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Promoting Critical Reflexivity through Arts-Based Media: A Case Study

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Christopher Trevelyan, M.S.W., is a clinical social worker working as a psychotherapist with 'at risk' youth in a community-based setting in Toronto. His current research interests include critical reflexivity, contemporary psychodynamic theories and practices, marginalised communities' perspectives on mental health, neo-liberalism, and governmentality. Rory Crath is Ph.D. candidate at the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto. His research interests and experience split into two distinct areas: dissertation work explores the epistemologies that drive the use and production of visual images in policy settings targeting racialised youth and youth deemed at risk. This research is based on ethnographic field research and is inspired by nearly fifteen years of experience working with arts-based programming and activist work with street-involved and racialised youth in Toronto and Los Angeles. The second area is health-related research, currently focused both on queer and trans men's sexual and mental health needs and on the development of community-based palliative care practices and policies in Jamaica for those with life-threatening illnesses. Dr Chambon's scholarship has moved from research and teaching on immigration and refugees to transnational social work. She is part of a network of scholars in this area with a forthcoming co-edited book on Transnational Social Support (Routledge Publisher). She is interested in expanding the scope of social work theory (cf. Reading Foucault for Social Work (Columbia University Press, 1999)). Her critical interpretive research links material and discursive activities drawing from the social sciences, the humanities and the arts. She is currently involved in two main directions: (i) exploring what art practices can bring to social work for social change; and (ii) archival research re-examining the history and memory of the social work discipline and bringing to light multiple voices, debates and linkages between past, present and future—both programmes of research have received funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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Abstract

As an increasingly central focus of social work pedagogy, critical reflexivity can be distinguished from non-critical forms of reflexivity by its emphasis on the socially constructed, power-laden nature of knowledge and subjectivity, and its embracement of anxiety and other difficult emotions in social work practice. Given the *in actu* nature of its processes, however, critical reflexivity poses particular challenges as a teaching objective for social work educators. In order to assess the potential of arts-based media to engender critical

forms of reflexivity in social work audiences, qualitative inquiry was conducted on social workers' experience of an arts-based video installation on self-determination in social work practice. Participants' reflections strongly supported the installation as a catalyst for processes of critical reflexivity, emphasising the ways it encouraged active reflection on issues of power, knowledge construction and subjectivity, as well as demanded a negotiation with difficult emotions such as anxiety and uncertainty. The arts-based features of the video installation were highlighted as those most productive of these processes of critical reflexivity—a finding with significant implications for social work pedagogy, supporting the call for greater inclusion of arts-based media in social work education.

Keywords: Critical reflexivity, power, knowledge, subjectivity, arts, social work education

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Introduction

In order to encourage social workers and social work students to experience on affective, embodied and cognitive levels the tension between the regulatory functions and the emancipatory ideals of professional social work (Chambon, 1999; Epstein, 1994; Park and Kemp, 2006; Park, 2008), the first and second authors developed a video installation that explores a concept especially relevant to this tension, that of self-determination. The installation was conceived and produced in the context of a social work education process guided by the third author that encouraged participants to engage with multi-media as a forum for thinking through and presenting issues relevant to social work policy and practice. Initially, the video installation was piloted with students in master's programmes in two different Schools of Social Work and was then presented in a training session for the field instructors of one of these schools. In these different learning environments, it became evident that, as hoped, the installation was engendering meaningful reflection on what might be described as the ethical dissonance between the social control and the social justice functions of professional social work. More specifically, the installation seemed to be fostering the kind of reflective practice that, following current social work literature, we here refer to as critical reflexivity (Kessl, 2009).

In order to evaluate the installation as a catalyst for processes of critical reflexivity in social work audiences, we conducted qualitative investigations into participants' experiences of the installation in a range of institutional contexts, including hospital settings, a children's mental health setting and a family services agency. The research ethics board of the University of Toronto approved the recruitment and consent methodologies. Our investigations included recordings of group discussions, participant observation of participants' interactions, written feedback from participants

and semi-structured individual interviews with participants following their experience of the installation. An interpretive phenomenological methodology was employed to analyse the data for themes (Crist and Tanner, 2003).

In what follows, we present the results from our research, highlighting the specific processes or practices of critical reflexivity that seem to have been facilitated by the installation and examining the elements of the installation, as an arts-based medium, that seem to have been most effective in this regard. We begin with an explication of critical reflexivity, drawing on relevant social work literature, and then briefly consider the place of critical reflexivity in social work education. It is hoped that these deliberations will contribute to both the evolving social work understanding of critical reflexivity and the growing literature on strategies for teaching it.

Critical reflexivity for social work

Interest in ‘reflexivity’, ‘reflection’, ‘critical reflection’, ‘reflective practice’ and the like has increased enormously in recent years within social work literature, with a wide range of arguments for their importance to professional practice being proffered (e.g. D’Cruz *et al.*, 2007; Fook, 1999, 2002; Heron, 2005; Mandell, 2007; Ruch, 2009; etc.). Indeed, a number of reflective practices are now often cited as core competencies of the social work identity and as central learning objectives within social work education (Fook, 1999, 2002; Ixer, 1999; Mandell, 2007; White, 2001). However, as many have noted, reflexivity and other associated terms remain problematic and contentious within social work, sometimes used interchangeably and other times differentiated from one another in various ways (D’Cruz *et al.*, 2007; Ruch, 2002). What, then, is meant here by ‘critical reflexivity’?

To begin, ‘reflexivity’ is usually distinguished from other kinds of reflection by its timing: whereas other reflective practices typically involve a retrospective examination of a practice situation, ‘reflexivity’ is said to take place in the moment, while one is still in the midst of the incident in question (D’Cruz *et al.*, 2007). This recalls Schon’s (1983) seminal distinction between ‘reflection-*on*-action’ and ‘reflection-*in*-action’, the latter being described by Ixer (1999) as the ability ‘to reflect on [a problem] whilst remaining in the original problem’ (Ixer, 1999, p. 518). Yet, while there is general agreement that ‘reflexivity’ is a form of ‘reflection-*in*-action’, there are important differences between those models of reflexivity that are here considered ‘critical’ and those that are not. These differences can be organised, for heuristic purposes, along three closely related lines. The first involves the status of knowledge in social work practice; the second has to do with how ‘the self’ of the social work practitioner is conceived; and the third concerns social workers’ relationship with anxiety and other difficult emotions in social work practice.

Critical reflexivity and knowledge/power

In what might be called ‘non-critical’ variations of reflexivity, knowledge is seen as a resource to be deployed by the social work practitioner in processing ‘complex material sufficiently rapidly to take action in a problematic situations’ (Iyer, 1999, p. 517). In this account, reflexivity is the capacity, as Kessl (2009) puts it, ‘to translate expert knowledge into autonomous social work interventions’ (Kessl, 2009, p. 309). ‘Non-critical’ forms of reflexivity do not demand that the social work practitioner consider the sources and specific forms of knowledge, and the relations of power that are structuring his or her assessment and intervention (D’Cruz *et al.*, 2007). As educator Stephen Brookfield (2009) notes, ‘It is quite possible to practice reflectively while focusing solely on the nuts and bolts of process and leaving unquestioned the criteria, power dynamic and wider structures that frame a field of practice’ (Brookfield, 2009, p. 293).

In critical forms of reflexivity, the otherwise tacit knowledge and power relations informing an individual’s appraisals and activities are explicitly brought into question. For social workers engaging in critical reflexivity, ‘*knowledge is not simply a resource to deploy in practice. It is a topic worthy of scrutiny*’ (Taylor and White, 2000, quoted in D’Cruz *et al.*, 2007, p. 77, emphasis added). To be critically reflexive, practitioners must actively interrogate the assumptions that inform how they are making sense of the practice situation in which they find themselves, viewing their understanding of and relationship with clients as ‘socially situated’ (Sheppard, 1998, p. 767). Moreover, firmly situated within a social constructionist epistemology, critical approaches to reflexivity demand that practitioners scrutinise the process by which knowledge is generated, with an emphasis on the ways in which relations of power are inevitably complicit in all knowledge creation (D’Cruz *et al.*, 2007). Social workers can wittingly or unwittingly, implicitly or explicitly, (re)inscribe inequitable relations of power by deploying dominant forms of knowledge in their descriptions of and responses to social problems and the people with whom they work (O’Brien and O’Donnell, 2000; Parton, 2000). As such, the critically reflexive social worker considers and challenges his or her social work practice as a potential site for the reproduction of existing power relations and hegemonic discourses about the social world.

This accounting of the power relations at work in the generation and deployment of knowledge-based expertise connects critical reflexivity with specific social justice ideals aimed at minimising power imbalances within social worker–client relationships and problematising the role social workers can play in the existing structures of political regulation (D’Cruz *et al.*, 2007; Heron, 2005; Kessl, 2009; Rossiter, 2007). And yet, as Rossiter (2007) and other authors like Reisch (2008) and Park (2008; Park and Kemp, 2006) so keenly observe, there is a tension at play within the

profession itself—a struggle between social work's 'democratic commitment to social justice', with its promotion of equity and an ethics of care and emancipation, on the one hand, and 'its modernist investment in expertise and benevolent social engineering' (Park and Kemp, 2006, p. 728) in which work with clients is guided by ruling, regulatory norms, on the other. What result, at times, are policies and interventions that, in their alignment with dominant discourses about race, gender, neo-liberalism, etc., stand in tension with, even violation of, the ethic of social justice the profession espouses. An ethical, critically reflexive practice, therefore, involves analysing how and what forms of knowledge are being deployed to identify social problems and guide interventions, and questioning the extent to which these forms of knowledge are or are not aligned with an emancipatory ethic (Park, 2008).

Critical reflexivity and subjectivity

In variations of reflexivity that we are describing as 'non-critical', the self is usually conceived in terms of the liberal humanist subject, 'a unified, rational subject who chooses, decides, and acts as an individual who is the author of her place in society' (Rossiter, 2007, p. 27). The liberal humanist subject is seen as self-determining, emanating from a unique essence that is irreducible to the social world in which it finds itself (Rossiter, 2007). Conceptions of reflexivity associated with this self-contained subject typically have to do with the practitioner taking account of and navigating cognitive and emotional reactions that are mostly understood as stemming from his or her idiosyncratic life history (Mandell, 2007). It is argued that these 'personal' reactions, if not adequately accounted for, risk interfering with the effective deployment of professional knowledge (Mandell, 2007; Rossiter, 2007; Ruch, 2002).

By contrast, drawing heavily on post-structural theorists, a number of authors have argued for an extension of critical reflexivity's purview to include an analysis of the ways in which social relations of power not only structure the generation and deployment of knowledge, but also constitute the identity and 'self' of the practitioner (Chambon, 1999; Fook, 2002; Heron, 2005; Rossiter, 2001, 2007). For these authors, subjectivity is an effect of discourse, understood as a system of representation that establishes what will be intelligible or conceivable—what will count as legitimate forms of knowledge or personhood—in any given historical context. These social work authors connect discourse with power relations, emphasising the ways in which human subjects are *subject* to discursive regimes that regulate the terms by which they experience and engage in their social world and themselves. In this way, dominant discourses constitute subjects who, in their everyday activities, become the vehicles or conduits through which these discourses are then reproduced and promulgated. The work

of critical reflexivity thus demands that social workers focus not simply on the multi-dimensions of their social positioning relative to the social positions of the clients with whom they are involved—that is, in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.—but also on the discursive nature of subjectivity itself, on the ways in which our experience of ourselves and others, and our apperceptions of our world, are always already both constituted by and implicated in a crucible of differential relations of power (Heron, 2005).

While wider discursive frames, in this account, always regulate available modes of subjectivity, with the rise of the neo-liberal subject, this regulatory function has been increasingly taken on as a reflexive, moral project of the self (Brown, 2003). Individuals in our current neo-liberal era are charged with the responsibility of crafting their own identities through engaging in a kind of hyper-reflexivity—vigilantly self-regulating their thinking and behaviour within the constraints and possibilities of circulating discourses (Heron, 2005; Mandell, 2007). Paradoxically, though, the call to be reflexive both conforms to dictates about the proper disposition of the subject and simultaneously, as has been shown, opens up the possibility for a critical interrogation of the very discourses and associated mechanisms that set limits to what subjects can be and what can be known about them. A critically reflexive social work practice works to understand and negotiate this paradoxical nature of reflexivity—with its normative and regulatory functions, on the one hand, and its critical, insurrectionary potential, on the other.

Critical reflexivity and difficult emotions

With its moment-to-moment attention on the power relations at work in the social construction of knowledge and subjectivity, critical reflexivity destabilises taken-for-granted knowledge and behaviours (White, 2001). In this way, critical reflexivity can generate uncertainty and ambiguity for the critically reflexive practitioner, and demands that social workers be able to take up and tolerate a stance of not knowing and disorientation with respect to their social work encounters (Miehls and Moffat, 2000; Rossiter, 2007). Moreover, critically reflexive practitioners must contend with the tension and discomfort elicited by an ongoing confrontation with the sometimes contradictory nature of social work practice, with the interpenetration of care and domination, emancipation and social control, that seems intrinsic to the profession (Rossiter, 2007). For these reasons, authors promoting critical reflexivity consider the experience of anxiety and unsettledness to be unavoidable and even necessary to ethical social work practice (Heron, 2005; Miehls and Moffat, 2000; Sakamoto and Pitner, 2005; Ruch, 2002, 2009).

‘Non-critical’ models of reflexivity, however, eschew the embracement of difficult emotional and cognitive experiences espoused in critical forms of reflexivity. With their focus on the professional deployment of expert

knowledge, ‘non-critical’ versions seek to maximise the epistemological confidence of the social work practitioner (Ruch, 2002). Neither, as we have seen, do ‘non-critical’ forms of reflexivity grapple to the same extent with the power relations intrinsic to social work practice, nor with the socially constructed nature of subjectivity. From this perspective, the anxieties and discomforts that come with both uncertainty and a confrontation with issues of power, then, are not seen as central to social work practice and, indeed, tend to be considered as unwanted barriers to competent and professional practice. As such, anxiety is something to be minimised and controlled for (Miehls and Moffatt, 2000).

Teaching critical reflexivity

Facilitating the praxis of reflexivity in social work educational settings poses unique challenges to educators given the *in actu* nature of its processes (Ixer, 1999). However, many educators interested in fostering reflexivity take their first cue from theorists like Dewey who claim it is only possible to reflect authentically when confronted by material that is perplexing, and that presents a ‘felt difficulty’ (quoted in Ixer, 1999, p. 515). Brookfield (2009), for example, drawing on transformative learning literature, argues that reflective processes begin with a ‘disorienting dilemma’ (Brookfield, 2009, p. 295) in which there is an evident discrepancy between one’s assumptions and the material being encountered. Through this disorienting crisis in one’s usual modes of interpretation, the tacit forms of knowledge that undergird one’s habitual responses emerge as assumptions in need of scrutiny. By challenging assumptive frameworks and demanding further resolution, perplexing situations can also be argued to confront one with one’s ongoing, yet often unrecognised, participation in knowledge generation (Brookfield, 2009) that might very well be complicit with dominant discourses and broader dynamics of sociopolitical power and control.

For social work educators, then, presenting students with a ‘disorienting dilemma’ seems foundational for any pedagogy aimed at teaching critical forms of reflexivity. Indeed, given the increasing importance of reflexivity as a core competency of the professional social worker, some commentators have called for a dramatic reorientation of social work education, away from teaching knowledge and towards facilitating students’ capacity to work with ‘felt difficulties’ (Brookfield, 2009; Ixer, 1999; Miehls and Moffatt, 2000). Ixer (1999) quotes Barnett, who says that, henceforth, ‘the main aim has to be that of creating disturbance in the mind of the student and of enabling the student to handle that disturbance’ (Ixer, 1999, p. 522). As has been shown, the critically reflexive social worker does not ‘handle that disturbance’ simply by adaptively deploying professional forms of knowledge. Instead, in embracing the uncertainty and discomfort that come with questioning the power dynamics constitutive of

social work knowledge and relationships, the emphasis here is on emergent, intersubjective forms of knowing and relatedness (Ixer, 1999; Miehl and Moffatt, 2000).

Arts/multi-media-based processes have figured prominently in this pedagogy. For example, role plays that stage practice dilemmas have been suggested both as effective means of drawing attention to operative assumptions and biases at work in the interactive moment and as vehicles for cultivating the sensibilities necessary to creatively mediate the gap between clients' and workers' experiences of the process of intervention (Kinney and Aspinwall-Roberts, 2009; Yip, 2006). Other writers have suggested that arts-based media, because they invite participants/learners to operate on affective, imaginative and interpersonal/empathic social registers, provide a more open-ended and embodied means of cultivating reflexive interaction in complex, multidimensional practice environments (Eisner, 2002; Gulla, 2009; Rutte *et al.*, 2010). In a similar vein, Chambon (2005), Denzin (2002) and Gulla (2009) suggest encounters with arts-based mediums can not only influence a critical distancing from hegemonic, neo-liberal forms of managerial practices that 'foreclose options', but can, in turn, incite the formation of 'new epistemologies', new 'modes of analytical thinking' (Gulla, 2009, p. 53) and more spontaneous, poetic responses to social work problematics as they occur in the moment of engagement (Chambon, 2005, 2009). Finally, Chambon (2009), drawing on art historian Claire Bishop (2005), suggests that the nature of art installations—as experiential, participatory and interactive forms of engagement—allow us to think differently about social work pedagogy and social workers' appreciation of the socially constructed nature of their own knowledge and activity.

The video installation: *Four Variations on Self-Determination*

Entitled *Four Variations on Self-Determination*, the multi-media installation is composed of three different videos playing simultaneously, each on its own screen, in its own corner of the classroom/exhibit space. Each video, or 'variation', shot in black and white, with its accompanying soundtrack, lasts between three and five minutes in length and is programmed to loop continuously, creating an audio-visual space within which participants may roam and engage with the media at their own pace. The installation also includes a number of objects—standing mirrors, white boxes—set up in the fourth corner of the classroom/exhibit space, acting as a fourth variation alongside the three films. These objects also figure prominently in the videos and, in this way, the participants are invited to actively engage with the same props and set as found in the films (Figures 1–4).



Figure 1 An anti-oppressive practice lens



Figure 2 An anti-oppressive practice lens

Text in the videos is limited to a single statement from the *Ontario Social Work Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook* (2008). Laid out in the handbook with the asterisked subsection as a footnote in a lower-case

font, the statement captures in textual form an ethical dissonance at the heart of professional social work's self-understanding:

College members respect and facilitate self-determination in a number of ways including acting as resources for clients and encouraging them to decide which problems they want to address as well as how to address them.*

*Limitations to self-determination may arise from the client's incapacity for positive and constructive decision-making, from law, from the order of any court of competent jurisdiction and from agency mandate and function (OCSWSSW, 2008, pp. 3–4).

The statement was repeated in an installation guide that was given to each participant. Also included in the guide were three quotes taken from three different theoretical bodies of literature familiar to the field of social work: (i) a Foucault-inspired literature on self-regulation; (ii) an 'anti-oppressive practice' literature; and (iii) a literature associated with the turn towards neo-liberal discourses. Each quote is linked to one of the films, and was included in a 'gallery guide' that was made available to participants as a supplementary, text-based orientation to the reading of the different variations.

The videos each present the theme of self-determination in social work practice from a different theoretical perspective, as outlined above, with different scenarios, but the same two characters in each film—the 'client' (representing an individual, group, family or community) and the 'social worker' (Figures 1–4). There are no words spoken between these protagonists—a departure from typical educational films about client and worker interactions.

The physical/emotional interactions between the two characters and their relationships with the objects vary across the different videos. Each video comprises a series of movements and interactions arranged in a discernable narrative arc, detailing various forms of intersubjective engagement between client and worker—surveillance, coercion, guidance, rescuing, opposition, collaboration, facilitation, stasis and, at times, gentle embrace. Still images are interjected intermittently in each film, offering more intimate perspectives on the interaction between subjects, and between subjects and the symbolic objects. The accompanying soundscape frames the unfolding imaging of social worker/client engagement, and yet its effects are tempered or distorted by the audible presence of the soundscapes accompanying the other two videos.

The video installation and critical reflexivity

In analysing participants' experience of the installation, we identified a number of modes of reflexivity that seem to have been engendered.



Figure 3 A Foucauldian lens



Figure 4 A neo-liberal lens

The following presentation of these forms of reflexivity relies on a composite of participants' accounts, with a focus on participants' efforts to grapple with issues of knowledge construction, subjectivity and power relations within the installation. For heuristic purposes, the different facets of participants' experiences are presented, at times, in terms of a linear or

chronological development. It is important to note, though, that the data support an understanding of these different positions as alternating or even as coextensive. Further, not all participants seem to have experienced each of these moments or modes of reflexivity. However, the following account of participants' experiences offers a productive means for thinking about the different processes through which the installation works to engender critical reflexivity in social work audiences.

'A felt difficulty': 'a disorienting dilemma'

One of the most consistent themes of participants' reflections on their experience of the installation has been that of the 'unsettling' and 'jarring' qualities of both its form and content. Through the use of multi-media technologies, specifically the looping audio and visual images, the form of the installation creates an environment in which multiple interactions transpire between the installation and the participant in every moment. It is an environment in which participants reported experiencing a type of 'oversaturation' in which they found it difficult to assimilate their sensible experience. As mentioned, in terms of content, the three films stand as discrete pieces, each with its own narrative arc and particular use of the props. While the meaning of each and their interrelationship are ambiguous, they nonetheless seem both to have a symbolic quality and to be in conversation with one another, and therefore to demand some interpretation on the part of the participant. Moreover, participants commented that the vignettes clearly reference a helping relationship, and so readily evoke in social work audiences associations with their own social work practice.

As such, in spite of the overwhelming nature of the sensory environment and the ambiguity of the films' content and interrelationship, the participant is not released from a cognitive engagement with the potential meanings of the installation. Indeed, recalling Dewey's 'felt difficulty' (quoted in Ixer, 1999, p. 515) or Brookfield's (2009) 'disorienting dilemma' (Brookfield, 2009, p. 295) as the necessary precipitant of reflexivity, the installation seems to generate processes of reflexivity in part by denying an immediately discernable meaning for the participant, and by thus demanding further engagement. A number of interviewees, for example, thought it was precisely the fact that its meanings 'could not be easily accommodated' that had most prompted them into actively thinking and reflecting on their experiences of and reactions to the installation.

Knowledge/power

Participants reported first attempting to understand the installation by drawing on what they know about social work practice. Following

transformative learning theorists, however, we can speculate that participants might not have become conscious of their efforts in this regard had they been able, from the outset, to comfortably make sense of the installation (Brookfield, 2009). Instead, as has been discussed, the assumptions participants typically draw on would have very likely remained tacit and unacknowledged, smoothly functioning in their relatively unconscious structuring of participants' interpretations. As a perplexing object, though, the installation frustrated participants' reliance on familiar ways of conceiving of social work practice and, as such, seems to have made these various circulating discourses more available for conscious reflection. More generally, however, the installation, in presenting itself as a 'disorienting dilemma', seems to have confronted participants with their own involvement in processes of knowledge construction, and to have done so in a number of ways.

To begin, as alluded to, the failure of participants' tacit modes of interpretation demands that participants' experiences be supplemented with more actively generated meanings. An engagement with the installation ultimately asks, therefore, for some deliberate, creative agency on the part of participants if they are to meaningfully organise their experience. Doing so necessarily requires they move around the installation—a movement in which different subjective positions in relation to the field engender different perceptions, affects and ways of knowing (cf. Chambon, 2005). This variability in the participant's perspectives on the installation, as he or she moves within it, is heightened by the looping quality of the three videos: although the same sequence repeats itself, new forms of meaning emerge with each repetition of listening/viewing. In this sense, what 'was' is constantly being transformed into something that is contemporary and open to different possibilities through participants' active and ongoing engagement. From this position of meaning-maker, participants seem able to affirm the meanings that are created, while at the same time, to acknowledge that these meanings, like the experience, are spatiotemporally and subjectively contingent.

In addition, as already touched upon, the apparently representational quality of the four variations of the installation, and their interrelationships, also foreclose a simple retreat into anything like a free play of creative associations. As such, a number of participants described themselves as having felt 'forced' to try to provide a meaning of their own, but also to have experienced themselves as constricted in this knowledge construction by the specific structure and contents of the installation. In this respect, the installation offers participants an embodied experience of the ways in which processes of meaning-making, understanding and knowledge production are always contingent upon the possibilities and constraints of the discursive context(s) in which one finds oneself.

More explicit consideration of the relationship between power and knowledge, however, was evident in participants' preoccupation with the intentions and perspectives of the creators of the installation. A

predominant theme of respondents' reflections was that, despite the fact that they felt thrust into an active role of making meaning, there remained an 'unsettling' sense for them that some inaccessible, more comprehensive and 'truer' meaning existed. This felt experience of an asymmetrical power relation between artist/creator and participant, based on differential access to knowledge, elicited strong responses from participants, all of which involved grappling with the ways in which power and, specifically, power imbalance structure the field of knowledge production and distribution—another key focal point of critical reflexivity. Moreover, it is worth noting here that a number of participants commented on the parallels between their own experiences of feeling inadequate in the face of an assumed, withheld and privileged knowledge, and how clients might encounter and experience professional knowledge as practised through technocratised, expert-based models of assessment and intervention.

Subjectivity/power

Participants also spoke about confronting issues of power in the installation in the different modes of interaction between the two protagonists of the different videos. Identified interactions included moments of co-operation, collaboration, care and support, on the one hand, but also opposition, directivity, coercion and control, on the other. Moreover, many participants commented that there were points in the videos in which it was very difficult to distinguish between these two poles of emancipatory and oppressive forms of relating. For example, several interviewees spoke of interactions of an overtly directive nature that were executed with gentleness and sensitivity. A number of participants said that these more ambiguous moments, when it was undecidable whether the interaction was caring or controlling, were particularly unsettling and troubling for them. This ambiguousness raised for consideration the paradoxes at play in social workers' complex professional objective of both facilitating and regulating the self-determination of clients, and in this sense engendered critical reflection about the integrality of complex relations of power to professional social work practice.

In addition, the installation seems to have catalysed critical reflexivity about the ways in which power relations also constitute subjectivity. The effectiveness of the installation in this regard seems closely connected to the ways the vignettes offer various positions or roles with which social work audiences readily identify. The first of these positions, perhaps not surprisingly, is that of the 'helping' figure, the protagonist most resembling a social worker in the videos. The second is that of the client, the figure being 'helped' in the videos. The third position that participants seem to have identified with was that of the spectator of the social work encounter: the supervisor/manager of social work practice. Participants' shifting

identifications with these different positions seem to have engendered particularly affectively charged thinking about the ways in which their social work selves or identities are constructed in and regulated by a network of power relations and broader sociopolitical discourses.

In taking up the role of spectator, social work audiences very quickly began assessing the interactions in the videos—with their strong evocations of ‘helping’ relationships—by drawing on the predominant discourses and practice ideals that define social work as a profession. In this way, participants’ engagements with the films became marked by the evaluations and judgements of a supervisory or regulatory gaze. Our earlier reflections about how participants initially fell back on available frames for thinking about social work practice in order to assess and evaluate what they experienced in the installation, then, might be usefully connected with the ways in which participants seem to have taken up the perspective of the supervisor and the disciplinary gaze of the profession. As has been discussed, however, participants’ attempts to supervise, to judge the nature and quality of the social work practice in the different vignettes, were significantly frustrated by the ambiguous, indeterminate quality of the films’ form and content.

Participants’ efforts to assess the social work interactions figured in the videos were consistently evident in evaluative comments participants made about different moments in the vignettes. However, these positive and negative assessments were often expressed in terms that implied a close identification on the part of the participants with the ‘social worker’ in the films. Conversely, participants sometimes expressed their identification with the social worker in the films negatively, by strongly differentiating their practice or approach from that of the social worker on the screen. In either case, participants can be seen as having actively imagined themselves in the place of the social worker in the vignettes, meaningfully inserting themselves as professionals in the various interactions.

The coinciding of these different identifications suggests that, in an important way, participants engage in the videos by inserting themselves in the position of both the supervisor and the supervised, the subject *and* the object of the gaze. On this account, participants’ efforts to supervise and assess, to survey the scene, might be closely linked with a reflexive capacity for *self-surveillance* and *self-regulation*. The ready identifications social workers make can be seen, then, as referencing the kind of self-regulation, structured by disciplinary ideals and codified discourses, that characterises the professionalised form of reflexivity now considered a key competency of professional social work practice. At work here is the paradoxical nature of reflexivity, in that reflexivity is both the means by which social work practitioners regulate and discipline themselves in line with professional norms, and also the critical means by which they are able to interrogate, challenge and refine their own participation in these and other power-laden discursive frames.

As mentioned, however, participants also tended to identify with ‘the client’ in the different vignettes. Some spoke explicitly of ‘sympathising’ with ‘the client’ in interactions in which ‘the client’ was being strongly directed by ‘the social worker’, saying that it reminded them of interactions they had had with their own supervisors or managers. More broadly, however, participants’ identification with ‘the client’ involved a recognition that the various moments and markers of constraint, limitation or regulation within the films pertained not only to the social work client, but also to the practitioner. In other words, in identifying with ‘the client’ in the different vignettes, participants drew parallels between the processes of regulation at work in the client–worker relationship, on the one hand, and those at play in the worker’s relationship with the larger regulatory and disciplinary frames that structure social work practice, on the other. This was especially true of those working within large institutional settings, for whom the installation served to heighten an awareness of their own embeddedness within, subjection to and propagation of regulatory apparatuses. In all these ways, for many participants, the installation strongly promoted critical forms of reflexivity around the ways in which their social work selves and identities are constituted by and implicated in sociopolitical discourses and differential relations of power.

Difficult emotions

In keeping with current literature on critical reflexivity, the experience of confronting issues of knowledge construction, subjectivity and power relations within the installation elicited a considerable amount of anxiety, discomfort and uncertainty for many participants. Participants ranged greatly in their response to and feelings about these difficult emotions; for present purposes, however, two main groups of participants can be identified. These differences in participants’ experiences no doubt, in part, reflect variances in participants’ styles of learning and in their interest in or familiarity with arts-based media. But these discrepancies in participants’ reactions to the installation also seem to correspond with some of the distinctions that were made at the outset between ‘non-critical’ and critical forms of reflexivity.

Many participants, for example, seemed able to embrace the affective and cognitive challenges of engaging the installation, and saw their experience of the installation as closely analogous to their experiences of difficult social work encounters. These were the participants who tended to most enjoy and appreciate the installation as a pedagogical tool for enhancing social workers’ capacities to work with both the uncertainty attendant to intersubjective processes of knowledge creation and the anxiety and discomfort that come with confronting the complex relations of power integral to social work practice.

Other participants, however, expressed feeling angry at the ways in which the ambiguity and/or complexity of the installation made them feel ‘des-killed’ and even ‘dumb’ because they had not been able to arrive at a clear understanding. These participants tended to consider the emotional and cognitive challenges of the installation as relatively unrelated to their everyday social work encounters, and spoke of their feelings of being ‘overwhelmed’ and ‘uncomfortable’ as obstacles to their engagement with the installation. Many of these participants wished that the installation had offered more concrete and practical guidelines for practice, and were disappointed that they had not come away with knowledge or techniques they could readily apply in their interventions with clients. These two starkly different reactions of participants to the installation seem to reflect a certain tension, if not divide, within social work as a profession—a contrast that has been here discussed in terms of that between ‘non-critical’ and critical forms of reflexivity.

It is worth mentioning here, however, that a number of social work commentators on reflexivity and reflective practices have pointed out that there seems to be an optimal level of anxiety or discomfort that initiates and supports meaningful forms of reflexive engagement; beyond this optimal level, however, learners and/or practitioners are believed to be too distressed to function reflexively—the ‘disorienting dilemma’ has become too disorienting (Pitner and Sakamoto, 2005; Ruch, 2002; Yip, 2006). It may be, then, that the ‘felt difficulty’ of the installation evoked an optimal amount of difficulty for some participants, but more anxiety or discomfort than was ideal for others—an important consideration for social work educators aiming to teach and promote reflexivity. Indeed, this potential of the installation to engender strong reactions in participants raises ethical considerations about its use pedagogically: warning participants in advance of the possibility of their having such responses and offering opportunities for debriefing afterward, for example, seem requisite.

Conclusion

Having examined the ways in which the installation promotes processes of critical reflexivity in social work audiences, encouraging affective, embodied and cognitive forms of engagement with the imbricated issues of knowledge construction, subjectivity and relations of power, we here want to conclude by briefly summarising the arts-based elements of the installation that seem to be most effective in this regard and that might be particularly instructive for future social work pedagogy.

As has been stressed, the installation presents social work audiences with what, following Dewey, we have referred to here as a ‘felt difficulty’ (quoted in Ixer, 1999, p. 515), the confrontation with which is perhaps the catalyst of all processes of reflexivity. The installation seems to do so

primarily through its aesthetic form, which appears to open up an indeterminate space for interpretation and meaning-making that cannot be closed, frustrating the usual modes by which social workers might understand its material and demanding more active and creative processes of knowledge construction. The effectiveness of the installation in this regard, as an arts-based piece, seems to be enhanced by its specific use of multi-media to create an immersive, sensory field that incorporates sound, imagery, objects, space, movement and text.

Moreover, in articulating complex theoretical issues of power, knowledge and subjectivity in an aesthetic form, the installation stages these often seemingly abstract dilemmas in ways that foster more engaged modes of learning, eliciting uncertainty, anxiety and discomfort, and calling for ongoing negotiation and interpretation. As such, the installation creates an experiential learning environment that confronts participants with some of the same cognitive, affective and sociopolitical and ethical challenges as they face in their everyday social work practice contexts. The videos of the installation clearly evoke 'helping' relationships, creating some sense of familiarity and establishing points of identification for social work audiences. In this way, the installation invites social workers to insert themselves into the different vignettes and to relate these to their own practice experiences. But, at the same time, through its aesthetic form, the installation functions to make the familiar unfamiliar, to open up a space for critical questioning and creative knowledge construction about everyday social work practice. In all these ways, the installation supports the conviction of those social work educators who argue for the potential of arts-based media to engender transformative, critically reflexive processes in social work learners (Chambon, 2005, 2009; Denzin, 2002; Eisner, 2002; Gulla, 2009).

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