timmermans & Epstein, 2010). As a contrast to more holistic and reflective approaches to work (Ingram et al., 2014; Ruch, 2002; Webb, 2001), standardization, it is argued, is cost-efficient and so is EBP (since it stems from a bureaucratic philosophy), as ideals have become contested concepts within human services professions. At the same time, though, reflection can also be considered a kind of standardized activity since it is a systematic way of thinking (e.g., Watkins, 2016) and dealing with experiences, although implicit and more personally designed in character.

Consequently, similarities appear to exist between the aims of bureaucratic philosophy as a governing ideal within the public sector, and reflective practice. Indeed, reaching and ensuring high quality and effectiveness in the treatment of clients is a goal for both. However, the way to achieve it is what separates them: practitioners and advocates of reflection emphasize its importance as an activity and practice, while other groups argue that there is a need for evidence to inform practice, preferably findings from RCTs, the top of the “evidence-hierarchy” (e.g., Mantzoukas, 2008). But even if working according to a manual, some level of adjustment based on the current situation and the client’s specific needs ought to be required. All clients, at least in the field of social work, cannot possibly be treated in the exact same way, and situational knowledge is required to offer the best possible treatment. This thus points to the need for highlighting both practice- and evidence-based knowledge in practice and education. Serving different functions, they complement one another: practice enriches theory and vice versa. Together with more standardized approaches to practice, both are needed, and neither of them can be considered more important than the other (e.g., Avby, 2018; D’Cruz et al., 2007).

Reflection is not a new field in research on social work. Previous research has focused on reflection in relation to both the education field and the preparation of students for their future practice, as well as on practitioners (cf. Nilsen et al., 2012; Sicora, 2017). There is
research claiming the importance of reflection in social work, however less research has focused on describing in more depth the content of reflection and practitioners’ ability to reflect. Finding themselves in a complex and uncertain practice, characterized by increased demands from various stakeholders, and with reflection, proven experience and tacit knowledge becoming subordinated, practitioners are an important group to study. Hence, this study is aimed at gaining better insight into social workers’ understanding and valuation of reflection. Its purpose is to explore the possible impact of the changes going on in their field that could be affecting their opportunities for reflection. The participants in the study are social workers engaged in family support for children with mental health problems. Their work involves helping families in crisis or with social problems and includes counselling, support and treatment, focusing on the family and its surrounding network. Family support is both preventive and treatment-focused, implying the broad scope of problems that practitioners encounter. The goal is to help the family find useful strategies to overcome difficulties, thus enabling the child to live at home and function at school and in leisure time. The purpose is to help the parents support and guide their children in their development and help them to feel better. As social workers, they work either alone or in pairs with a colleague, in individually designed efforts (with the specific family) or in parent groups. The work is done both at the family’s home and at the practitioners’ office (i.e., the social services resource-unit) and assumes both the form of dialogue, network meetings, direct work in everyday situations and other supportive activities. For handling questions and complexities of practice, social workers are offered various types of supervision, often involving reflective practice, aimed at improving practice (cf. Bradley & Höjer, 2009).

The Meaning of Reflection and Reflective Practice

Dewey claimed that “while we cannot learn or be taught to think, we do have to learn how to think well, especially how to acquire the general habit of reflecting” (Dewey, 1998 [first published in 1933], p. 35). Thinking is an often-used synonym for reflection. However, reflection is often regarded as a more structured, disciplined and rigorous way of thinking, caused by some doubt, hesitation, problem or difficulty, a way to articulate thinking (Watkins, 2016). Both are however needed and furthermore interconnected with doing. Doing, thinking, and acting are complementary: doing affects human thinking, a doing which, together with the carried-out actions serves as fuel for human reflection (e.g., reflection-in-action, Schön, 1991). Reflection can be described as a process where practical experiences are elaborated and transformed into personal knowledge, aiding in developing professionalism (e.g., Avby, 2015; Kolb, 2015; Schön, 1991). In trying to resolve specific situations, a search-process for cues is initiated, often comprising observation and conversation with oneself, one’s actions, and experiences. This forms part of learning and knowledge development (Dewey, 1998). Reflection is seen as necessary for sense-making as well as a constructive way to learn from/make use of complexities, doubts, and hesitations, which are common in social work practice (Gursansky et al., 2010). To understand these situations, and decide upon the next step, questions are helpful and used for guidance. However, it is not about just any questions: the smarter the questions, the better the chance of reaching deeper and finding a solution, with the ability of generating knowledge (Sicora, 2017). This can be related to the importance of why in making reflection critical, i.e., not only considering the how but also the why, that is, looking for reasons and examining consequences in relation to what we do (Watkins, 2016).

In terms of reflection, an important and often-used concept is reflective practice. Lately, it has received increased attention in the field of social work, possibly because with it comes recognition of the field’s challenging characteristics, serving as a response to the abovementioned changes (Ingram et al., 2014; Mattsson, 2017; Nilsen et al., 2012; Ruch, 2002). Reflective practice, it is argued, is a process of self-involvement and self-reflection, i.e., self-awareness, to pinpoint important content in previous experiences and use the information for adjusting behavior and actions (Dolan, Pinkerton, & Canavan, 2006; Ruch, 2002; Schön, 1991; Yip, 2006). By remembering and evaluating past and present experiences and actions, dealing with present problems, emotions and feelings, new perspectives and solutions to situations are sought. Thus, reflective practice is a process of considering both the past, present, and future in evaluating one’s own behavior, thoughts, and actions (Yip, 2006). Schön described reflective practice as a reflective
conversation with the situation (1991), implying that reflective practice is the very action, or practicing, of reflection, thus related to both design and the provision of reflective activities in practice. Reflective conversations can vary in form. They can be individual and/or collective, and they can be retrospective (reflection-on-action) or continuous (reflection-in-action) in character, thus being dialogic reflections on what one does, both before, while and after doing it (cf. Schön, 1991). Being dialogic in character, either with oneself or others, communication can be regarded as mediating reflection. Language, as a dynamic and powerful discursive tool in human activity, can mediate both meaning, sense and consciousness (Vygotsky, in Mäkitalo, 2012; Mäkitalo, 2012), not only in speech but also in written form. Reflection, as an activity, also occurs both verbally and in writing, implying the importance of language for making sense of reflections and creating knowledge. In terms of collective reflection, one hallmark is supervision. If critically examined, supervision, it is argued, can improve organizational learning (e.g., Bradley & Höjer, 2009).

The Present Study

The changes in the social work field, it is argued, reduce the value of professional and personal values and the provision of community services in favor of organizational and bureaucratic accountabilities thus shift from “people-changing” to “people-processing” (Björktomta & Arnsvik, 2016; Gibson, Samuels, & Pryce, 2018). These are changes that degrade professional expertise gained from experience, reflection, and an interpretative practice (e.g., Barfoed & Jacobson, 2012). To avoid the risk that social work loses quality by becoming too bureaucratic and managerial, a relationship-based and reflective practice is stressed. Despite its frequent utilization and argued importance, reflection and reflective practice are however often accused of being broad, multifaceted and lacking conceptual clarity (Kinsella, 2010), a process which can “unearth any assumptions about anything” (Fook, 2004, p. 59). Due to its breadth and complexity, it is argued that reflection and reflective practice are often described in a general, simplistic way and used unreflectively (Bengtsson in Kinsella, 2010). In view of the varying ways of understanding reflection, this study aims at contributing to research on reflection in social work. Swedish family support social workers were invited to participate, resulting in 12 focus groups (n = 40). By investigating how reflection is described and used and asking about opportunities and resources for reflection (together with obstacles and/or facilitators), the aim was to gain deeper insight into social workers’ understanding of reflection and its role in everyday practice. The study was initiated by the following research questions:

1) What is social workers’ understanding of reflection and what value is it given in everyday practice?
   - How is reflective practice arranged/organized?
2) Based on the current changes in the field, how are social workers experiencing the opportunities and resources provided for reflection?

Method

Participants

This study, conducted during the spring of 2016, emanates from data produced in focus groups with family support social workers. The participants worked at the municipal social services in a city in western Sweden. They shared experiences from the same type of work and are trained in various intervention-models related to the field of social work.

The collaboration-partner in this project is the Center for Progress in Children’s Mental Health (UPH), a unit within Närhälsan (the public primary care provider) working with methods-development, education and research. For this reason, the selection criterion for being included in the study was employment in a city district in which UPH is represented. At that time, this applied to seven out of ten districts, meaning that social workers from three city districts were not invited to participate in the study. In total, 103 social workers were invited. Of those, 40 (39%) chose to take part, resulting in 12 focus groups (see Table 1). All participants belonged to pre-existing work groups at their respective workplaces. However, not all members

| Table 1. Focus groups participants. |
|-------------------------------------|
| Participants (n = 40)               |
|-------------------------------------|
| No. of focus groups                | 12            |
| Female                             | 31            |
| Male                               | 9             |
| Age range (years)                  | 31-63         |
| Mean age                           | 49.9          |
| Work experience range (years)      | 3.5-40        |
| Mean work experience (years)       | 18            |
of each pre-existing group participated in the focus group. Further information about the participants is shown below.

The number of participants in each focus group was between two and five. The duration of the interview was between 65 and 102 minutes (in total 16 hours, 35 min). All focus groups’ interviews were recorded with a Dictaphone and transcribed verbatim.

**Procedure and Interview**

The use of focus groups for producing data was considered an appropriate method as it allows for group interaction. Allowing participants to discuss the topic in groups rather than individually enabled them to discuss and engage in both complementary and argumentative interaction (Kitzinger, 1994), offering the possibility to “reflect on reflection” and reaching greater depth of analysis than in individual interviews. Focus groups can stimulate participants to share concrete, specific, but also personal answers, while simultaneously creating a possibility to reveal dimensions of variations in opinions and understandings (Hylander, 2001; Kitzinger, 1994).

To recruit participants an information letter about the study was sent by the first author to the resource-unit managers of each included city district. They were asked to provide the names of the social workers in their respective districts. The social workers were then contacted individually by email regarding participation in a focus group. All invitees received an information and consent letter informing them that participation would be voluntary and providing an assurance of confidentiality. Interest in participating was confirmed by email or telephone by the first author. A reminder was sent out prior to the focus group interview. The focus group interviews were conducted by the first author, either at the respective city district’s resource-unit or at the office of UPH. The focus groups commenced with participants being asked briefly to describe their jobs. A few open-ended questions about reflection followed to facilitate a discussion among the participants, but without interfering in the ongoing dialogue. At the end, participants were given the possibility to add to or comment on the topics discussed.

Prior to recruiting participants, a representative from the regional Ethical Board was consulted regarding the necessity of an Ethics Board approval for the study. Due to its specific aim and purpose, the representative did not consider an approval necessary. Other Swedish rules and requirements in relation to conducting research have been respected and applied (Vetenskapsradet, 2017).

**Analysis**

A thematic analysis, in accordance with the principles outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used for analyzing the data. The analysis was done by the first author and discussed continuously among the three authors. The aim of the analysis was, through an inductive approach, to provide rich and detailed descriptions, creating themes representing the participants’ thoughts and opinions on the topics discussed. To obtain a good grasp of the data, the transcriptions were first read through. Important content and initial ideas about interpretations and possible connections were noted. In the next step, the software MAXQDA was used for coding and further analysis. A second reading of the transcriptions followed, encoding relevant content into categories. Introductory questions, used to help to get to know the participants, were excluded from the analysis. The next step was the organizing of the coded categories into different themes, i.e., repeated patterns recurring in the data. During the process, initial codes and themes were reworked, renamed and, when necessary, organized into subthemes, to ensure consistency with the dataset as a whole. The final themes have been used to describe the findings. Excerpts are used to illustrate the content and meaning of each theme.

**Findings**

The thematic analysis resulted in four themes (see Table 2). Themes 2–4 had subthemes. The term participant/s has been used for ensuring confidentiality. When the word client is mentioned, it can refer to

| Themes Subthemes |
|------------------|
| 1. Reflection – a meaningful but diverse concept |
| 2. An asset in everyday practice |
| 3. The structuring of reflective practice |
| 4. Reflection – important yet not prioritized |
| 1.1. For obtaining perspectives and professional legitimacy |
| 2.1. A coping mechanism |
| 3.1. For making progress and bringing about development |
| 4.1. The managing of time and resources |
either an individual or a family. When quoting, the focus group is abbreviated FG, followed by its number. The quotes have been translated from Swedish to English.

**Theme 1: Reflection – A Meaningful but Diverse Concept**

The participants were asked about the meaning of “reflection” and their thoughts when hearing the word. Although agreeing on its importance, its true/real meaning was frequently discussed and compared to various synonyms and metaphors, indicating a difficulty to define it. One participant says: “It is an opportunity to process what you have been through, to ponder and discuss what you have experienced. And, thinking ahead, like very vast. I think it back and forth with each other and talk, but is this what we do when we reflect? Or is it reflection we do then? Or…?” (FG1)

Despite the discussion of its meaning, reflection, the participants argued, is necessary and important for social work, even crucial and “obvious,” meaning they were unable to understand how anyone could carry out social work without using reflection. Being more than interpretation and different from thinking, reflection was instead considered to be the twisting and turning of things, a kind of perspective-thinking not included in “regular” thinking. It offers a possibility to stop and think in various ways: one can reflect upon what happened in the past, what is happening here and now, and what will happen in the future. Furthermore, many participants regarded reflection as never-ending:

For me it [reflection] is a constantly ongoing process. Daily [laughter]. About what you do, what you could do differently, what you have done wrong, yes, you could improve and reach the goals with the case you are given, so well, for me it is something that is going on all the time. (FG6)

Regardless of its perceived importance, the participants could still understand the intangible nature of reflection. Since it is neither part of their work-description nor measurable, and furthermore varies in meaning for different people, it was not difficult for them to understand why reflection is occasionally considered difficult to define, as something nonconcrete and less important, especially for people who do not use reflection so extensively. This was an issue that became clearer after discussing the difficulty of defining and measuring reflection, which arose in the focus-groups.

**Theme 2: An Asset in Everyday Practice**

The discussions revealed the opinion that reflection is an asset. A strong connection between reflection and what they argue is the very “core” of their work was underscored: “Without reflection, I don’t think we could work on bringing about any change” (FG3). To reflect is to be professional. Reflection, it was argued, is a tool for visualizing both their own and others’ behaviors, necessary for mapping, familiarizing and understanding both cases and their own performance and role.

The participants expressed a need for the twisting and turning of ideas, for creating awareness about thought-patterns, values, preconceptions, and feelings. The quotation below illustrates the significance of reflection in aiding the practitioners in their efforts to perform well, and consequently being an asset in everyday practice:

You really must be listening closely, because it’s easy to, to conceptualize, you get some information and conceptualize. Then you meet the parent and you must sort of...
listen closely, what is it, and reflect all the time, “ah, no, no it was not what I thought.” You have time to do many mental somersaults when listening, so it’s very important to listen and try to ask the questions that come to you. (FG11)

Subtheme 2.1: For Obtaining Perspectives and Professional Legitimacy

When discussing reflection as an asset in practice, the role of questions for facilitating and obtaining different perspectives was frequently emphasized. Various types of questions that are both helpful and provide guidance in the reflection-process were mentioned:

Where are we going? Is this meaningful/helpful and how do we know? What is left before reaching our goal? What could I have done differently? What is my influence on them? By reviewing, attaching value to, and evaluating the situation more clearly, questions were considered helpful for creating awareness and putting into words what is happening. Questions are also useful for making explicit what needs to be improved, clarifying the client’s wishes, needs, and actions, and for reaching the stated goal, yet also for understanding the interaction between family-members. This type of question forms the basis for their reflections; however, it seemed that most reflection takes place in retrospect, e.g., after a conversation or observations from a meeting. Additionally, they claimed that reflection offers a sense of legitimacy in their professional role. Reflection offers an opportunity to create a knowledge-base about the client on which to stand as a practitioner, and its supportive and legitimizing character was of use in future work. Reflection, it was argued, is a “tool” or “method” for gaining greater insight into the case; it is believed to increase professionalism compared to basing work solely on one’s own intuitive feelings.

Subtheme 2.2: A Coping Mechanism

Reflection also seemed to serve as a protection for the practitioners. Occasionally being a challenging and difficult practice, reflection was considered to function as a coping mechanism and for sorting out emotions: “It can be a daily mental cleansing routine to have someone to reflect with …” (FG9). Being recurrently in (close) contact with other people, a contact not rarely energy-consuming and emotionally charged, they, as practitioners, also become part of the clients’ systems. To reflect upon the joint therapist-client process and its impact on them (as practitioners and individuals) was considered a way to handle potential complications and reduce the risk of taking on the clients’ feelings. This protective function helps in separating what is “theirs” (i.e., the client’s) and “mine” (the practitioner’s). These types of reflections were considered helpful for reducing the mental burden their work involves: “If I didn’t have the capacity or possibility to reflect upon it [the situation], or the permission, I would have, I think I would have driven myself into a ditch. It would have been really bad” (FG2).

Theme 3: The Structuring of Reflective Practice (See Figure 1)

During the focus groups’ discussions, it became evident that reflection is structured in various ways. Discussions of place (where) and form (with whom) occurred frequently, indicating its variety as a practice. Regardless of structure, all variations, due to serving specific purposes and completing each other, were considered important (see Figure 1):

In terms of reflection I think we are moving at very different levels, it is some type of structured and organized time for reflection and then there is the inner reflection where you…, but then I think that all of them play an important role sort of, or they are important. (FG10).

In terms of form, both individual and collective reflection was mentioned. Individual reflection is more about reasoning with oneself, about oneself, the client and the emotions that surface in connection with meetings. Collective reflection, on the other hand, is reflection with colleagues, clients or supervisors, constituting a complement to individual reflection.

I think that, I think more and more that reflection occurs in various contexts, I mean, I am reflecting when I am on my own, sitting by myself and my inner dialogue, or if you can call it analysis, that’s a way for me to sort my thoughts and experiences and what I have been experiencing for example or what I personally need. But the other reflection, what we are doing now … you can reflect in a group and the group is different, if you are more than two you are a group, at least that’s my opinion. And then you are also reflecting as a colleague, with each other, on the basis of our work roles and professional roles. But the other kind [of group reflection] is to reflect together with those we are here for, for families, and children and adolescents. (FG9)

The need to reflect on thoughts and experiences was emphasized, occasionally described as an inner
dialogue. Utilizing reflection for learning from experience was underscored and considered to be promoted by both individual and collective structure.

Variations however seemed to exist regarding opportunities for engagement in the various structures. Individual, and “informal” reflection was said to occur anywhere and at any time. It requires nothing more than the time to ponder situations and cases. It is a type of reflection that commonly appears in connection to more formal occasions like client-meetings or supervision and needed for handling feelings and emotions that arise. However, due to a heavy workload and the provision of mainly formal reflection opportunities while at work, this type of reflection was frequently described as a companion on the way home from work or during evenings and weekends.

One frequently mentioned type of formal and collective reflection was supervision. Supervision was described as highly reflective, positive, useful, providing encouragement and help in dealing with concerns at work. Unlike individual reflection it offers the possibility of sharing and receiving in terms of both knowledge and experience, promoting professional learning and development.

And then we have supervision and it’s really a reflective process. There, you try to describe as detailed as possible, or so, your experience of the client and the meetings and such, as emotionally as one can really, and there, you get a lot of reflection from your colleagues, in your supervision-group. And the supervisor then of course. (FG8)

Although offered various types of supervision (e.g., method and process supervision), a desire for additional resources for formal reflection was expressed, especially in conjunction with client-meetings. A certain level of formality (or structure as per the participants) was believed to be beneficial; it was thought that productive reflection would occur more frequently if scheduled, offering positive outcomes for several parties, like clients, themselves and the organization.

Subtheme 3.1: For Making Progress and Bringing about Development

Collective reflection was accentuated as a way to “get help to think” (FG10). By offering diverse perspectives, it provides a more nuanced and complete picture of the situation. By enabling the sharing of impressions, thoughts and views on a situation, collective reflection was considered a way of taking one’s own reflections further and for making progress on the case. The collective sharing of knowledge and experience, enabled in joint reflection, was also considered an element of professional development. However, it was stressed that to achieve such a productive situation, in which experiences are learnt from and a deeper understanding is gained, there must be an open and safe environment.

In line with these discussions, the importance of collective reflection together with the client was raised. Bringing about change requires reflection, for which merely one reflective practitioner is not enough. Rather, the client and practitioner need to work and reflect together on stated goals and the progress they are making (or not making). By getting the client to reflect, the practitioner can help him/her to gain a

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**Figure 1.** The structuring of reflective practice, as described by the participants. The arrows emphasize how various reflective practices can influence, inspire and complement each other. With individual reflection informing collective, neither is though argued more central than the other, rather complementing each other (cf. Breidensjø & Huzzard, 2006; Ingram et al., 2014).
better understanding of the situation. Joint reflection can enable a common understanding of the specific case and problem, creating favorable conditions for bringing about change, which is the very core of social work. Besides, joint reflection is not only aimed at one-sided gain. Offering substantial possibilities for professional learning and development, it was considered equally important for them as practitioners:

I think it’s very important, it’s important for the families. And to do it together with them is also a way to get them to develop and to see other perspectives, that you [the practitioners] learn a lot from that. That you… [it is] a way of avoiding doing something wrong. That you do a good job. (FG7)

**Theme 4: Reflection – Important Yet not Prioritized**

Discussing reflection raised another important matter, that of organizational support. Although experiencing a positive attitude toward reflection on the part of management, resources provided for it were, however, not always considered sufficient. Consequently, the organization impacts on practitioners’ opportunity to reflect, implying that a supportive organization is not enough if time for reflection is not provided, instead placing the responsibility for finding time on the employee him- or herself. It seems to be taken for granted (by the organization) that the individual practitioner, based on the prevailing work situation, will schedule and devote a certain amount of time for reflection when appropriate. The participants found this worrying, expressing a desire for more structure in relation to reflection. Since reflective activities are more implicit in character, thus difficult to measure, calculate or valuate, they argued that reflective activities should be both emphasized and equated with more “practical”/concrete work-tasks. Consequently, it seems that the organization is both supporting and hindering reflection.

Regarding social work as a field, the participants experienced what they call a move from a “reflection-” or “exploration-domain” to a “production-domain.” They described a change of practice appearing to increase both pressure and demand for “quick-fixes,” i.e., the fast and cost-effective treatment of clients, an increase in tasks and duties interfering with their core work (bringing about change), like administration, meetings and other activities, a change also constituting a “threat” to reflection and other important elements.

And you must also, you must take a stand for reflection. Right now there is quite a lot of pressure on us to be inside the production-domain and to deliver quickly and that we should be able to accommodate families quickly and offer appointments quickly and sort of, these are things that can reduce the preparation time, reflection before is reduced, start-up meetings are reduced, the number of social-secretaries is reduced due to great pressure, now is the time for you to deliver, and then, then it is very important to safeguard, it is an actual and practical circumstance, but you have to safeguard reflection throughout the whole process because otherwise quality will be greatly diminished. (FG9)

This quote emphasizes the importance of “protecting” reflection, claiming that it is at risk in the seemingly prevailing effectivization of social work.

**Subtheme 4.1: The Managing of Time and Resources**

This subordinate theme depicts the participants’ experience of managing time for being as reflective as necessary. The social workers are constantly fully-booked, with other tasks impinging on their time. It is difficult to find time for reflection, but they are left without a choice, since there are not enough resources provided. Room for reflection must be made, especially in more difficult cases. If they fail to find time for reflection, they themselves and their well-being are affected, with stress and a negative impact on work being the probable results.

The introduction of new work-tasks interfering and “stealing” time is another aspect related to this topic. One explicit example is documentation. Even though several participants considered documentation promotive of reflection, newer documentation systems appeared to be more about describing cases and their progress succinctly, without including the practitioner’s thoughts, values or feelings, thus offering a limited opportunity for reflection. By making documentation impersonal, its dissemination can be widened and form part of the material being used for “measuring” their practice. Besides, documentation not only impinges on their reflection-time, it also appears to take up a lot of their overall time. The managing of time and resources in relation to new work-tasks that interfere with everyday practice is furthermore perceived to be management controlled, thus beyond their own influence. With time appearing to be equated with money, the participants are exposed to a form of external control affecting the layout and content of their everyday practice and resulting in the
“squeezing in” of the more intangible tasks, like reflection, in an already busy schedule.

Discussion

The findings reveal an understanding of reflection as “self-evident” within social work and an aid (or tool/method) for understanding complex situations, reactions, and emotions one faces in practice. The participants found it hard to imagine social work without reflection playing an integral role. It also became evident that reflective practice occurs in various forms, for which opportunities for engagement seemed to vary. Despite being regarded as “obvious,” the problem of defining reflection became apparent (as described in Theme 1). One possible reason could be its challenging character as a concept, possibly referring to a collection of attitudes and methods, both cognitive and philosophical (van Manen, 1995). Another possibly influential factor is experience, and level and type of education. However, whether differences in the participants’ understanding of reflection as a concept is necessarily problematic is debatable. Being multi-faceted, appearing, e.g., as a concept, a word and a practice, it is not surprising that such a discussion arose. The participants were asked about their thoughts when hearing the word “reflection.” Despite being common and well-known, there is no guarantee for equal interpretations or similar conduct in the action (in this case to reflect), thus leading to a varying range of interpretations and actions (cf. Archer, 2003). If the participants were, for example, asked to distinguish between different practices of reflection, like reflection at work, as a professional, and reflection more in general, the discussions might have appeared different. Furthermore, it was argued that the type of reflection needed for handling work and which is capable of leading to professional learning and development is different from “regular thinking” (cf. Mattsson, 2017; Watkins, 2016). Thus, the discussion related to reflection as a concept or word – What does it mean to reflect? Is it thought of as a concept, word, or practice? – could possibly also be concerned with the objects the reflection is based upon, implying that everyday/casual reflections are possibly thought of as thinking, while “thinking at work,” as an aid in complex situations, on the other hand, is considered reflection. Hence, reflection can be regarded as context- and content-dependent, in alignment with Volosinov, who argues that words have as many meanings as there are contexts, and that meaning and situation cannot be separated (in Mäkitalo, 2012). Additionally, to investigate people’s subjective experience of a mental activity, like reflection, can be compared to investigating attitudes and beliefs; both involve interpretation and a subjective report on an inner conversation (Archer, 2003).

The findings indicate that reflection is used to legitimize professional knowledge (i.e., what they are doing and why) (Theme 2; 2.1). Originating in medicine and science, social work has long struggled for professional legitimacy, recognition and increased professionalization, built on professional knowledge and competence (e.g., Barfoed & Jacobsson, 2012; Bolin, 2011; Forenza & Eckert, 2017). Due to ongoing discussions of how to organize social work, which direction to adopt, and whether changes should occur at the micro, macro, or mezzo level, the struggle for a professional identity is also continuous (Forenza & Eckert, 2017). To reach a more coherent identity, and to raise and consolidate professional status, a new science-based professional style, including manual-based approaches and EBP has been proposed (e.g., Barfoed & Jacobsson, 2012; Ponnert & Svensson, 2016). The potential of using standardized assessments (like EBP) for increasing professionalization within social work is, however, questioned (e.g., Barfoed & Jacobsson, 2012).

A view of reflection as a coping-mechanism emerged (Theme 2.2.) and was described in terms of a protection against clients’ tragic fates, life stories, situations and the related emotions which easily affect social workers, both professionally and privately. Social work today, it can be argued, is contradictory in that it aims to be cost-effective, leading to a high workload for the practitioners, who simultaneously are expected to take on personal responsibility for the client (e.g., Astvik & Melin, 2012). Astvik and Melin’s study is aimed at identifying various coping-mechanisms for handling social secretaries’ increasingly demanding work. According to them, coping is the “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage the internal and external demands of transactions that strain or exceed a person’s resources” (2012, p. 341). This study’s participants’ understanding of reflection as a coping-mechanism can thus be argued as accurate, since it helps them to manage, or cope with clients and organizational demands. This could be an indicator of the need for organizations
and decision-makers to take reflection seriously, to prioritize it and provide opportunities for it in everyday practice – especially since social work today is facing problems with recruitment and high staff turnover, something claimed to be relational with the audit and managerial changes simultaneously identified (e.g., Björktomta & Arnsvik, 2016; Munro, 2004).

The importance of reflection for making progress in cases and obtaining perspectives, especially through collective reflection, is described in Theme 3.2. The results imply that reflection is used for processing experiences. By doing so, lessons learned from experiences can be integrated into future work, enabling professional learning and development, in turn creating and expanding the individual “experience bank” of knowledge, which is possible to share with others. This can be likened to the “naming and framing” of problematic situations for finding solutions, a process creating opportunities for the identification of situations and experiences of use in future practice (Schön, 1991). Through reflection, strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in terms of knowledge, skills, and values are offered, facilitating an understanding of what worked well and less well, what needs to be adjusted and how to bring about change and new goals (cf. Mantzoukas, 2008), which is furthermore similar to what are described as the benefits of EBP (e.g., Gambrill, 2010; Mullen et al., 2005). This aligns with experiential learning-theories in which reflection (as a conscious thought/act/activity), through its advanced processing, is claimed to be a key mechanism for understanding experience and learning from it, important for individual learning, competence-development and professional expertise (Billett & Somerville, 2004; Ellström, 2001, 2006; Kolb, 2015; Sicora, 2017). The processing function of reflection was also discussed by the participants, who saw it as contributing to the formation of a knowledge-base as well as offering a sense of professional legitimacy.

Collective reflection, emphasized and described as occurring in various forms, can be compared to so-called informal support networks, essential for professional growth (Forenza & Eckert, 2017). As it is collective, collaborative and participatory in character, the importance of communication, or dialogue, for sharing experiences, gaining understanding, and creating meaning is evident (e.g., Breidensjö & Huzzard, 2006; Ingram et al., 2014). Collective reflection was emphasized in relation to both colleagues and clients.

According to Schön, the “reflective client” is important for improving decision-making processes and avoiding mistakes, since this type of collective reflection offers opportunities for agreement and shared understanding (1991). Consequently, reflection is not only important when occurring at an individual level, but also at the group level as a “community of practice” (Lave & Wenger in Breidensjö & Huzzard, 2006). Indeed, collective reflection is informed by individual experiences, which, through dialogue, are compared to and affected by other information, informing practice, and capable of leading to new collective knowledge (Breidensjö & Huzzard, 2006; Ingram et al., 2014). Forenza and Eckert (2017) stress the need for an improved understanding of informal support networks: their functions, members, content, and importance for social workers. If collective reflection, in its various forms, is to be considered an example of such a network, a small contribution is hereby deemed to have been submitted.

When discussing the resources provided and opportunities for reflection, the support, interest and prioritization on the part of management was stressed (Theme 4; 4.1.). An opinion that management considers reflection important emerged; it was nevertheless not always visible in the resources provided. The participants however stressed the importance of having sufficient resources, which aligns with the importance of appropriate conditions for assisting personal and professional development through individual reflection. An environment that is both intellectually and emotionally supportive includes factors such as context, colleagues, and supervisors, all of which can create such conditions. Enough inner space, time, workload, and readiness are other factors with possible effects on the self-reflection process (Mann et al., 2009; Yip, 2006). Support, mentoring, and a safe and respectful climate that allows for the expression of feelings are other examples (Mann et al., 2009). Inappropriate conditions, on the other hand, like a demanding and/or oppressive work-environment or the poor physical/mental health of the practitioner (e.g., negative self-image or unresolved traumatic experiences), may be destructive and lead to self-reflection becoming a burden rather than being helpful (Yip, 2006). Clearly, the organization impacts its practitioners. However, practitioners also constitute a part of the organization; employees and organization are not separate entities. Making up an integral part of
the organization, practitioners form part of its culture, and can thus take advantage of opportunities to both influence and transform it (e.g., Billett & Somerville, 2004; Ingram et al., 2014). This is similar to Vygotsky and Luria’s argument about humans transforming their environment (in Mäkitalo, 2012). Their own role and possibility of influence was however not discussed by the participants. One can imagine, though, that collective activities among practitioners, like collective reflection and supervision, are influential and can bring about development, thus exerting influence on the organization. In a group, power and influence grow stronger, which can have an impact on the organization.

However, other factors also have an impact on organizations. One example is the application of ideas from the “audit society” on social work, in turn affecting practitioners’ practice, placing them in a growing dilemma (Liljegren & Parding, 2010; Munro, 2004; power in Ponnert & Svensson, 2016). This is a matter that is relatable to child welfare systems as either “people-processing” or “people-changing,” i.e., processing clients through the system, or changing, and improving, clients’ lives through interventions (Hasenfeld in Gibson et al., 2018).

Bureaucratic ideals, striving for standardization, evaluation and cost control of social work practice, appear to have caused a tension between social work and paperwork, with an increased amount of (digital) documentation being one result (Gibson et al., 2018; Liljegren & Parding, 2010; Mäkitalo, 2012). Similar to this study, the participants in that of Björkтомта and Arnsvik (2016) considered their work situation as characterized by an increased level of administrative work, creating a heavy workload and efficiency requirements. They did not discuss decreased opportunities for reflection; they did, however, mention the problem of increased staff turnover.

**Limitations**

First, the sample originates from one city only. A geographical breadth could have brought varied insight into the matter. However, due to the project’s financial partner being in this city, its social workers became the focus. Another limitation is the approach of self-selected participants, meaning that only practitioners with an interest in the topic participated, something that in turn could have affected the results. Despite these limitations, this study contributes important and useful insight into social work practitioners’ understanding and use of reflection.

**Conclusion and Future Implications**

Despite being a subject of interest for quite some time now, the importance of reflection in challenging and dynamic practices requires continued emphasis. With current changes in mind, not only affecting practitioners, but also clients, reflection and reflective practice needs to be prioritized. If not, the risk of facing other types of problems, involving cost, like high staff turnover and sick-leaves among staff might increase. If governmental, political and organizational prioritizations are to be ruled by ideals like “quick-fixes” and “people-processing,” thus subordinating practitioners’ proven experience and tacit knowledge to efficiency, the goal of working for change might be difficult to reach and the general perception of social work as a helping profession altered.

Although difficult to measure (i.e., prove its worth), reflection is, according to this study, highly valued and essential for coping with social work practice and for reaching progress in cases. The prevailing changes in the field tend to reduce resources for less measurable features and instead focus on making practice measurable. Potential organizational benefits need to be emphasized for making decision-makers aware of the usefulness and importance of reflection. For example, reflection is described as a way to increase productivity within organizations (e.g., Cressey, Boud, & Docherty, 2006; Yliruka & Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2013). Constituting a central part of organizational work, such as decision-making processes, evaluations, and sense-making, reflection constitutes an important function in everyday practice (Docherty, Boud, & Cressey, 2006; Sicora, 2017). It serves an important function by enabling detection of errors and avoiding mistakes, both at the individual and organizational levels; it aids in the following of ethical guidelines, rules, and responsibilities; and it provides an opportunity to make social work more effective (Sicora, 2017). Furthermore, reflection is emphasized in relation to both workplace learning (e.g., Boud et al., 2006; Ellström, 2001, 2006) and organizational learning (e.g., Fook, 2004; Schön, 1991). As mentioned in the introductory section, reflection could be considered an asset in individualizing more general models/
methods, like EBP, for meeting the client’s needs and wishes. EBP cannot be questioned if the evidence is strong, but to believe that it can be directly applied to every client, without taking into account prevailing circumstances might be a mistake. Reflection, it could thus be argued, is needed for the application and correct use of the model’s general knowledge in individual cases. Reflection and reflective practice thus need to be re-thought and re-contextualized to gain both a new position and meaning in working-life (Docherty et al., 2006). If decision-makers are to see re-thinking, it might gain increased value and meaning, a learning strategy, rather than the mere activity of re-thinking its potential capacity as a useful tool in practice, which, put this way, also can be understood by managers and politicians.

The results imply the importance of reflection for promoting learning and development. It can be argued that reflection is a form of advanced, continuous, and ongoing evaluation of one’s work for improving the services provided as well as one’s own competence. This points to the importance of not basing our views on reflection upon predefined categorizations, i.e., as either a tool for evaluation or as personal nonsense: reality is not so black or white. Based upon the participants’ statements, reflection can be considered a process of constant self-assessment and quality assurance, highlighting its potential capacity as a useful tool in practice, which, put this way, also can be understood by managers and politicians.

Thus, reflection needs to be studied in relation to work-place learning, investigating practitioners’ views upon reflection in relation to this area. Like reflection as an activity, opportunities for professional learning and development also need to be studied to understand the possible effects of changes to the work environment in this specific area. Similarly, since it is claimed that EBP poses a threat to reflection and other more intangible features of practice, reducing the level of professional discretion (e.g., Ingram et al., 2014; Liljegren & Parding, 2010), studies are also needed to investigate the impact of EBP on social workers’ everyday practice, and more specifically the impact of the evidence-based models that are part of their treatment-repertoire. However, since it is also argued that EBP can reduce the theory-practice gap, helping clients in an un-harmful way (e.g., Gambrill, 2010) and enable the acquisition of new knowledge, increased insight into research, and make social work more effective and equal (e.g., Barfoed & Jacobsson, 2012), the matter of EBP is seemingly controversial, similarly emphasizing the need for further studies.

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