Developing Anti-Oppressive Practice with the Person-in-Society: Reflexivity and Social Work

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Introduction

Social workers, regardless of their stage of professional development, are strongly encouraged to reflect on their practice to promote the best use of knowledge, skills and values to improve the lives of service users (Fook, 2012). **The same plea applies to social care workers and similar professional groups who engage with people in need**. What is not so prominent in professional and **vocational development**, however, is the application of a related, cognitive skill termed *reflexivity*. Sometimes, the terms 'reflection' and 'reflexivity' are juxtaposed, or seen as synonymous and many may not even have heard of the latter term. **However, there is an important distinction between them. Whereas the former systematically considers an important event in social work practice [usually analysing what happened, the thoughts and feelings evoked, and what could have been done differently – see, for example, Gibbs (1988)], one understanding of the latter involves a more rounded, holistic and critical awareness of the impact of personal and social characteristics on social work encounters with service users (D'Cruz et al, 2007).**

Put another way, reflexivity differs from its conceptual cousin, reflection, in that it locates the inquirer within much broader, power-infused, ideologically-driven, systemic domains - noting their impact on human experience and interaction (Fook, 2012). By utilizing reflexivity to examine the psychological and social determinants of social life, social workers can enhance their understanding of difference, diversity and subjugation. In particular, this type of conceptual awareness illuminates how various types of resource (for example, material and symbolic resources) are often asymmetrically disseminated within the social categories of class, ethnicity, and gender building into a power-matrix of intersectorial disadvantage. By gaining this enlarged comprehension, social workers are better equipped to execute anti-oppressive practice which advocates against micro and macro levels of oppression while promoting social justice, social change and human emancipation (Burke, 2013).

In this article, we will firstly review how reflexivity has been conceptualized and applied within the social sciences. This endeavour evokes some important ontological premises

informing the development of reflexive awareness. Secondly, we argue how one particular understanding of reflexivity can be appropriated to develop a reflexive model that is apposite for anti-oppressive social work practice: a model examining the themes of inequality and discrimination which we apply briefly to contemporary Irish society. To conclude the article, the authors indicate how social workers can make use of this model when analysing critical events within their day-to-day practice.

Explorations of Reflexivity in the Social Sciences

The notion of reflexivity has attracted much interest in the academic and applied fields. In the social sciences, there are four main perspectives which attempt to throw light on the subject. The first addresses the way in which a body of knowledge can refer back to itself in an inquisitive mode (Woolgar, 1988). For example, not only does the academic discipline of sociology examine societal processes in an interrogative way, but it also appraises its own principal premises concerning these areas. Put another way, reflexivity instigates a second-order awareness of the discipline's own knowledge base. This understanding was prominent in the work of Pierre Bourdieu when he considered the role of the social researcher in diverse cultural settings (1977).

The second notion of reflexivity has been advanced in ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1991) and symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1967). Both are noteworthy theories in sociology that underscore how meaning is socially produced through social engagements, language and interaction. The focus of these theories is on how social actors tacitly reflect and talk about their everyday actions in social life. According to these perspectives, reflection and communication make the social world happen and shape it and are therefore *constitutive* processes. This view of reflexivity presents a conceptual tool for analysing our knowledge, talk and social practice, to break it down into its elemental parts. Talk and action are therefore seen as social constructions rather than expressing a mirror image of social life.

The third view of reflexivity suggests that it is embedded *sui generis* within the nature of contemporary society. It is contended, here, that the unremitting transformation of social life under modernity encourages people to reflect on their way of being in the social world and mould or re-fashion themselves in line with chosen life-projects or personalised aims and objectives. It is exemplified in the individual's reflection on her everyday experience, identity,

narrative, options and prospects. Hence, the individual becomes her own project manager. Reflexivity, in this understanding, is a bespoke tool used in the pursuit of self-actualization: the fulfilment of capabilities and potentialities. Beck (1992) applies the term *reflexive modernization* to denote this social phenomenon.

Lastly, reflexivity is viewed as a tool for enhancing human agency and empowerment (Humphries & Truman, 1994). Understood in this way, it unearths how knowledge, norms, roles, social positions, and discourses interlace with *power* and *ideology* to enable or constrain life outcomes or reproduce inequalities. Applied every so often within qualitative research, and relying on explanatory concepts within critical social theory, this account of reflexivity scrutinises the influence of personal and social characteristics (for instance, gender, sexuality, race, disability or class) and the socio-cultural world on meaning, narrative, knowledge production and social action. In all of this, the intention is to shed light on how individuals are constrained by structural contradictions and cleavages, limited life opportunities, status injustices, social stratification, and social divisions. Gaining such awareness can potentiate human agency and parity of participation in social relations (Fraser & Honneth, 2004).

In the section below, we embrace this fourth understanding of reflexivity in the social sciences to develop a model of reflexivity for social work practice. This choice accords with the profession's core aim to work ethically with the person-in-society in a manner that promotes social justice, social change and the recognition of repressed identities (International Federation of Social Work, 2014). Moreover, it enables social work practitioners to be sensitive to the sway of power and ideology on themselves and service users. In doing so, it assists them to reflect on how various personal and social domains have shaped meaning, narrative, biography and the life-course. Without this vital understanding, it is hard to see how anti-oppressive practice (Thompson, 2006) can properly materialize.

The Reflexive Model

The model of reflexivity, outlined below, was developed by the lead author over several years (2011 to present day). The process started with initial attempts to theorise the model drawing principally on, and re-working, Layder's (2006) theory of social domains.

Commensurate with the fourth understanding of reflexivity (described earlier), Layder had posited that social life comprised a series of imbricated, ontological spheres of experience (which he termed 'domains') focusing firstly on a person's unique psychological narrative, and then positioning it within day-to-day social situations and, more widely, the cultural and economic resources available to the individual. The theory was intended to illuminate the interplay between human agency and social structure and cast a distinctive light on human experience, outcomes and oppression. However, given the theory's schematic orientation, it had to be re-conceptualized for real-life social work with its focus on tangible, everyday loss, crisis and social change (Burke, 2013).

An early, prototypical version of the model was configured conceptually and subsequently considered by a range of purposively selected social work practitioners, trainers and managers in Northern Ireland. Their views (which were largely of a positive nature) were canvassed through a structured evaluation comprising a series of coterminous focus groups. After several attempts at applying the model to their practice, the participants' feedback was collated and used to refine it, culminating in a bespoke version. This developmental process, including the benefits of using the model from the participants' perspectives, is described more fully in a recent publication by the lead author (Author, 2015b).

The model comprises five inter-linked domains of psychological and social influence (see Figure 1. below): **Figure 1. Domains of psycho-social experience**
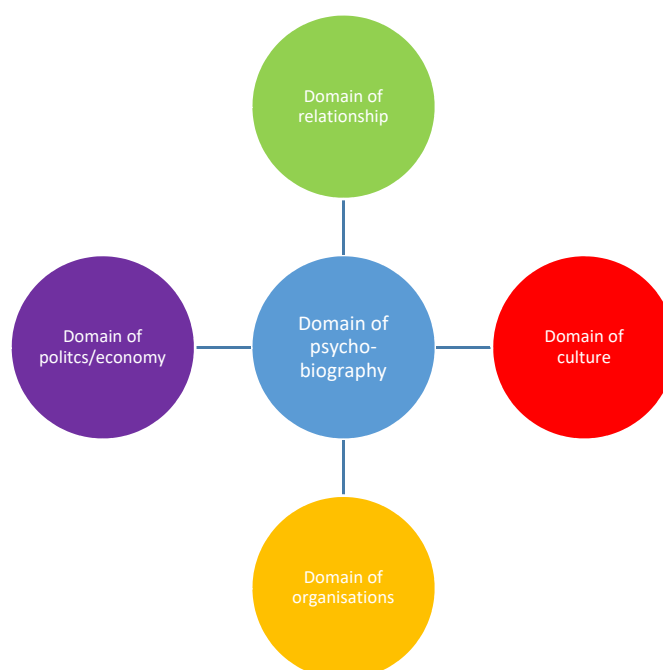
The afore-mentioned domains are ontological spheres of psycho-social reality that shape consciousness, thinking, emotion and behaviour in human subjects (Green, 2010). Although interconnected, they are nevertheless exhibit their own distinct properties which we will explore below. The metaphor of a Russian Doll is apt when conceptualising the configuration of these enveloping domains, starting with the micro level, moving outwards to the mezzo and subsequently macro dimensions. As can be seen, at the heart of the conceptual framework is the person with her subjective psychological biography. Moving centrifugally beyond this inner reality, the framework introduces a series of social spheres from the most immediate, intimate connections in social life to much wider dimensions of the social system with its often inequitable distribution of cultural and economic forms of capital (Bourdieu, 2004). Importantly, the domains are shaped by various types of *power and ideology* (Eagleton, 1991). In fact, we can say that power and ideology are intrinsic to social life much in the way that blood flows through the capillaries in the human body (Layder, 2006). Towards the end of this article, the nature of these societal influences will be appraised more fully.

The Domain of Psycho-Biography

This domain highlights a person's embodied *life-course* (Green, 2010) as it progresses along a path through time and space in the social world. In other words, it establishes a person's unique biographical and corporeal history as it has spread-out from birth onwards charting the significance of various transitions from childhood, through adolescence, to adulthood and then the experience of later life. At each point of transition there may be psycho-social challenges to face, cope with and resolve. This domain also looks at how significant events have impacted on the person emotionally and physically (in terms of the bodily effects of change). What is of concern here is the effect of loss, ageing, illness (mental and physical), disability, sensory impairment, psychological trauma, crisis, estrangement, re-union, and opportunities for growth and development. Throughout the life-course, we are also socially positioned according to our race, class, age, sexuality, religion and gender **(Green, 2010)**. This effects of social patterning and positioning mould how we view the life-course and respond to the various demands it presents **(Walker and Crawford, 2010)**.

Within this domain, the construct of *narrative* (Baldwin, 2013) is also highly significant. This refers to the auto-biographical story we tell about ourselves, others, our past and imagined,

future lives. For some people, such stories can be oppressive, recounting the misuse of power by significant others, while other narratives can depict positive adaptations to challenging circumstances. All in all, narratives integrate a person's life history around a core, inner identity: a sense of self, and inner conversations about self and others (Archer, 1996). What is more, they refer to the emotional world and moral quandaries. Thus, people, in the course of their psycho-social development are sometimes forced to make significant decisions, impacting on themselves and others. These decisions may centre on the management of inter-personal conflict, or whether to disengage from a relationship **(Archer, 1996)**.

Lastly, narrative is a tool for bringing about therapeutic change in social work (White & Epston, 1990). A person can reach a more empowered stance in her life through telling and reinterpreting her story to an empathetic individual. In this process, people need to externalise and distance themselves from their disabling narratives – stories that perpetuate shame, poor self-esteem and self-disrespect. By doing so, they can then formulate alternative stories about themselves that lead to change or adaptation. Narrative is therefore a means to a therapeutic end.

Lastly, in this domain, the life-course and human narrative are integrated through the interconnection of *time, place and memory* **(Tulving, 1983)**. Thus, the life-course is marked by significant dates signifying important periods and events (for example, graduating from college at a certain time of the year). It is also rooted in the noteworthy places where such events occur (eg graduation halls within universities). Both time and place are held together and amplified by memories, some of which afford pleasure but others that resurrect traumatic, emotional pain. The *absence* of certain kind of places must also be taken into consideration. For instance, place, for some individuals, is urban place through and through, exclusively so. Hence, they rarely (if ever) experience wilderness, bucolic or sylvan landscapes as formative places for mood enhancement, positive memories and well-being **(Gifford, 2013)**.

Social workers can make use of this domain when working with a range of individuals including older people who would benefit from reminiscence and reflection on their life-histories, when they have experienced significant loss, change, meaning or crisis; children and

young people who have disjointed life-histories; adults with mental health issues who need to re-frame their understanding of themselves and their past in a more positive way; and people with a disability moving into residential care who feel depressed about the loss of role and activity.

This aspect of the model invites social workers to consider a number of reflective questions. These questions were enumerated by the participants in the evaluation outlined above and exemplify the tenets of the fourth dimension of reflexivity (see above) with its critical consideration of the impact of social difference: (a) how and in what way are social workers and service users shaped by the domain of psycho-biography? (b) what sort of narratives do they both tell? (c) what stage of the life-course are both engaging with and what psycho-social challenges are they experiencing as a result? (d) what types of emotion are present in their lives and what impact do they have on their identity and lived experience? (e) how do such differences or similarities affect how social workers and service users interrelate? Such questions can also be applied to consider how different professionals (working say in a multi-disciplinary team) interpret events as a consequence of their distinctive psycho-social experience.

The Domain of Relationship

This domain focuses on what happens in *everyday, informal, social interaction* involving dyads or small groups of significant others including families. Such interaction reflects the truism that we are social beings 'all the way through' **(Mead, 1967)**. Put another way, we live porously and sociably. When we first come into the world we are *deeply coupled* with our caregivers **(Howe, 2011)**. As we mature, we develop a sense of our individuality. Yet, even though we move towards greater independence, our relationship with significant others continues to provide meaning, social support, comfort and a sense of belonging. Conversely, relationships can break-down through negative projections, transference, inter-personal power struggles, misunderstandings and unmet care and control needs **(Bull, 1990)**. Whatever the outcome, though, people need to be seen in the context of their most intimate, close relationships (for example, peers, family, and friends). This point is affirmed in

ecological and systems thinking and firmly embedded in relationship-based social work (Ruch et al, 2010).

Given what has been said, *attachment and object-relations theory* (Howe, 2011) provide a crucial lens through which we can view this domain. Here, it is posited that children require a *secure base* with their carers to enable them to explore their social worlds confidently and subsequently develop cognitive, emotional, social and linguistic skills. In other words, a secure attachment assists people to mature into competent, responsible adults who are fully open to the challenges they may face in various settings. The corollary to this is children who experience impoverished care of some sort and the insecurity it may engender. As a consequence, exploratory actions might be compromised and human development thwarted. Furthermore, the afore-mentioned theoretical sources contend that secure children most likely develop positive inner working models whereas insecure children are at risk of succumbing to unconfident, anxious personalities. **That said, early impoverished experience does not inexorably lead to an implacable life-sentence marked by inner turmoil and outward mayham. The life-course can evince 'turning points' or 'windows of opportunity' that impact positively on identity and subsequent psycho-social outcomes (Rutter, 2010). Typically, such 'turning points' are frequently triggered by empathic, unconditional positive regard from receptive others (Rogers, 2004).**

It is important to state, at this point, that attachment and object-relations extend well beyond the spheres of childhood and adolescence into the remaining stages of the adult life-course **(Howe, 2011)**. Our identity, throughout life, is a social construct because we react to how others react to us. Importantly, social interaction moulds our sense of self as we periodically wonder what people are thinking about us. These internal conversations shape our image of ourselves (Archer, 1996). This can have manifest implications as some individuals may be labelled in a pejorative manner by powerful others. In all of this, language is the medium through which selfhood emerges and continues to develop throughout the life-course.

Some reflective questions emerge for social workers when considering the impact of this domain in social work: (1) how have service users' and social workers' lives been shaped by the domain of relationship? (2) What has their attachment experience been like and how has

this moulded their inner working models? (3) Do both sets of actors carry any stigma and have they been subject to any form of labelling? If so, what has this meant for their overall emotional well-being? (4) How do **similar** or **dissimilar** experiences of this domain affect the interactions between social workers and service users? (5) What are the possibilities for change as a result of 'turning points'?

The Domain of Culture

Culture is a social sphere that imbues meaning. It moulds how we approach social life in the most fundamental, taken-for-granted way, shaping our attitudes, beliefs, tastes, styles, fashion and use of language. It is also the ultimate source of societal values and ideologies. Critically, it is socially reproduced by social actors from one generation to the next (through childhood socialisation) although cultural expressions are open to change **(Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2018)**. As we know, social media plays a significant role in cultural reproduction.

When thinking about culture, two core elements become apparent: the 'material' and the 'symbolic'. The former refers to the range of artefacts which give our life meaning. Artefacts are physical, person-made objects which have significance for social actors. We can think here of modern-day, consumer products such as mobile phones. Symbolic culture, by way of contrast, points more to the concepts constituting social life: the range of ideas, beliefs, norms, ideologies and values that shape how we interact with others.

Furthermore, when examining the domain of culture the role of power and social control becomes evident. This is reflected in ethnocentrism (Cree, 2000). Through this lens, the observer views his own culture as the 'gold standard', the ideal against which other cultures must be measured (and found wanting). As a form of cultural power, it gives rise to xenophobia, fear of the stranger, the experience of 'othering', concerns over ethnic purity and the ever-present threat of contamination – as many social, anthropological studies have discovered (Douglas, 2003).

Social workers can make use of this domain when working with minority groups, migrants and asylum seekers who require support or were some kind of risk or vulnerability is evident. Critically, the domain is most relevant to culturally-sensitive social work and the requirement to tune-in to the customs, language and meaningful symbols of diverse groups. **In terms of this domain, we can enumerate a number of reflective questions such as: (1) how has the**

domain of culture shaped the social worker's and service user's lives, meanings, goals and aspirations? (2) to what extent is the service user supported by communities around him or her? (3) does the prevailing culture discriminate against the service user in any manner? (4) how, in particular, has the social worker's cultural upbringing shaped how she views minority groups, how power has affected them, and the need for culturally-sensitive interventions?

The Domain of Organisations

Most of us interact with and are affected (in some way) by formal organisations. These organisations include the workplace, various bureaucracies with which we come into contact (such as Government bodies), schools we have attended, universities we may have graduated from and possibly care institutions in which our older relatives may now reside. As social workers, we may visit children living in residential care or secure accommodation. Other social workers may have been involved in the compulsory detention of adults in a psychiatric institution.

In the modern western world, many organisations (private and public sector) embrace four key features, namely: efficiency, predictability, quantity and technology (Ritzer, 2004). In a social work organisational context, efficiency is shown in the way claims on the service are processed expeditiously in order to retain a capacity to assess new referrals. Predictability occurs when social workers adhere to strict procedures dictating how and when actions are to be performed. A fixation on quantity is manifest in managerial reviews of contract volumes and statistical outputs: numbers of cases opened and closed, for example. Lastly, technology is part and parcel of computerised assessment frameworks in human welfare and the move towards paperless records.

Organisations also encourage specialisation, hierarchy, technical competence, and formal written communication (Hughes & Wearing, 2017). They likewise embrace bureaucracy (to differing degrees) as a primary tool for organisational improvement, regulation and quality assurance. This tool further supports the audit culture, where aims and objectives need to be clearly defined and targets enumerated. Quite often, bureaucratic systems are employed to avoid risk outcomes and so an onus is placed on recording interventions particularly when

services are scrutinised by independent, inspection agencies. Linked to this tendency, some organisations are keen to recruit and retain what they perceive to be resilient staff: individuals who will stay at the front-line and manage role-induced stress effectively, even if terms and conditions are precarious and insecure **(Rose & Palattiyil, 2018)**.

Social workers can make use of this domain when working with colleagues, managers, staff within their own and other's agencies, and service users. Social workers can reflect on the ways in which bureaucracy helps or hinders their role. **A number of questions arise for social workers in this context**: (1) how can they use recording to strengthen their professional practice and ensure it is safe? (2) to what extent can they achieve a balance between administration and face-to-face contact with service users? (3) to what degree is discretion a part of their decision-making practice when using bureaucracy? (4) how do organisations working in the community, voluntary, statutory and private sectors differ in role, structure, type and function and does this create differing expectations? (5) what are the factors that contribute to *stress* in the organisation and how might this be addressed? (6) what factors can improve the workplace and morale within the organisation? (7) how does organisational change impact on role and function? (8) most important of all, how does the social work organisation affect the service user? More precisely, how do hierarchy, status, rank, and power differentials influence service users' reactions to the organisation, what it will demand of them, and the threats it may pose to their well-being?

The Domain of Politics and Economy

What chiefly defines this domain in many western states is the modern consumerist, neoliberal economy and its emphasis on sound economic performance, wealth creation, austerity management and market stability (Steger & Roy, 2010). It is further defined in public policies characterised by the *'D-L-P formula'* where 'D' stands for deregulation of the economy; 'L' stands for the liberalisation of trade; and 'P' stands for privatisation of State-owned welfare and enterprise (Steger & Roy, 2010). In this formulation, a universal, welfare regime is viewed as a drain on the economy, one that needs to be radically attenuated. Government, generally, is seen as a resource-intensive structure in need of down-sizing.

However, two central problems flow from this economic model, namely: commodification and inequality. Both involve the (mis)use of power and have implications for social work. Commodification refers to the way in which various aspects of life are turned into commodities or things for sale **(Singh & Cowden, 2015)**. When commodification occurs in an unbridled way, market values colonize social life. People are no longer approached as subjects but rather units of production whose labour is bought and sold without sentiment. In short, people become de-personalised objects. More than that, important areas of life, such as education, become a product to be sold as opposed to a way of developing people. Commodification also ensures that people in receipt of welfare services are drawn into market forces: means-tested benefits and targeted provision being two examples **(Singh & Cowden, 2015)**.

Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) have addressed the second area, that of inequalities, in great depth. They convincingly show (through a meta-analysis of research studies) that inequalities are growing in neo-liberal societies at an alarming rate. Not only that, they suggest that inequality leads to life-diminishing effects on a range of key measures. Thus, such societies experience higher rates of teenage pregnancy, crime and violence, obesity, educational non-achievement and mental ill-health. **A key finding is that all classes in neo-liberal societies are adversely affected by the disparities in wealth, not just the impecunious**. More affluent members of these societies suffer as well due to higher rates of crime and impoverished environments. Notably, Wilkinson and Pickett showed how countries (for example, Sweden and Norway) with less income disparity had better social outcomes on a range of measures.

Social workers can make use of this domain when working with services users experiencing poverty, inequality and class discrimination. In this connection, they can address number of questions, namely: (1) what are their responses to service users facing these social problems? (2) to what extent do they engage in welfare rights as a central part of their role? (3) to what degree do they invoke advocacy, mediation, empowering groupwork and negotiation on behalf of service users? (4) do they ever highlight *unmet need* to their line-managers? (5) how is material inequality factored into their assessments, viewing it as a key cause of social problems such as poor mental health and child development? (6) how

pertinent is social class within day-to-day practice? (7) how does the prevailing welfare regime impact on the delivery of services? (8) in what ways has inequality moulded the service user's life-opportunities and well-being?

Power and Ideology

To reiterate, as blood flows through the body's capillaries, so does power encompass the domains but in diverse ways. Thus, power is multi-faceted, evanescent and ubiquitous – and is therefore a recurrent feature of social life in all of its guises (Foucault, 1977). Power comes from the 'top-down' (via the state through social policy measures and legal instruments – note here the link with the domain of politics and economy), the 'bottom-up' (through community activism – note at this juncture the link with the domain of culture) and is 'horizontally enacted' (as exemplified in everyday social interaction when social actors employ interpersonal manipulation, for example, to achieve their aspirations (note here the link with the domain of relationship). Power operates symbolically, in the way that citizens embrace take-for-granted cultural norms and etiquettes in the domain of culture (Bourdieu, 1977). Power affects knowledge and ideology: belief systems and cultural mores in the domain of culture (Foucault, 1977). Yet, power is enabling and constraining in human interactions. The enabling form is shown in certain types of 'power-with' strategy (exemplified in empowerment-led groupwork), the constraining version in some 'power-over' ploys (shown in paternalistic types of practice) (Tew, 2006).

Within the organisational domain, power (as leadership) can be expressed in different guises: 'legitimate' (centred on the right to make decisions), 'reward' (reflecting the capacity to compensate for complicity), 'expert' (grounded in competence), 'referent' (based on charisma or worthiness and 'coercive' (founded on the capacity to punish) (Raven & French, 2007). Lastly, and importantly, The (mis)use of power leads to the unequal distribution of resources (monetary, status, symbolic, educational) (Bourdieu, 1977). In this guise, it can act as a conduit of misrecognition (Fraser & Honneth, 2004). Crucially, the question becomes: how do social workers use power in their day-to-day encounters (in the domain of relationship) with service users and how do the latter experience these power relations?

Ideology, by way of contrast, constitutes an officially sanctioned set of ideas used to legitimise political and cultural ideas and norms (Freeden, 2003). Ideologies attempt to claim the truth

about governing or preferred socio-economic relations and in many cases offer a vision of a desired future. Often reflecting the views of a dominant, ruling class (Gramsci, 2011), an ideology can perpetuate false consciousness through subtle forms of socialisation, or cultural osmosis, creating what Bourdieu (1977) referred to as a governing *habitus*, or taken-for-granted, deeply ingrained, subjective dispositions shaping one's actions and embodiment in the social world. It can be seen from these observations that ideology, although conceptually distinct from power, is nevertheless imbricated with it. The nature of ideology, that is, its content, is dependent to some degree on a ruling faction exercising a 'power-over' strategy.

Contextualising the Domains within Ireland

Under this heading, we consider how the domains take on a particular purchase within contemporary Irish society (North and South). However, it is beyond the scope of this article to present an exhaustive description of prevailing needs and challenges within these jurisdictions, so a concise review is afforded. It is perhaps necessary to start with the domain of politics and economy, for it is here that Ireland (both North and South) is still attempting to recover from the strident austerity measures introduced following the melt down of global, neo-liberal markets in 2008 **(Garrett & Bertotti, 2017; Powell, 2017)**. Even though fiscal growth rates have been evident in the South more recently, the re-distribution of wealth (at the level required) has not transpired resulting in continuing levels of inequality, poverty and lack of social mobility **(Social Justice Ireland, 2019)**. The crises and contradictions of global neoliberalism have been played out in both of the Irish jurisdictions, with the uncertainty of Brexit, and fragile political administrations in both governing systems, further undermining the life-course of many citizens.

This economic and social malaise in the South is reflected in the housing crisis **(O'Sullivan, 2016)**, the shortfalls in primary health and social care **(Connolly & Wren, 2017)**, and disparities in educational outcomes **(Central Statistics Office, 2017)**. Such deficits impact inexorably on the psycho-biographical and relationship domains of experience often leading to fractured lives and narratives. As **Murphy (2017, p. 17) stated, in her report summarizing a participatory action research investigation into homeless people in the Dublin area: 'the service users' narratives…suggested that there was a complex, interdependent relationship between their mental health, and their experience of homelessness…'.**

Such concerns are compounded by changes in the domain of culture. In the North, an insidious culture of sectarianism still exists despite the nascent and ramshackle political reforms **(Stewart et al, 2018)**. In a land where the edict, 'whatever you say, say nothing' continues to hold sway, there has been no substantive de-commissioning of mind-sets. This state of affairs has acted as a precursor to transgenerational, post-traumatic stress disorder pertinent to the domain of psycho-biography **(Manktelow, 2007)**. In the South, the challenge of responding humanely to asylum seekers and differing cultural expressions (for example, from the Travelling community) is also of particular significance **(McGorrian et al, 2013)**.

Within the domain of the organisation and institution, Irish society has witnessed clamorous change. The disenchantment with formal religious institutions has been seismic. More specifically, the evidence of widespread clerical and institutional abuse, North and South, has marred the psycho-biographical lives of many of the victims **(Government of Ireland, 2009)**. The state's organisational response has been to enhance formal processes of inquiry and investigation through proceduralisation, bureaucracy, audit, registration, inspection, and regulation. Yet, the demands of these understandable systemic changes have eclipsed the time welfare professionals can devote to enhancing the domain of relationship with service users. More than that, it has contributed to high levels of attrition, burnout and stress in front-line staff, despite some progressive changes in practice methods and attempts at workforce retention **(Powell, 2017)**.

Such preliminary reflections on the domains in Irish society, lead to the conclusion that social justice ought to be the defining feature of any reforms to social policy and that welfare professionals need to embrace, wholeheartedly, the tenets of anti-oppressive practice.

Applying the Model in Social Work

The model outlined above can be gainfully applied in a number of enabling, developmental contexts including professional supervision, coaching, mentoring, and practice learning **(Author, 2015(b))**. In education settings, it can be applied in individual and group tutorials. However, in this section, we want to explore its use within peer-supervision. This form of supervision is unique as it does not rely on a 'so called' expert to steer the reflective process. Hence, it is structured around reciprocal interactions involving like-minded peers all of whom experience common interests and work-based challenges. Such interactions are meant to

encourage developmental feedback and self-directed learning. The rationale is to promote mutuality and build collegiality in a forum where professional equality and a supportive culture of inquiry, prevail. As a method, it does not replace formal, one-to-one supervision in social work, but rather acts as an adjunct to it.

Peer-supervision, because of its focus on reciprocal learning in an egalitarian forum, is therefore uniquely placed to embrace reflexivity. It is very challenging to examine the impact of power and ideology on social work practice if the supervisory context is marked by status and rank differentials between the supervisor and supervisee. Moreover, learning gained from controlled self-disclosure (about self, one's personal background and experience of the five domains), is much harder to achieve in traditional forms of supervision were elements of managerial oversight and evaluation pertain.

There is evidence that peer-supervision benefits from a structured process of reflective inquiry, one that establishes a focus to maximise the level of learning **(Ming-Sum, 2005).** Unstructured deliberations can drift away from reflexive considerations, ostensibly getting caught up in the lowly swamplands of practice where the emphasis is on description rather than analysis **(Schön, 2017)**. Below, I describe a process that can be followed by group participants.

The process commences, firstly, with the identification of a *critical incident*: an event from practice in the past that seemingly challenges a practitioner's assumptions or world view – about herself and the service user(s) with whom she engaged. Such incidents can be replete with value-dilemmas, or invoke questions as to whether a challenging situation might have been handled differently. Being assaulted in a children's home or taking a child into care, are two examples. Critical incidents, according to Fook (2012), are necessary prompts to start the reflective process. Group members can take turns in eliciting such incidents, so that when the reflexive process has been enacted for one member, it can then pass to another. Values, such as confidentiality and respect for others, must underpin group-based discussion and be contractually agreed before the reflective analysis proceeds.

In this approach, there are two central veins of discussion-led inquiry. The first involves facilitating responses to a number of preliminary questions **designed by the authors** to set out the nature and initial reaction to the incident, namely:

- What occurred during the incident, who was involved, when and where did it happen?

- In what sense was the incident deemed to be of a critical nature?

- What feelings, thoughts and actions were provoked by the incident?

- With hindsight, what has been learnt from the incident and how might practice change if the practitioner is faced with a similar experience?

Having established a consideration and discussion of these opening areas, we then advocate a deeper, more probing process. It draws directly on the model of reflexivity espoused earlier enabling us to develop a number of central questions shaping this mode of inquiry, namely:

- How different **or similar** were the social worker's and service user's personal and social characteristics?

- To what extent did any of the above differences **or similarities** affect the interactions occurring during the incident?

- Did the social worker's personal experience of the domains of psycho-biography, relationship, culture, organisation and politics/economy shape the way she interpreted and responded to the service user during the incident? (Depending on the nature of the incident, one or two of the domains may have a sharper resonance). On reflection, can the service user's reactions during the incident be explained in part by his personal experience of the five domains?

- Did power and ideology have any role in the way the incident unfolded?

- What is the overall learning about one's psycho-social positioning in the social world and how it affects professional judgment, thoughts, emotions, use of power and practical social work action?

Such questions are designed to enhance anti-oppressive awareness by placing thoughts, feelings and actions in the context of the psychological and social spheres of influence.

Conclusion

This article described a developmental process to inform and illuminate anti-oppressive social work practice. To achieve this aim, we chose a particular form of reflexivity gleaned from the social scientific literature: one apposite for anti-oppressive social work because it embraced a critical examination of the interplay between human agency, power, ideology, social difference and social structure. To construct the reflexive model, Layder's theory of social domains was appropriated and re-configured into a format of five interlacing, ontological spheres of psycho-social experience. Layder's theory was chosen because it was commensurate with our overarching reflexive orientation. Thus, it provided acute insights into the nature of social reality including human oppression. It was argued that social workers could apply these domains to understand transactions between themselves and service users, examining similarities and differences through responding to a series of exploratory questions generated by the model's reflexive stance.

To further develop these analytical deliberations, we argued that the model could be used to explore critical incidents within social work practice: incidents involving oppression, discrimination, inequality, the impact of difference and social stratification. More specifically, through the method of peer-supervision, we contended that social workers could apply the reflexive model to examine, not only their own experience, but also the reactions of service users. In all of this, social workers must consider how the five domains have shaped their perspectives on social life and any biases engendered inadvertently or unconsciously. All of these multi-faceted factors and contingencies will impede insight and understanding unless acknowledged.

More widely, the reflexive model can be applied in practice learning opportunities, formal supervision within organisations, and coaching and mentoring activities. The model is particularly relevant for action learning groups, or experiential forms of teaching and learning. Moreover, there may be opportunities to extend it to critical inquiry within groups of multi-disciplinary practitioners. Self-evidently, those who work together from different professional backgrounds often gain from conjoint learning opportunities. In all of these enabling activities, the model (with its underpinning reflexive orientation drawn from the social sciences) reminds us that private ills are often irrepressibly linked with public, social issues (Mills, 2000).

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