REFLEXIVITY AND SOCIAL WORK PRAXIS

CONVERSATIONS OVER COFFEE:

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Abstract

Utilizing autoethnography and thematic analysis, this thesis explores reflexivity and social work praxis. Specifically, it illuminates the phenomenon of reflexivity and its related themes; reflexivity's multiple meanings, challenges and enabling factors, its link to internal processes, rationale for usage and timeliness of inquiry. The multiple ways that practitioners engage in reflexive inquiry was revealed through dyadic interviews. However, current literature does not reflect this and the breadth and scope of reflexive inquiry is lost within contemporary social work discourse. Therefore, this thesis puts forth multiple definitions of reflexivity, which broaden the scope of reflexive inquiry, contextualize its usage and highlight its indications. The first group of definitions, efficacious, exigent and entrenched reflexivity are defined in terms of four key components; the reflexivity's focus and center, what the reflexivity seeks and the degree to which reflexivity is utilized as a tool of practice. These definitions shed light on the varying depths of reflexive inquiry. The next group of definitions, extant and revenant reflexivity can serve to highlight to the worker when an experience needs to be reflected upon. The final group of definitions, polycentric and monocentric reflexivity, identify the context in which reflexivity takes place, namely communally or in isolation. The impetus for disseminating these broadened definitions is my belief that their incorporation into contemporary social work discourse and utilization as a required tool of practice will further promote the integration and support of the dual existences of the professional and personal selves; that their procurement into practitioner pedagogy will lead to dedicated space within the practice setting that enables one to be an emotional being, complete with emotional realities while simultaneously coexisting as a social worker, complete with social work related realities. I believe this will result in increased efficiency and productivity to serve and care for our clients, as well as increased worker health and wellbeing, to serve and care for ourselves.

Dedication

My MSW journey and this thesis, is dedicated to Penny.

For the hope that was never revealed.
For the dreams you never dreamt.
For the little life you lived.
Unlike this story,
Which will come to an end,
You will live on,
In my heart.

Though you never were,
You will always be.

*Love,
Mom*

Statue: Grieving a Possibility
By: Aisha V. Applewhaite

All lovely things will have an ending,
All lovely things will fade and die;
And youth, that's now so bravely spending,
Will beg a penny by and by.

Conrad Aiken (Novelist and poet)

Acknowledgements

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I would also like to thank those who agreed to engage in conversations over coffee for interviews. Without your time and openness, this project would not have been possible.

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To each of the above, I extend my deepest gratitude and appreciation.

Merci Buckets!

Table of Contents

Prelude
You, Me, Shakespeare and All That Jazz

Hi There. I'm torn about having this conversation with you. Part of me thinks

I should, and part of me doesn't. When weighing my options and searching for

words to explain my conundrum, an old favourite, Hamlet's Soliloquy by

Shakespeare, popped into my mind. And so, with his help, I will begin explaining my

train of thought to you.

To explain, or not to explain, that is my question:
Whether 'tis Nobler in the mind to suffer
The Slings and Arrows of critics of autoethnography,
Or to take Arms against a Sea of troubles,
(and potential major re-writes and delayed graduation)
And by prefacing, end them: to sleep, to rest
So close; and by a sleep, to say we end
The stress headaches, and the many grey hairs
That Flesh is heir to? 'Tis graduation
Devoutly to be wished. To rest to sleep,
To sleep, perchance to Dream; Ay, there's the rub,
For in that rest of sleep, what dreams may come,
When I have shuffled through my presentation notes,
Must give me pause. I'm seeking the respect
That acknowledgement of the academic rigor brings:
For who would bear the Whips and Scorns of major revisions,
The student's wrong? The professor's Contumely?
The pangs of rejected success, the graduation's delay,
The insolence of my response, and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
When I myself might my quietus make
With simple apologia? Who would blame me,
To grunt and sweat under another pen,
But that the dread of something after defense,
The undiscovered freedom, from whose bourn
No student returns, Puzzles the will,
And makes me rather bear those ills I have,
Than stand silently supporting the methodology that many know not of.
Thus not prefacing my work make Cowards of...just me,
And thus I must begrudgingly explain that I am a storyteller

> I am a writer, with the pale cast of thought,
> And while I should believe in this methodology,
> With its ability to stand on it's own, I turn awry,
> And lose the name of confidence. Soft you now,
> The fair Aisha? You are not a sell-out
> Be all my sins remembered.

Loosely translated, this passage suggests that I feel prefacing my work with an explanation that I am using autoethnography weakens the methodology before the reader is given a chance to fully experience its academic merit. Would I do this if I were using a positivist approach? I say nay! Is this somehow connected to a potential patriarchal oppressiveness of the academy? Perhaps, but this conversation isn't the venue for that discussion.

 I believe my methodology, as I engaged with it, *is* academically rigorous, and therefore prefacing my thesis with an explanation of what kind of methodology I am using feels apologetic, as if I am preemptively assuming I will need to argue the merits of my work. That being said, while I am honored to be working with this research, using autoethnography, I want to move on! This tension between my personal desire to appease the academy through additional explanation and my professional desire to prove to the academy the merits of this work by allowing it to stand on its own, highlights the struggle between the personal and professional selves that permeates my research. Ironically, this tension was also felt between my supervisor and I as we negotiated the amount of myself to include within this piece, ensuring that my personal self didn't outweigh the professional and academic purpose of this exercise. I don't have an explanation, or a lovely ribbon to tie around

this complex relationship dynamic. All I can do is illuminate it, put it out there and reap the consequences or rewards. Happy Reading!

Preface (Introduction)

Standing in the middle of my tiny studio apartment on the 24th level, floor to ceiling windows frame the blackening lake and provide a striking background for the downtown city lights and the concrete peduncle of the CN Tower. I think back on how I came to be here. I slide the 19 boxes across the hardwood strip floor trying to implement some tangible feeling of order in my otherwise disordered life. "How can all my worldly possessions fit into 19 cardboard cubes?" I wonder, absentmindedly placing my feet on walls as leverage to help me shift the 4 largest of the boxes towards where my bed will be. I chuckle out loud as I realize I have created a headboard out of my boxes of books; cubes of cardboard containing insights into every nook and cranny of my mind. Spirited tales of love and heartache, textbooks on the criminal and devious minds, political theory, bioethical inquiry and social work monographs…all weaving a tapestry, which speaks to my ontological and epistemological stances, in a strangely unique hermeneutic circle. I can see by the progression of the books, I've always been on a contemplative quest for knowledge, seeking some ultimate truth or meaning.

Two images come to mind; a sandbox fight I tried to mediate when I must have been 3 or 4 and a vivid memory of a young me, my fat little four year old legs swinging off a park bench, staring up at my mother asking "why mom?" She tells me

she replied "why what honey?" and I responded, "Why are we living?" It's been clear

from an early age that a search for meaning and social justice is an inextricable part

of me. I didn't realize however that at almost every crossroad or challenge or

triumph I experienced, social work was there. Not officially mind you, not a person

or a place or a thing, but rather the learning *of* social work was there. I ponder this

reality for a while and shift my focus back to the present where, gazing around my

new humble abode, two thoughts come to mind. Firstly, given my recollections,

apparently I've been on the job training since I was a tot, destined to become a social

worker and secondly, given my tiny surrounding, apparently social workers really

are underpaid!

My mattress and bedframe won't be delivered for a couple days, so I pull out

my air mattress and search for the pump. I'm reminded of the first time this

mattress was unpacked, a joint effort on a camping trip almost a year into our

relationship. Young. Naïve. In love. Excited about the prospect of spending more

than a few hours together. It would bring conversations until the dawn and climbing

up to a rocky peak, overlooking the bay, sipping coffee from a thermos, arm-in-arm,

and watching the sunrise.

"There it is!" I chime, spotting the pump, unraveling the thick black cork and

clicking on the switch. With surprising force and persistence, air floods into the

mattress, filling its pockets and space with substantiated firmness. And as air floods

the mattress, I remember the last time it was used. Inflated on the cold, hard

concrete floor of the unfinished basement, as far away from him and us as I could

get. Yes, as the air floods the mattress, all which led up to that day, all of the

memories come flooding back.

It was a day unlike any other. Cold, biting air and tropical blue skies that were

painfully reminiscent of a trip to the Mayan Riviera, maliciously reminding me how

cold it really was.   I entered the large correctional facility, passing through the

scanner waiting for each barred slider to open and shut, foreshadowing my journey

into the pit of the jail. 1200 men awaiting trial or transfer, 4 social workers doing

the work that 5 were supposed to do, which in and of itself was a monumental

workload. The job was rendered to little more than an answering service,

responding to various inmate requests. Social Work was locked on the other side of

freedom and didn't exist within these walls.

My practicum supervisor, just two years out of her BSW, was overworked,

exhausted and outrageously embittered by the system. In the beginning we spoke

about the inability for social work to really exist within the construct of the Ministry

of Corrections, the dual role we must play bowing to the powers of the correctional

officers, belittling and mocking ourselves to steal a moment away with an inmate to

do an assessment or referral to psychiatrist or healthcare. It was a morbid joke.

I was a quick learner and sooner than later was seeing my own units of

inmates, doing my own parole assessments and co-facilitating a grief and loss group.

A few days after I began, another social worker left and we covered the abandoned

units; I carried a load, my supervisor carried a load and we only saw each other in

palliative rounds or special needs rounds once a week. I remember trying to speak

with her once about feelings I had regarding one particular situation. She laughed

and simply said, "that's the way it is in corrections, it's not for everybody, but if you

can make it here, you can make it anywhere".   And I wanted to make it.

    We arranged for me to carry several inmates for one-on-one sessions and

meet with them ongoing. That first meeting, with that first client was the day unlike

any other.   The day was fresh and so was I. I had prepared, I knew the inmate's file,

I had researched his mental health conditions, I was versed on abusive men, men

who were abused who abuse, men who are in denial of their abuse, men who accept

their abuse. I was ready. Down the long hall, through the sliders, past the desk, into

the program room. I sat, my back closest to the wall and farthest from the door,

where you are taught to sit closest to the blue emergency button that one pushes to

initiate a code blue; every available officer in the building, come…now.

    The guard brought him in - my first client…ever. Large. Piercing eyes. Orange

Jumpsuit. Locked Door. No More Guard. Alone. Sitting. "Hello Miss" and a sly,

devious smile. The conversation unwound itself like wallpaper being pulled from a

wall. Slow, sticky, hard, tearing away layers that you didn't even know existed. It

was a game he played because he liked to play with women. But I knew. And I

didn't play. I was prepared; I was calm and even toned. And he…grew…angry. I

didn't flinch when he moved hands in quickly or head in fast or fist onto table. It

was all an act, bravado. I knew where the blue button was. I was safe; after all, I was

calm and evenly toned. I was prepared. I don't even really remember my rationale,

I'm sure it was some sad sob bleeding heart idealized notion that if I stood by through the rage, we would be able to work through his pain. What I should have done was gotten 'the hell out of dodge'! But. If I could make it here, I could make it anywhere. And I wanted to make it.

The session lasted 45 minutes or so. I got up, moved around him to knock on the door, returned to my seat and we waited. Both of us knowing that if the guard wasn't there already, that meant he had left his post and the inmate and I were just two people locked in a room and the closest person was farther away than they were mandated to be, on the other side of a camera. I don't know how long we waited. The guard returned. Standing. Orange Jumpsuit. Unlocked Door. Sly, devious smile. "Have a good day Miss." And just like that, He was gone and I was through the program room, past the desk, through the sliders, down the long hall and into the washroom, where I miscarried.

Inside, it turned out, I hadn't been calm, I hadn't been prepared but even I wasn't aware of that. There was no time for preparatory supervisory conversations or reflexive inquiry, it was too busy, there were too many clients and we were far too overworked. And besides, if the language of real self-reflection doesn't exist within the greater social work discourse, how could it possibly exist behind the bars. The jail was merely the place where it came to die.

My partner, Bryan and I arrived home from the hospital. I was deflated, dejected, feeling as if I had failed my only opportunity at procreation, knowing that in a sense, I had. Bryan and I talked for hours. We decided to name the baby Penny,

as that was the size they were when they died. Finally we were able to sleep. But hurt masked as conflict and anger reared its ugly head, and after a day or so I moved into the basement, filling my air mattress while draining my womb and deflating my heart.

BANG! I am instantly aware of the rapid increase in my heart rate; eyes wide, stiffening body, fear… "what was that" I wonder and then deep breathe in and release slowly. The air mattress had overfilled and popped. It now laying withered in front of me, mirroring my now weary self. I shut off the pump and settle onto the couch with a steaming mug of Irish cream café au late. Sipping and remembering, breathing deeply and settling the uneasiness that had crept into me like a shadow encroaching up a dusty brick wall. Yes, my experience in the jail affected the core of my being, and illuminated the intersection of one's personal and professional realms. It highlighted for me the need to have space to engage in…what? Thought? Recollection? My practicum experiences at the jail informed much of my writing and research during my Master of Social Work courses. I search through a box marked "writing", pull out a couple of papers and settle into the embrace of my café au late and my comfy couch, looking forward to reminding myself of what my take on reflexivity in writing was so many moons ago…

Reflexivity's Existing Construct:
A Stroll Down Penny Lane
(Literature Review)

I didn't realize it then, but the experiential research for my thesis began in the wake of Penny's death, as I returned to the cold, concrete halls of the correctional facility. My field-notes were timecards that showed later arrivals and departures which spoke of an unrealized desire to avoid coming into work and a guilt filled inability to leave early, emails that requested time away from the facilitation of the grief and loss group because I couldn't bare helping other's deal with their feelings when I was left in such cold isolation, three face-to-face requests to delay subsequent sessions with my first client, and the tear-stained pillow cases that held proof of my isolated mourning. My supervisor never asked how I was or if being back was uncomfortable. In fact beyond my phone-call to her after returning from the hospital, explaining Penny's death and requesting two days off, we only acknowledged what happened once, when I asked to leave early one afternoon the following week for another ultrasound to make sure all of Penny's remains had left me. "Do what you need to do," She replied.

Logically, I knew that I should be processing my pain and engaging in a reflexive, healing inquiry where reflexivity is defined as the ability of humans to look back (reflect) on the past, or more deeply, the self-conscious awareness that reflects back over what has happened so as to extract meaning (Dewey, 1938). From what

I've read, it appears that self-awareness and reflexivity are used interchangeably, or given the fused blanket term reflexive self-awareness (Adams, 2003; Aron, 2000) however for me, these are two very distinct terms. For me, self-awareness is being consciously aware of the self: the body, the feeling and thinking brains. Whereas reflexivity is connected to a search for meaning from within one's self, within one's heart and psyche, a search to understand.   But my stripped reality of social work within the correctional facility left me in functioning numbness, seeking neither feeling nor understanding. How could I engage in reflexive inquiry knowing that I did not have the support systems in place to move through the potential emotions revealed through that reflexivity? With ironic serendipity, Penny's death had birthed my thesis question over a year later, which was only strengthened by my desire to gain meaning from an otherwise miserable situation. When Ife (1999) suggested that "daily personal survival" is the only reward for the individual practitioner, he inadvertently highlighted an important fact: a social worker cannot thrive or engage in reflective practice when the only reward for work is surviving the work itself. In fact, merely surviving the work precludes higher functioning activities like processing feeling and engaging in reflexive inquiry. For me, the jail was a practice setting that stifled healing by necessitating the avoidance of emotion. I would come to realize that healing was a luxury I wouldn't be afforded for quite some time. Reflecting back, I am aware of the tensions that existed for me within my experience. I was pulled between my professional self as a social worker that engaged in an emotionally volatile situation and between my personal self as a

woman who lost a child in a traumatic way, which was embedded into my practice experience. The interconnection between my professional and personal selves was unavoidable and yet working through that propinquity was avoided. It is apparent to me now that my practice was impacted by personal trauma, and while I recognize that my supervisor's role wasn't as therapist, I have questions. How could she have helped me navigate the intertwined reality of my personal and professional self? Given this particular setting, given that I had this crisis, what was the role of my supervisor? Was it to point me to where I could seek support? Was it to get me to a place where I felt more comfortable and strong, able to go back to the front line requirements of the position? Shouldn't there have been a debriefing after my first client? There wasn't a time or space set-aside at the end of that day to reflect on and engage in a learning opportunity about what had happened. For me as a social work student on placement in that particular practice setting, it would appear that self-reflexivity was a bourgeoisie activity that could not exist in the proletariat world of social work.

We have been constructed from our past and present realities. We are a product of who we have been and where we were being. For me, becoming a social worker was a culmination of societal, familial, inter-relational and personal discourses and experiences. I view it as an identity; some view it as a cloak. It can be both or neither. It has been said that many come to the helping profession as the "wounded healer", a concept discussed by many including Guy (1987) and Scott &

Hawk (1986), who suggest that negative experiences in childhood enable the

therapist to identify with the problems of their clients and relate to them in an

empathic manner. In fact statistically, "female therapists report significantly higher

rates of physical abuse, sexual molestation, parental alcoholism or hospitalization of

a parent for mental illness than do women in other professions" (Elliot, D and Guy, J.,

1993 p. 4). This might be due to the internalization of caretaking role through a

parentification of the childhood therapist. Either way, it isn't unfair to say that each

of us brings a past history of positive and negative memories, small and large

traumas and intrapsychic jumping jacks to our work. All things that may "trigger

us", leading to the collision of our personal past with our professional present. For

me, I think these experiences contribute to my greater empathetic abilities; to an

increased awareness and attunement to the people I serve. Perhaps these

experiences lend to insight, drive and motivation for success. Regardless, the

experiences of our past contribute to the construction of our present, a lesson I

learned harshly while a student. As much as I would have liked, we cannot be

removed from who we were. In truth, some of my experiences were pushed down,

forgotten, repressed, rendered inaccessible because I had moved on, or so I thought.

I realize now that the pain of my past had left me disconnected from my experiential

reality leaving me unable to recognize my own distress with that first client. My lack

of self-awareness contributed to not allowing myself to heal and note engaging in

reflexive inquiry. And thus the need for self-awareness and reflexivity is born.

  If only... So many sentences about Penny start this way. If only I had of

known, if only I had of been more in tune with my body, if only I had been prompted

to examine myself in the context of client/worker relations by my social work

teachers and placement supervisor. But, if they had of said "pay attention to your

body, it may give you clues about your wellbeing during a session", would I have

known what to pay attention to? Would the tension in my stomach or raising body

temperature have let me know I was in a situation that was volatile or that I felt

unsafe in?

Social Work's scope of practice includes the assessment…treatment and

evaluation… through the use of social work knowledge, skills, interventions and

strategies" (Code of Ethics, 2008). My skills, interventions and strategies were

developed through my formal and informal education and practicums. Implied in

the development of these, is a significant degree of self-awareness (Gardner, 2001).

Unfortunately for me, implication didn't necessitate reality as had developed strong

skills, according to the Code of Ethics, but I hadn't required a significant degree of

self-awareness to do so. I was able to understand self-awareness in a logical sense

but didn't need to transcend that to anything deeper or connect it to anything about

my wellbeing. Instead, self-awareness as I understood it, was a process engaged in to

benefit the client. And why wouldn't I think that? As many say, it is imperative that

social workers are aware of how their own attitudes, values and personal issues may

affect their work with patients and clients (Gardner, 2001, O'Connor et al., 1995;

Fook, 1993; Compton & Galaway, 1994). As such, when I began my placement in the

correctional facility, my supervisor and I had a lengthy conversation about bias and

how each inmate deserved to be treated fairly and with respect, despite their

charges and/or convictions. I completely agreed with this sentiment and had

examined in depth my motivation for choosing a correctional facility as an

practicum; I was interested in working with a variety of populations ranging from

those with mental health issues, to those who engage in domestic violence all within

a broad range of diverse ages, ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. I was aware of

my motivation for placing myself in that environment, but wasn't aware of the

potential impact of that environment on me. I had apparently engaged in a depth of

self-awareness that the scholars deem is appropriate.

Self-awareness (i.e. being aware of the "self" in practice situations) has been

encouraged as a practice principle since the professionalization of social work

(Kondrat, 1999). In my experience however, I was neither encouraged to be self-

aware of my self, nor was I encouraged to reflect on, let alone speak about,

professional incidences that affected both my professional and personal self. Indeed,

professional self-awareness is generally accepted as a necessary practice for

competent social work (Hepworth et al., 1997; Lammert, 1986; Sheafor et al.; 1994,

Kondrat, 1999). Engaging in the process of self-reflection, being self-aware, is done

to ensure optimal service delivery; acknowledging the subjective and objective parts

of oneself where the subject-self is who reflects and the object-self is the focus of

reflection (Kondrat, 1999). There was an expectation that I remain objective when

examining my practice interactions, social location, and attitude, not only while

working within the correctional facility, but in every practice setting. To be honest, I

had to check my subjectivity on a daily basis in the jail. I was working with men who

were charged with horrific crimes, but I knew that as a social worker, I was charged

with "increasing the distance between the reflecting-self and object-self and to

reduce any negative impact of the subjective self on the practice setting" (Kondrat,

1999 p. 6). It is precisely this reason that many textbooks advise social work

students to become aware of their values, needs, and biases in order to serve clients

more objectively and consciously (Kondrat, 1999).   Until my experience with Penny,

it appeared as if I was the poster-child for textbook self-awareness.   Could

something then be lacking in the way I was indoctrinated to view self-awareness?

Indoctrination into the social work profession is contextualized within the

dominant socio-political perspective of the day. One of the processes of

indoctrination into the social work profession begins in school and is indicated by

the mandate, mission and value of the individual school of social work itself. As

example, the philosophy of the School of Social Work McMaster University states:

> "As social workers, we operate in a society characterized by
> power imbalances that affect us all. These power imbalances
> are based on age, class, ethnicity, gender identity, geographic
> location, health, ability, race, sexual identity and income. We
> see personal troubles as inextricably linked to oppressive
> structures. We believe that social workers must be actively
> involved in the understanding and transformation of
> injustices in social institutions and in the struggles of people
> to maximize control over their own lives."

Indeed, one of the aims of social work teaching is to increase self-awareness

(Moffatt, 1994) by being able to reflect, in the moment, on how power held by both

the social worker and societal structures effects the client. As a social work student

in school, I was trained to be aware of my social location in order to best serve the

client. As a student on placement in the jail, I was trained to be aware of my social

location, the space I occupied, in order to get my job done, without annoying the

guards or aggravating the inmates. I was never taught to talk about, let alone reflect

on my experiences with the inmates or the power imbalances that were birthed

inside a locked room where neither I nor the inmate could leave without someone

else turning a key, a room where the inmate was larger and stronger than I was and

could potentially have been awaiting a sentence of life in prison (25 years),

regardless of his interactions with me. In the context of my practice in the jail, I was

alone with my fear and sadness, unable to process the power imbalances I

experienced.

 I remember returning to my concrete nightmare, turning down the hallway to

my office that stood next to the washroom where only three days prior I had

inadvertently flushed a part of my baby down the toilet. I froze in front of the

washroom door. I can remember smelling the disinfectant chemical cleaner wafting

up along the floor and wondering how I was going to make it through the remaining

months of my placement. The field coordinator at my school was so overwhelmed

and overworked herself, that I had researched, interviewed and chosen placements

on my own, without advice and I didn't know how I could possibly find another one

now, mid-way through term. I'm not sure how long I stood there, eyes on the door

of Penny's watery grave, but I was brought back from my thoughts as the loud click,

clack of my supervisor's high heeled shoes came down the hall. "Come find me

later," she said with an eerily familiar smirk. I tried twice, but each time she was on

a smoke break and the next time we connected was in Special Needs rounds another

day. This experience raised questions for me. If, as a student on placement I was in

need of discussion and reflection about my practice experiences but was unable to

seek this out, would hired social workers have these needs met? Would time and

space, or even opportunity be available to support the importance of reflexivity in

practice?

Looking back now, I realize that in the jail, emotion or expression of feeling

was something that was only talked about in relation to the inmates. I recall my

supervisor explaining that we weren't able to have any deep or meaningful

therapeutic exchanges with the inmates because if they experienced emotion during

the session it might show when they arrived back on the range and they would most

likely be attacked and beaten up for it. So early in my placement I was indoctrinated

into the culture within corrections that was constructed to view emotion, especially

expression of feeling as weak and necessarily avoidable because of threatening

consequences, either to one's physical self or reputation.   While the depth of

anguish and heartache I experienced personally seemed unbearable, within the jail

there was no space to feel that pain, to mourn my loss, or engage in a reflexive

conversation. My professional reality and my personal existence were colliding, but

there was no space to discuss this. I was concerned my supervisor may view me as

weak or unfit to "make it" in that environment. The jail was unquestionably a highly

charged yet impassive environment, which seemed to obey a code of silence, where

showing emotion was frowned upon. This inability to engage in dialogue and reflect

openly had professional and personal consequences for me. Shouldn't there be a

space within the practice setting that enables one to be an emotional being,

complete with emotional realities while simultaneously coexisting as a social

worker, complete with work related realities? If one is to do this work, shouldn't

there be a way to address and work through the inevitable intersecting realities of

the professional and personal realms?

     Instead, I walked into my office, finding more files on my desk, clicked on my

computer, and clicked off my heart.   It was easier to focus on the work because as a

social worker, especially in a correctional facility of 1200 inmates, I was completely

overburdened. I realize now that work served as an easy distraction because I didn't

have the words or emotion to grieve or reflect, in part, because I didn't have the

skillset to fully connect to the internal processing of my experience; I wasn't aware

of my lacking self-awareness. I wonder though, where was I supposed to learn that?

Would engaging in reflexive practice supported by my supervisor have contributed

to my increasing self-awareness? Moreover, how is self-awareness encouraged in

practice settings? Whose job is this?

     My experience in school was that self-awareness had only been taught, or at

the very least was typically stressed, in relation to the client. That is, the self is often

defined in light of the self's impact on the client. But shouldn't we be taught to understand ourselves? Shouldn't we be taught to gain awareness of ourselves and be given the skills to internally assess our health and wellbeing in light of the client's impact on us? Surely there are places where this occurs, but it wasn't my experience. Shouldn't I have learned that a client/worker interaction is mutually impactful? Perhaps, but as is often the case in social work, time was crunched. I was in the midst of a 4 year BSW that I was completing in 12 months. How could they possibly fit in another class? Even if I was given an option, I'm not sure I would have taken it because I didn't understand the impact of such a lesson, and was already completely exhausted in the program as it was. Thus, for myself and for many, it's easy to avoid true self-awareness, so long as the appropriate discourse of one's particular agency and the larger social work community are placated. We can see this in terms of anti-oppressive practice, for example. I can gaze inwardly, ensuring that I am aware of power imbalances and oppressive structures of society and ensure that I am encouraging the minimization of their impact indirectly on my client, or directly through my own biases and beliefs. It is easy to understand the big "isms" of the day; to have awareness of racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, ableism etc. and check myself against these in a sort of ethical litmus test. But where are the ethics for the social worker? Shouldn't there be an ethics of reflection because isn't engaging in reflexive inquiry part of ethical practice?

Social work students are indoctrinated with the language to be able to work within a climate of acceptance and to be self-aware enough to recognize their own

values and beliefs so that they do not unethically impact the client or the therapeutic relationship. Why then aren't we taught to examine the ironic antithesis of this reality; how does the client affect the social worker? As social workers we are socialized in school to be empathetic, to do emotionally exhausting work. Why are we told to engage in self-care, but aren't told how to identify specific areas of our inner being that will require heightened self-awareness and self-care? In many ways, we are set up to fail. Current social work literature frequently mentions the importance of social workers recognizing their social location in challenging racial, class, gender, heterosexual, and ableist structures of domination (Heron, 2005). Ironically the emphasis on self-reflection has placed focus onto 'the other', reflecting only on the part of the self that affects the client. Have we forgotten to reflect on the part of the client that affects the self? Maybe, but instead, I think we've just lost the language to really be reflexive with a client…or maybe we've just run out of time.

As social workers we are trained to perch atop our wall of education and gaze upon the world; cocooned by the pedagogical thoughts, which we have internalized, informed by the societally constructed realities that we absorb through discourse osmosis as we preen in our chrysalides of language. Like good scholars, we examine our social location, values, biases and prejudices and check check check mark them off with a keen precision, like threading a needle, embodying the duty of benevolence; refusing the "interlocking relations of power" (Heron, 2005 p. 341), critically examining ourselves, to ensure we can serve our clients as free from

oppressive imposition as is possible. With obedience, we are cognizant of the world

around us; the space we fill, the power we wield, the structures we work within.

Yes, we have been successfully indoctrinated into a discourse of professionalization

substantiated by "awareness". How lovely...for our clients.

Propelled to explore deeper into the notions of self-awareness and reflexivity,

I've begun questioning some ideas. Does critical reflection on our own experiences

serve to get us unstuck as Napier & Fook (2000) suggest? In my experience, yes it

does, but critical reflection is a marathon that follows the first step of internal self-

awareness. How is it possible that the intimate process of reflexivity is exploited and

charged with the task of contributing to new social possibility, through subjectivity

(Miehls and Moffatt, 2000 p. 343), rather than being free to aid in the development

of self-awareness? It would seem that even if we did have the internal processes to

engage in self-awareness or reflexive inquiry, some would prefer if we absconded

our personal gains and shifted focus back onto the external. Isn't that what caused

my problem in the first place? Yes, but the ethically questionable reality of social

work practice is that the contradictory experience of policy and practice, the neo-

liberalized time crunch, which most social workers live within, does not allow for

the luxury of gazing introspectively; it's about getting the job done. A hazard of the

social work profession is that there is often not a built in space to allow for

meaningful reflexivity within oneself. Given my experience, there isn't enough time

to engage in Mandell's "heuristic process of asking oneself (or being asked)

questions" (2008 p. 240). Rather, "managerialism...downsizing personnel...the

mixed economy…and the devaluing of the social work role" (Noble, 2004 p. 294),

leave no time for an "expanded use of self" (Mandell, 2008 p.240) or engaging in any

type of reflexivity. Once I walked through the first set of sliders and began my

descent into the jail, there was no room for my person. I became a body that could

complete parole assessments effectively, moving paper and inmates from one

position to another, while dancing to the tune written by the correctional officers. If

they wanted to leave me sitting in a locked room with an inmate, no guard on the

other side of the glass for protection, then that is what they did. There wouldn't be

repercussions because there wasn't an understanding of what it was like to be a

woman locked in a glass cell with a man who was becoming increasingly agitated

and violent. There wasn't a forum for discussion because my supervision, as is quite

typical, did not transcend anything deeper than mere caseload management,

discussions regarding solutions to "stubborn" inmates and shifting beds. There

wasn't even room for macro discussions of funding or research grants.

And, of course, the increasing number of clients plays right into the maternal

discourse that so easily plagues the profession: put everyone else before yourself or,

spatted more ostensibly "you're not a good social worker (i.e. mother) unless

everyone else is taken care of!" Thomas M. Skovholt, author of The Resilient

Practitioner (2001 p. 1), offers:

"Exhausted when saying yes, guilty when saying no — it is
between giving and taking, between other-care and self-care.
This is the universal dilemma in the human drama. It is just more
intense for those in the high touch fields. It gets highly
illuminated when intense interaction is the occupational core.
Here, giving of oneself is the constant requirement for success.
Caring for others is the precious commodity."

I felt the pull of this sentiment each time my supervisor asked if I was going to see

my first inmate again. I'd politely ask to delay and she'd quip, "see, that's why we

can't do one-on-ones in here, we're too busy and can't guarantee we'll see the inmate

when we schedule the appointment," leaving me feeling guilty for trying to fulfill a

requirement of my practicum and more guilty for avoiding the inmate because of my

personal experiences. That I didn't want to see him because I was struggling

separating him, his large looming frame, and sly devious smile from the intricacies of

loosing my child, went unsaid-I never acknowledged, she never asked and I

swallowed my increasing guilt that I was avoiding a client who could potentially

benefit from sessions. Regardless of the loss of Penny, processing, reflecting and

talking about my experience with this inmate was crucial. The experience was

emotionally charged and full of practice and procedural questions. What do I do

when an inmate/client becomes violent? What do I do if the guards aren't at their

post when I'm trying to leave? Rather than outwardly gain answers to these

questions, I internally questioned myself. Why did I feel a need to work with this

inmate further? Did I arrogantly think I could "save" him? Why did I feel I should

put myself into an uncomfortable, potentially emotionally damaging situation, just because the inmate needed it? This self-sacrificing sentiment seems to be multiplied when social workers receive wage for work that was historically volunteer. It is almost as if the societal expectation to "care" unconditionally, as if our job is defined solely in emotionality, even to the potential detriment of oneself, is underscored, a la Machiavelli, by acceptance of a wage. Moreover, even if the realization occurs that one needs to seek external help, many benefit plans do not cover psychotherapy or social work, so often workers are left with Short Term Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services or a referral to a psychiatrist, who may or may not be focused on medication/behavior management and may/or may not engage in therapy, per se. As a student on placement, I didn't have access to the Ministry's EAP and my school's benefits didn't cover any external counseling at all. My only option was seeing someone at student services, which was a 90-minute drive away and gave me an appointment over 5 weeks later. Caught up in everything, I forgot to attend and the entire appointment had slipped my mind until I was invoiced for the missed meeting. Thinking back, I'm not sure what supports I would have needed to deal with the practice situation of a first client being increasingly violent, even in the absence of my personal trauma. Doesn't this kind of emotionally charged work require a space to seek support, particularly as a student who had never done this before? I didn't realize that the cost of a social work education was so much more than just a Penny.

So, I've rattled on about the innate problem of our indoctrination into the social work profession. Where women used to be defined in light of their position relative to men, now social workers (ironically largely a female dominated profession), are defined and thus reflected upon, in light of their relation to the client. A changing clinical discourse from Freudian and the analytic to postmodern and that which is constructed (Kondrat, 1999), marks this shift. Prior to social science research's 'reflexive turn' in the 1970's, many social work academics and clinicians expressed the imperative need for 'reflexive awareness of the self' as integral to competent social work with clients (Kondrat, 1999). The impact on the clinician of the therapeutic relationship was written into the very definitions of the language that marked the times, which necessitated the clinician examining themselves deeply; 'transference', 'countertransference', and 'defense mechanisms' implied a reflexivity whereby the clinician had to consider "how the self of the clinician, formed through early life experiences, contributed to clinical perception and judgments as well as, in part, to the behaviors and reactions of the other person"(Kondrat, 1999, p.9). In this traditional approach to practice, clinician responses to the client were understood, at least in part, to be reactions to aspects of the clinician-self (Kondrat, 1999). Therefore, clinicians were advised to use professional supervision and therapy to become increasingly self-aware (Kondrat, 1999). Unfortunately though, "the construct of 'use of self' in social work has fallen out of favour due to its focus on the individual and its very roots in the original countertransference literature, where issues of power were largely neglected"

(Mandell 2008, p. 1). The replacing structural, anti-oppression and critical social work have tended towards disregarding the clinician's personhood, necessarily deleting a place for self-awareness/reflection except for social identity as they focus on issues of power (Mandell, 2008). This downsizing of language results in a chasm "in our understanding of how personal and social selves interact in social work encounters" (Mandell 2008, p.1). For me, supervision and access to counseling has been eaten away by neoliberalism's hungry bite and I, like many social workers, was left to fend for myself. The contrasting modern clinical social work language, which includes contemporary terms like 'narrative', 'deconstruction' and 'text' does not necessarily require or allow a space for clinician focus beyond examination of their function in oppressive societal structures. In many instances, the social workers feelings, experiences and reactions have been removed from clinical discourse. So yes, an idea of reflexivity exists, but for me, within the concrete walls of the jail, it was completely inaccessible and systematically deconstructed to a point where my need for it meant that I was weak and ill suited to the profession because remember, if I could make it there, I could make it anywhere.

Getting Past the Literature (Reflections)

I allow the pages of various papers to fall back upon themselves as I finish the last sips from my mug. Staring out of my window, the indigo sky having faded to a vapid blackness, the CN tower erect, shining ice blue like an electric eel. I feel hollow, confused, like I took a scenic train ride through winding country-side, expecting to

get off at my predetermined destination, only to descend the stairs and halt on a

platform in a place I didn't know existed. How did I get here? I wonder. I remember

being in a place where my own lack of self-awareness, compounded by a stifling

neoliberal regime of cost cutting, managerialism, and a shifted function of

supervision had left me penny-less. I understand the intricacies of being a social

worker, expected to be self-aware and reflexive in a highly pressurized and

oftentimes emotionally charged environment. I know first-hand the detriment to

one's self when we are not supported when "life happens" and there is no supportive

workspace where social workers can reflect on the messiness, challenges and

struggle of the work or engage in dialogue about the reciprocal impact of the work

on the self and the self on the work. These thoughts left me with more questions.

Have other social workers experienced a realization or awakening like mine? Did

self-awareness and reflexivity play a role in some personal understanding or growth

for them? How? What was it? I wanted to hear other people's stories.

Research with Heart (Theoretical Framework and Methodology)

  The chiming tune from my buzzing phone brings me back from my mind.

"Hello?" I ask into my cell and we begin sharing general updates about our day.

  "So what are you up to?" Bryan asks.

  "Not much" I reply "Just thinking about my research". And for a second I

wonder why I said 'not much', when really, it's a whole lot to me!

"Cool, tell me about it. What were you thinking?" Bryan asks, intuitively knowing that if I said 'not much', it must mean 'yup, there's more', which makes me smile.

"Well, I was thinking about the conversations I'd like to have with other social workers. Ask them what reflexivity means to them; do they use it in their practice? If so, how? Do they have support systems to help them through the processes of reflexivity? See if they've had realizations or moments in their work that have stuck with them, or experiences that taught them something about themselves…" My voice trails off.

"Like us with Penny?" Bryan offers, his voice softening at our memories.

"Yeah" I reply, my tone quickening, ever the power ranger that I am, trying to avoid an outward feeling. Over time, we grieved our loss separately and together; it brought us closer and farther apart. We are comfortable talking about Penny, and do on occasion, but after my evening reflecting on everything, I'm not up for it now and feel a bit of guilt as I shift gears away into a topic nearby, but not spot on. I worry that Bryan may have needed to talk. "I just feel like there are stories out there to be heard and if they hold meaning for one person, they may hold meaning for others. You ok?"
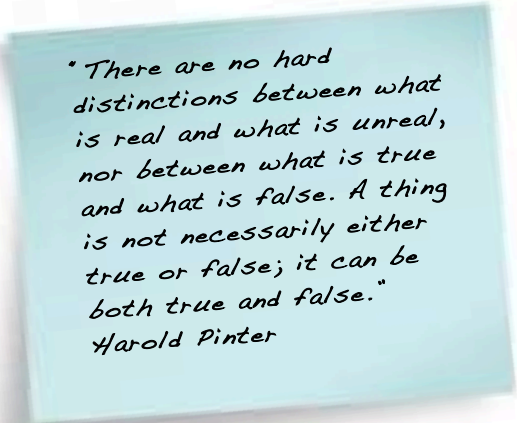
"Yeah, I'm ok. I think you're right though. I'm sure other social workers have experiences they've gone through that have impacted them." Bryan says as a couple post-it notes fall from the pages I'm holding.

"Oops," I say.
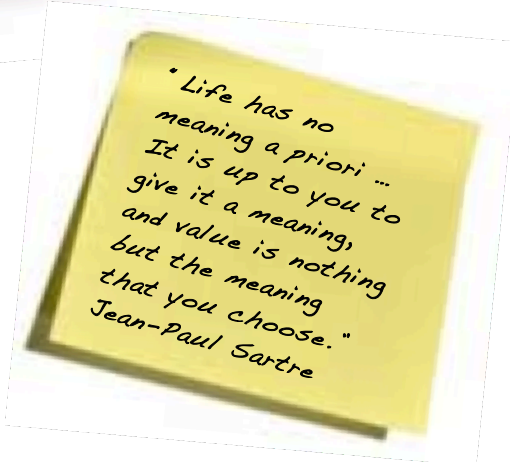
"What are

these?"

"What are

what?"

Chuckling, I

read the post-

its to Bryan.

"There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false." Harold Pinter

"Life has no meaning a priori ... It is up to you to give it a meaning, and value is nothing but the meaning that you choose." Jean-Paul Sartre

"It's funny to me how things fall into place. I'm at a point in my research where I need to firm up my theoretical framework, and these stickies drop out of nowhere!"

"Life happens in mysterious ways," Bryan says. "How does post-modernism link with your research?"

"It's interesting, I was thinking about that the other day. You know my background and me; I think there's a part of me that has historically rejected relativism because I needed an absolute truth. I mean, I almost wonder if subconsciously I believed, believe? In an absolute truth because if I achieved or met

the standards set out by this ultimate truth, I would somehow gain approval or

acceptance or some deeper sense of worth. Who knows? It's far too "existential

CBT" for me right now! These quotes bring me back to the crux of my research

though- social work praxis and reflexivity- and I feel that, perhaps to my potential

chagrin, postmodernism supports my methodology!" I say.

"How so?" Bryan asks

"Well, to me, reflexivity is such a multi-layered word that has different

meaning for different people. In my experience, the standard definition of reflexivity:

looking back on an experience to gain meaning, seems hollow and needs to be

contextualized. I imagine that people's ideas and interpretations of reflexivity

change depending on the space, time and context of the situation, which is a very

postmodern notion. It'll be interesting to see how the multiple and shifting

subjectivities that exist about reflexivity directly influence the constructs of

perception, interpretation, learning (Four Arrows, 2008, p. 53) or perhaps identity

and authenticity."

"I'm excited for you!" Bryan says, "How are you going to do the research?"

"Well, I was thinking about using reflexive dyadic interviews and

autoethnography. I'd really like to learn about others' experience and deconstruct

the reflexive process they engaged in afterwards, learn about how that process lent

itself to a deeper meaning or increased understanding about self." I say, my mind

working on the details of my research in the background of the conversation.

Carolyn Ellis (2004) defines autoethnography as "research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political" (p. xix) and suggests that this methodology is "qualitative that links social science to literature, allowing [the researcher] to view [themselves] as part of the research-sometimes as [the] focus- rather than standing outside of [the research]. Instead of starting with hypotheses, [one] emphasize the writing as a process of discovery" (2004,p. 3).

"Well, that's a mouthful! But it sounds good. So, will you use a questionnaire?" Bryan asks, his genuine interest excites me and urges me on.

"Not really, the reflexive dyadic is more semi-structured. I have some general questions that I think will prompt our conversation along. It makes sense to me that I will start every interview, after discussing consent and all that stuff, with a simple question; what does reflexivity mean to you? After that, the interviews will be pretty organic and I'll ask for them to share their experiences with reflexivity. At some point during the conversation, I will ask if neoliberalism or supervision played a role in their reflexivity. These notions were so intricately connected to my experiences with Penny that I'd like to know about others as well. But really, the other social worker will drive the discussion by what they say and I'll try and hone in on the co-constructed meanings and dynamics within the interview (Ellis, 2004).

"Cool. After the interview, do you write a story about it?" Bryan queries, making me think out loud.

"Sort of...yeah, in a way...the written outcome of an autoethnographic process *is* a kind of a story. Which I think is good because humans are "storytelling

organisms who lead storied lives" (Conelly & Clandinin, 1990 p. 2). So, stories are the way humans make sense of their world...and should be both a subject and method of social science research (Ellis, 2004 p. 32)" An autoethnographic story will allow me to remove some of the power imbalance that exist between the social workers and myself because I'm the "researcher" and they're the "participants". Writing this way frees me to not only include direct quotes, but contextualize the quotes by deconstructing the situation, environment, actions and emotions allowing a deeper understanding of meaning."

"That sounds great. Your writing style is perfect for that! How you kind of write yourself into the piece, weaving personal responses and reflections throughout the pages. Using metaphors and incredible descriptions to look "back at the past through the lens of the present" (Bochner, 2000 p. 270). I can't wait to read it!" Bryan chimes.

"Thanks! I'm excited. I'm hoping that my subjective and emotional reflections will add layers and context to the stories the other social workers are telling (Ellis, 2004).

"In a sense, my experience becomes a topic of investigation, and the writing gets contextualized so it's not like it's being "written from nowhere by nobody " (Ellis & Bochner, 2000 p. 734). I say adding, "So, autoethnography is a type of methodology and a type of writing that connects the personal to the cultural and shows multiple layers of consciousness" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

"OK, it's a methodology where your data comes from the reflexive dyadic interview. how do you analyze that?" Bryan asks.

"I was thinking about that too.   Autoethnography provides a way of observing and interacting with the world, so to analyze everything, I'll have to use an iterative process where ideas that come up in conversations are "transformed, translated, or represented" (Thorne, 2000 p.69) in my writing. I'll sort through all my ethnographic field notes and pick up themes, inconsistencies and contradictions (Thorne, 2000) to help me generate a conclusion about everything."

"It's really neat how you are so focused on representing the participant's stories' authentically. " Bryan says.

"Thanks, co-creating a space where different voices can be heard is important to me...but they're not participants, they're people!" I tease, smiling at how my core beliefs as a researcher pop up every so often.

 "Ha-ha, you used "participant" first" Bryan jokingly goads.

"Touché! Sometimes it's difficult as a researcher to not use traditional terminology, especially when addressing things like power. I guess the key is to be aware of the issues, be able to talk about them in a traditional setting, but use my research and writing as an opportunity to challenge typical academic discourse about research, especially qualitative and interpretive."

"Interesting," Bryan says "it sounds like there are some issues that come up in this type of research."

"Yeah for sure. With autoethnography, there's a whole layer of relational

ethics (Ellis, 2007) surrounding identity and anonymity in the writing. For instance,

I want to share our story with Penny, but that brings up a tension because I'm not

only writing about myself, but about others too, like my supervisor in the jail." I say.

"What's to be done?" Bryan asks.

"I think being aware of the tension is most important. Slattery and Rapp

(2003) discuss these relational ethics and suggest writing in a way that is "true to

one's character and responsible for one's actions and their consequences on

others" (p. 55). Being aware of the tension while valuing "mutual respect, dignity,

and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers

and the communities in which they live and work (Lincoln, 1995, p. 287 in Ellis,

2007; see also Brooks, 2006; Reason, 1993; Tierney, 1993) in important. If I'm

writing with respect of myself and others, I am less likely to cross any boundaries"

"I hear what you're saying," Bryan notes, "it's a difficult task, especially

since some stories are so personal and specific that anyone reading them may be

able to piece together who is in the story, like your supervisor for instance."

"Yes, exactly. And that's why it's so crucial to write autoethnography with a

generous pen, upholding mutual respect and dignity. Honestly, I think this is a

tension in autoethnography that can't be "fixed", rather, as researcher, participant

and writer, I have to merely be aware and respectful of it. Bergum (1998, in Ellis

2007) suggests that a central question to relational ethics is "What should I do now?" rather than the statement "This is what you should do now". I think this speaks to the need for autoethnographers to always be questioning their work, reflecting on its impact and ethical underpinnings from different perspectives." I say, reflecting on my reflections.

"That makes a lot of sense to me," Bryan says, "It also makes me think about ethics and how they apply to the autoethnographer specifically."

"Great point," I say, "you're right. There is a lot to consider when deciding to write autoethnographically. Ellis (1999) has acknowledged the vulnerability experienced by revealing yourself in your writing. There's such a permanency, once something is written and published, it can't be taken back, there's no control over how readers will interpret it and I think there's a fear of being critiqued." I pause, continuing, "I think about Penny and am nervous at people's reactions. What will they think? Will they blame me? Once I write it, it's out there…I can't take it back."

"True," Bryan says. "I support you completely. I trust in you and what you will write. Penny would be proud."

We both pause, drinking in the sound of the others' breathing, reveling in the acceptance of a mutually life changing experience. After some time, "What are ethnographic field notes?" Bryan asks, lovingly shifting focus.

"Ethnographic field notes are basically everything I'll do to gather information (Ellis, 2000). So, email exchanges between myself and the other social workers, my supervisor, classmates, journal entries, interviews, conversations, transcriptions and audio recordings of interviews. Everything! Even this conversation maybe!"

"Fair enough. You know, I'm getting it now. Tell me more about the thematic analysis" Bryan asks

"That's an interesting one. From what I've read, it seems that a lot of people have talked about thematic analysis (Benner, 1985; Leininger, 1985; Taylor & Board, 1984) but I hadn't really come across a "how-to" guide until I read an article called *A Pragmatic View of Thematic Analysis* (Aronson, 1994). Give me a second; I think I have my notes here somewhere. I riffle through my boxes and find my summary of the article.

For Thesis

THEMATIC ANALYSIS
(J. Aronson-1994)

Ideas emerge ->
Need Themes to organize

1. *Collect data (tape interviews, then transcribe)*
2. *List patterns of experience (I think emotions/feelings/movements too)*
3. *Identify all data that relate to classified patterns*
4. *Combine and Catalogue related patterns into subthemes (conversation topics, language, meaning)*
"Themes are identified by "bringing together components or fragments of ideas or experiences, which often are meaningless when viewed alone" (Leininger, 1985, p. 60)

5. *Read literature, relate to themes, develop story (intertwine with literature for more merit?)*

Power…I can minimize my influence on the data and themes by member checking.

"So, I think I'll basically use that process to analyze, but I'll tweak it a bit" I

say, after having gone over the How-to summary I'd made on one of my reading

treks.

"How so?" Bryan replies

"Well, thematic analysis seems really sterile to me. I've chosen

autoethnography specifically because findings take on a much more organic

approach than in other methodologies. I understand knowledge as something co-

constructed between people and within the context of a moment. Something that is

fluid, always changing. Because I view knowledge this way, I value everyone's voice

because we are all contributing to the creation of knowledge, therefore I've picked

autoethnography, where my "data collection" is actually conversations with people

who are co-constructing the findings of the research with me as we talk (Ellis, 2000).

So, as I read and re-read the transcripts of the conversations, I'll begin to notice

words and phrases that emerge. Once I do, I'll look at those similar "themes" and try

and understand what meaning they hold for me. That's my analysis piece. Plus,

discussing the meaning I've found with Saara and the participants will help to

further co-construct meaning."

"You sure are conversing a lot!"

"Yeah I am," I laugh, "In fact, I think I'll call my thesis 'Conversations Over

Coffee'…although that carries cultural connotations with it. To be honest, I'm

nervous the social work department won't feel this project has academic rigor, or even worse that it will be viewed as narcissistic "victim art or confessional" (Bochner, 2000 p. 271). I can feel my heart quickening slightly and I'm frustrated that my heightened voice betrayed my nerves.

"Hun, slow down. You're the smartest person I know, you write amazingly. You have to let your work speak for itself. It's going to be great." Bryan's reassurance always feels lovely.

"Thanks. We'll see. I guess the other nerve-wracking part for me is that this whole idea is so…so…postmodern! I mean the idea that one's reality is merely a social construct and always changing (Nietzsche, 1990). Or the idea that the way each social worker perceives the world, or their world, is subjective and relative to language, power dynamics, societal discourses and a bunch of things…which in and of themselves are socially constructed and deconstructed on a minute by minute basis is freeing, but also frustrating. How can I research and write when my topic is so steeped in fluidity? I mean, while I'm excited about it, I kind of feel like it's wishy-washy. You know?

"I hear what you're saying. So talk me through it. What would you say if I said, yeah all this sounds great, but doesn't autoethnography skew your data?" Bryan asks, knowing that I love a challenge and working through it will make me feel better.

"Well" I ponder. "I'd say yes! Carolyn Ellis, an incredibly influential academic in this area once suggested that absolutely, the data *is* being intentionally contaminated and the real concern is that it won't be contaminated enough (Ellis, 2004)! In fact, I think she said "there is something to be gained by saturating…observations with [the researchers] own subjectivity" (Ellis, 2004 p. 89). And I agree. I mean, what is the purpose of research if not to gain knowledge, increased awareness and connectedness, while sharing your own experience as the researcher? All three of these I achieve by leading an ethnographic life. It's interesting, I realized I've kind of always led an ethnographic life; certain experience in my younger years turned my emotional expressiveness inward and I silently, introspectively began observing the world around me; people, their actions and reactions, places. I watched, and unconsciously assigned meaning, initially from a place of self-preservation, but later as a place of comfortable inquisitiveness. Allowing my body to be the site of research and engaging in the bodily act of research (Coffey 1999), to me, is arguably the most authentic type of research I could undertake."

"It sounds like you were destined to be an autoethnographer!" Bryan muses affectionately.

"Ha-ha. In a sense, I feel that way also. I really jive with a lot of the tenants of the genre and methodology, but I'm more hesitant about some." I reply

"How so?" Bryan inquires

"Well, it's a catch 22 of sorts, although postmodernism gives me the freedom to represent findings in different ways, I also feel constrained because I'm forced to scrutinize my claims of authorship, validity, truth and reliability more closely (Richardson, 2000). "Truth claims are less easily validated [and] speaking for 'others' is wholly suspect" (Richardson, 2000 p. 254), a practice I don't want to do. I don't want to speak *for* the other social workers, I just want to create space for *them* to be heard, but the mere fact that I'm the one deciding the themes in the end, means I'm the one with the most dominant voice, which bothers me. Going back to each social worker after I write the findings and analysis containing the themes to get their opinions, critiques and general input is a good way to minimize the power imbalance."

"That's a great idea. With this project, how will you deal with the issues you mentioned; truth, validity, generalizability and reliability?"

I breathe deeply, thinking and then "well, I guess the issues can be viewed as opportunities. True, this approach isn't methodologically typical, but it's becoming more so amongst numerous disciplines-sociology, nursing, even psychology a bit (Ellis 2004). Instead of seeking an external, unconstructed truth, I'm embracing narrative truth, "which means that the experiences [I'll] depict [will] become believable, lifelike and possible" (Ellis, 2004 p.30). Contextualizing my research with this lens, then, means that the research is valid if it takes into account the person wholly, including body, emotions, words, etc. and helps the writer to communicate with others, perhaps offering something useful that impacts the reader (Ellis, 2004).

So to then, generalizability focuses on the reader, rather than generalizing to the larger population. So, I hope this research will engage the reader in conversation with the text about their experiences and the lives of others, known or unknown (Ellis, 2004). Reliability is interesting also in that it's really about recognition of my situatedness as a "researcher" and rather than separating myself from the study, my interaction with others and the world is part of the study (Ellis, 2004). I can't seem to get away from that postmodern business, but really since there is no objective reality external to us, reliability, in the traditional sense, isn't applicable. It's by member checking that we can ensure those I speak to can contribute and assess the claims I've made (Ellis, 2004).

"Dude, how can you be worried after that soliloquy?!" Bryan chimes, without a hint of sarcasm. "It's going to be great! It sounds like you're taking more to this post-modern thing than you realize!" He notes.

"I feel like this project is an empowering form of resistance to canonical discourses, but I'm still stressed. I'm not sure if this topic is important enough or if it just seems so important to me because of my personal and professional experiences. I hope my personal experience isn't overshadowing my professional ability to choose or produce good research. I worry that I haven't chosen a topic that is meaningful to others and that I won't do justice to the social workers stories', or to the autoethnographic process itself. Good grief I can feel the grey hairs multiplying and the wrinkles deepening already! Maybe I should get Botox when this is all

over!" I joke at my post-modern half-truth, partly chuckling at the fact that I'm not

sure which half is joke and which half is truth.

"I'm just joking," I say.

"About which part?" Bryan asks. I can tell there is a smile on his lips.

"Exactly," I reply, saying goodbye and hanging up from his conversation, but

saying help to one hell of an upcoming journey.

And so the process begins. I settle back into my couch, fresh mug of Irish

cream café au lait warming me. My cellphone buzzes and I open a text from Bryan...I

smile. Success or failure, there is love. I am grateful. Multiple truths, indeed.

Ironing Out the Specifics

(Methodology continued)

"Hey, how's it going," Bryan asks and we begin exchanging updates about the

past few days.

"Things are great. I've made a lot of progress with my research. After the

Research Ethics Board (REB) approved my application, I recruited degree conferred

social workers to do the interviews," I say, excitement in my voice.

"Congratulations!" Bryan says. "How did you recruit?"

"I wrote a recruitment email that was approved by the REB and Saara emailed it out, along with my Letter of Information and Consent to the anonymous distribution lists in the social work department. Anyone interested in participating contacted me directly."

"That's great! How did the interviews go?"

"They were amazing. I'm privileged and grateful to have met such great people who were open and shared their personal stories of reflexivity with me."

"Awesome! Was it awkward meeting someone new and jumping right into personal things?" Bryan asks.

"I didn't feel it was, because we spent time discussing the study, going over the letter of information and then talking about consent first. And I gave each participant a $10 Tim Horton's gift card in appreciation of his or her time. Then, the first question I asked everyone was "what does reflexivity mean to you?" An open question that allowed us to move into the discussion easily. Following that, each participant guided the dyadic interactional interview by the stories they chose to share. The interviews went as deep as they felt comfortable. Throughout, I used probing questions to gain information, but checked in with everyone to make sure they were ok, asking if they wanted to take breaks etc. During some of the interviews, people became emotional and I wanted to respect their boundaries so I always reminded them that they were absolutely able to shift the focus of the

conversation if they felt uncomfortable. I think just knowing they had the power to do that made the participants feel more at ease."

"Did it go as you expected?" Bryan asks

"Well, I had intended to ask each participant if neoliberalism, supervision and language/discourse affected their experience of reflexivity, however that direct question was not needed as each participant discussed these terms without prompt, I merely sought clarification."

"That's great." Bryan says. "Given the nature of the topic and how it's so personal, I imagine confidentiality is really important. How are you going to ensure there aren't breaches?" Bryan asks

"Good question. There are quite a few mechanisms in place to ensure confidentiality isn't breached. To start, consent forms will contain participant's names and will be kept in my locked filing cabinet here, at my home. Also, any notes I take during the conversations won't contain names, plus I'll keep those notes in my filing cabinet as well and there isn't a way to link the notes to a consent form. Since I'm audio recording the conversation, I'll keep the digital recorder either with me or locked in my filing cabinet and as soon as possible after the conversation, I'll transfer the recording to my computer, which has a password protected hard-drive and erase the file from my recorder." I explain.

"How long do you keep the recordings?" Bryan asks

"Only until my analysis is complete, which I think will be a couple of months.

Same goes for the transcripts. The other good thing is that both the transcripts and recordings are on my computer, but you need a password to login to my computer, a password to get into the hard drive and a password to get into each of the files containing the recordings and transcripts. That's 3 passwords and I'm the only one who knows them, so I feel pretty good about confidentiality," I state.

"But won't confidentiality be broken if anyone reads your thesis and recognizes names or events?" Bryan asks astutely.

"It could, but I'm going to use pseudonyms for the participants names in order minimize the risk of that happening." I reply.

"It sounds so interesting," Bryan says. "What were your participants like?"

"The people who shared stories with me ranged in age from mid twenties to late forties. There were four women and two men. One woman identified as Iranian, one woman identified as black, one woman identified as Canadian, one man identified as gay. All social workers were educated to the Masters level and had graduated within the past seven years. Experience ranged from three to over twelve years. The participants had experience within a variety of settings with diverse populations, which I'll elaborate on in the findings and analysis section. Interviews ranged between 75 minutes to 2hrs and 15 minutes. When asked to discuss the topic of reflexivity, many people talk about experiences they remember that left

some type of impact. Given the nature of social work, many social workers had

several stories, which took time to explore and honor."

"Awesome" Bryan says. "You're on your way!"

"Yeah" I quip. "Hopefully after the analysis I'll have a deeper understanding of

reflexivity for social workers"

A Penny For My Thoughts (Reflections on methodology)

Hi There. I'd like to take a minute to connect with You, the reader, and check

in to see how you are doing. At this point in reading, you've come to a better

understanding of my beliefs as a researcher, some of my experiences as a woman

and new social worker and my ideas about knowing, knowledge and reflexivity in

social work practice. I hope that we also have a shared understanding of

autoethnography proper and how it fits so nicely into this type of research. Come

on...using a reflexive methodology to research reflexivity...that's golden! All kidding

aside, I'd like to take a few moments to elaborate on my methodology beyond the

theoretical underpinnings discussed in the previous chapters and share with you

how happy I am to taking the journey of this text with you.

This work, this chapter, this page, this sentence is, with every word, defining

me and it's defining you. See, that's the beauty behind autoethnography. As much as

I have constructed this story to fulfill certain personal and academic needs, you are

constructing this story for you, as you read it, creating linkages with your personal

and your academic realm.

"How so?" You might ask. Well, let's take a look at what some experts have to

say. "As soon as experience, whether mundane or epiphanic, is put into words, it is

shaped by language and culture" (Ellis, 1995 p.316), socially constructed by that

which constructs the writer, the participant and the reader. It can not be

deconstructed as it's mere presence as text necessitates it's "orientation to an

"other" (Ellis, 1995 p.316) and "involves circular cognitive and emotional

understanding and interpretation that unavoidably blur in day-to-day existence"

(Ellis, 1995 p.316). And, "just as authors and texts construct readers, positioning and

constraining their interpretations and reactions, readers construct texts as they read

them" (Ellis, 1995 p 320).

Isn't that great? We are both simultaneously and separately interpreting and

reflecting and engaging with and about the text. While the autoethnographic

method has expanded the possibilities for content and function, in light of it's ability

to arouse unique, personal reactions, this creative method also influences the

constructs of perception, interpretation and learning by encouraging the co-

construction of meaning by you as reader and me as writer, researcher and

participant.

But, as with all that is autoethnographic, the analysis doesn't stop there. For

instance, the analysis and meaning I've derived from the interviews is expressed

through the rest of the story you will read. Whereas the meaning you derive from

the analysis, will be expressed through your emotions and reflections while you read the story. What's so neat to me is that autoethnography promotes another layer of analysis, which comes from you. If I've written this story well, your own memories and meanings have come to light during our time together, within these pages. Some of the findings of this research are shaped by you and expressed through whatever memory, feeling or thought you experience during the process of reading this story.

Hmmm, I can imagine the look on your face and I'm betting you're thinking something along the lines of "yeeeaaaah, that sounds great in a very 'artsy-fartsy' way, but this is a thesis, so let's get down to the brass tax of 'findings and analysis'! What is that going to look like within this methodological presentation?"

Was I close? Did you use more swear words?! Ok! Ok! Firstly, since autoethnography is a methodology that "links social science to literature. I view [myself] as part of the research, sometimes as [it's] focus, rather than standing outside what I do. Instead of starting with hypotheses… the writing as a process of discovery" (Ellis, 2004 p. 3) is emphasized in this methodology and becomes the place where analysis occurs.

I was riveted by the stories being shared.   Each person co-constructed a unique interviewing experience that was "exciting and varied when it [happened but felt] boring and repetitive in retelling" (Ellis, 1995 p.315). Basically, there was a lot of similarity in the themes that emerged within each interview. I didn't feel right as a researcher choosing one person's story over the other's to exemplify that particular theme, but I also didn't feel right as a writer describing similar themes

over and over. One left me feeling unethical, as if I would be silencing the voice of

certain participants and the other results in a repetitive story, that won't move the

reader along and feels dried out and boring, like week old bread. A conundrum

indeed! How could I engage each individual interview, filled with so many differing

organic elements while telling a story that didn't feel like a hardened baguette? My

solution? I've connected themes, even when not chronologically near and created *a*

"single episode", "evocative composite" (Ellis, 1995 p.315). Or, as I like to call it, one

hell of a salad with awesome croutons!

As Ellis notes, observations and findings in a more scientific sense become

readings and interpretations within this more artistic interpretation of this

methodology (Ellis, 2004 p. 362). So what is a single episode, evocative composite,

you're asking?   Well, essentially I created a fictional discussion that is a composite of

direct quotations, participant's actual facial expressions, bodily reactions and

interpreted meanings from the interviews. I tried to stay as true to the actual

interviews as possible. These were then ordered topically and conceptually and

transformed into a group discussion that is synthesized through questions, many

directly taken from the transcript, and summary statements, which highlight the

findings and analysis. So, although the interviews happened individually, the

composite I have written enables complex analysis of greater depth. This can then

be presented in a way that honors the participant's voices and stories, while

ensuring their confidentiality because they didn't actually meet. This was also done

because a reflexive discussion setting, where I am the discussion leader and others

are discussion participants mimics the power dynamic of our conversation, where I

was researcher and they were participant. I am a discussion leader facilitating a

discussion in the story and I was a researcher facilitating a discussion in real life. I've

tried to equalize or, at the very least minimize, the power imbalance embedded

within the researcher/participant dynamic by using quotations and offering to

member check, however each person I interviewed said that whatever I wanted to

say, however I wanted to interpret things, was fine. I was honored by their trust.

I'm wondering if at this point you might be saying to yourself "fine, but isn't

there something to be said for historical truth?" And I would agree, yes, there is a

place for historical truth, and that's a history book! Simply, "utterances that had

been recorded in field notes or on tape" (Ellis, 1995 p.315) were merely edited with

a "goal of making them clear, focused and concise, since the unnecessary words,

pauses and hesitations in spoken speech [gave] a muddled quality to text" (Ellis,

1995 p.315). More importantly however, autoethnography and indeed my fictitious

group discussion of findings and analysis, creates a space where events and feelings

are exposed and questions of meaning and interpretation are emphasized. This is a

space "where readers… grasp the main points" (Ellis, 1995 p.315) and narrative

truth takes priority over historical truth, allowing the depth of meaning, which is

ultimately the purpose of analysis, to be portrayed. Spence, describes narrative truth

as "the criterion we use to decide when a certain experience has been captured to

our satisfaction….Narrative truth is what we have in mind when we say that such

and such is a good story, that a given explanation carried conviction, that one

solution to a mystery must be true" (Steig, 1982, p. 28 in Ellis 2004 p. 316). In

traditional ethnography, there is a taken for-granted understanding that events

happened at a particular time, the author "observed, categorized, and analyzed

them, then told the reader about them from her current, distanced perspective,

which presumably does not affect the telling." (Ellis, 1995 p. 316). However, with

autoethnography "time is more expressly enmeshed in [the] personal…where it is

hard to ignore that the narrator and subject merge" (Polkinghorne 1988 in Ellis,

1995 p. 316), that I as researcher and writer am also a participant and can therefore

facilitate a deeper analysis of the data by creating an alternative vantage point, from

which to view the information.

I participated in the research; I engaged in dialogue with each person and

grew to know him or her, in some ways, on a very personal and intimate level. My

experience in the conversation as one who observed the participants allowed me to

recognize their shared connection on many themes and allows me to introduce them

to one another and connect their experiences through words, albeit fictitiously. The

interconnectedness amongst the participants was unintentionally revealed to me by

the commonalities in tone, language, expression and responses to questions and

statements I made. A depth of analysis wouldn't be possible unless this

interconnectedness was examined through the autoethnographic method of story,

which allows my reflection and interpretation to encourage depth of meaning.

Let's get on with it I've interrupted the story long enough!

If I Had a Penny For Every Time Someone Said Reflexivity...
(Findings and Analysis)

"Hi everyone, come on in." I say smiling, mentally checking my materials. Leading a group makes me so nervous...breathe Aisha, they're just people like you, and you already know them! I reassure myself...It's not working.

"Grab a seat and get comfortable," I say. "There's coffee and tea at the side," I motion to a worn out credenza and wish I had brought a tablecloth to cover it. Scanning the room, its blue low backed fabric chairs and flip-chart are unwelcoming so I'm happy I opened the blinds, inviting the sun in. I also removed the middle portion of the light gray melamine table, creating a cozier space. The unfurled flip chart paper to my right reads: Conversations Over Coffee: Reflexivity and Social Work Praxis.

When everyone is settled in I continue, "Thank You for agreeing to meet. It's great to see you all again! As you know, I wanted to meet as a group with the people I interviewed individually and use this opportunity to share the findings that emerged from our interviews while having a reflexive conversation about our shared experiences. I'd ask that we all extend to each other the same respect we extend to our clients by maintaining confidentiality of our discussion. Having a

conversation about reflexivity necessitates sharing about ourselves, so it's important

we feel we're in a safe space. Any questions or thoughts?" I ask, scanning the room,

pleased to see heads nodding in agreement and smiling faces. They look interested

in both hearing the findings and engaging in a reflexive conversation, I muse. That's

a good sign!

"Great. Why don't we begin? Let's move around the circle and introduce

ourselves to one another, offer a bit of a background: education, experience that type

of thing. I'll start. I met each of you while doing my MSW thesis..." After saying my

bio, I breathe in and relax a bit now that the focus will shift for a moment, "who

would like to go next?" I ask.

"I'll go." Her calm voice resonates as I turn, smile and nod, eyebrows raised.

"Hi everyone, I'm Heike. I'm a recent MSW grad but have been in the field about 10

years since my kids got older. My background was in the criminal justice system,

but about a year ago I shifted into hospital social work." Heike says, punctuating her

words with a slight accent.

"Thanks Heike," I say, "who's next?"

"Hi everyone, I'm Vicki and graduated last year with my MSW. I started

working in the hospital I did my practicum in and have been there for almost a year

now." Vicky says, speeding through her introduction. I wonder why? Is it because

she looks younger than the other participants? I guess, maybe mid 20's, although her

flawless porcelain skin makes her look much younger.

"Thanks Vicki," I smile, looking around. The two men I interviewed sit next to each other, surrounded by 5 women, myself included. From our conversations, I know both men are in their late 20's or early 30's and they actually look very similar; dark hair and eyes, slender frames and Caucasian.

"Hey Everyone, I'm Jack. I also work in healthcare, in a hospital and got my MSW, hmmm, 3 years ago now." Jack's doppelganger goes next. "Hey Everyone, I'm Finn. My experience is in the area of crisis where I've worked at a distress centre. I've also done some advocacy stuff with the LGBTQ community."

"Thanks Jack and Finn," I smile and pause, looking around.

"Ok, I'll go. I'm Shadan and work with people who have experienced and/or engaged in violent behavior. I've been in the field for…" Shadan pauses, thinking. "Wow, I graduated 6 years ago! I've worked with Family Services ever since."

"Thanks Shadan." Smiling, I look towards Coretta, the last participant to go.

"Hello Everyone, I'm Coretta," the rich tone of her voice carries a rhythm as she speaks. "I've been in the field for about 3 years and have worked in a violence against women shelter and for a Canadian mental health agency. Now I'm with a Children's Aid society."

"Thanks everyone," I say, pleased that we have such a diverse group. Doing a quick calculation, I'm reminded that the sample age of my research ranged from early to mid twenties through to the mid-forties and we have quite a diverse background in terms of years and type of experience.

I'm also happy that my research included both men and woman, as well as people who identified as straight, gay, Iranian, Caucasian and Black. One person noted they were born in Canada, while two noted their emigration early in life. What a great mix of people, I think.

"It's wonderful to see you all again! I'm grateful that you've offered to spend time together and explore the findings of our interviews in greater detail. Let's get started," I say, flipping the chart paper.

"Six overarching themes emerged during our interviews, which I would like to explore with you in greater detail today."

1. Reflexivity has multiple meanings
2. Factors that hinder reflexivity
3. Factors that promote reflexivity
4. Internal processes that influence and effect reflexivity
5. Why people engage in reflexivity
6. Reflexivity in the moment

1. Reflexivity's Multiple Meanings

"At the start of each of our interviews, I asked what reflexivity meant to you. Would anyone care to share?" I ask hoping people take an active role in this discussion. Vicki begins and I'm pleased she looks more comfortable.

"When I think of reflexivity, I'm mindful of the relationship with patients and the power dynamics that exist between myself and them. Things like appearance and stature." She smiles, pleased with contribution. I begin to feel my nervousness lessening as the groove of the discussion begins.

"For me," Shadan says, "It's the idea that I have the ability to have a ripple effect on my environment, and my environment and the people within it have a ripple effect on me. So that whether I'm in practice, when I'm at work and when I'm with clients, every part of my being, every part of my past, follows me into that session, and I need to be aware of that." Shadan states, Vicki nodding reflectively.

I notice Coretta sit up in her seat. "I agree with the idea that reflexivity is about that deeper meaning. And I think it goes beyond just feelings. We can say that experience made me happy or sad or upset, whatever the case may be, but I think reflexivity is deeper. It's about interactions and oppression and awareness of those, if that makes sense."

"Well, when I think of reflexivity," Jack begins, "I think back to my interactions with patients and think about what I could do differently next time to be more efficient, like what kind of tools might work better with that population, stuff

like that." He nods and looks at Coretta. "But I don't understand what you mean about interaction."

Coretta nods as well, and then continues, "So from a critical framework, in terms of social work practice, we are interactive all the time. Any situation we're in, there's always a give and take. I can reflect from the standpoint of how I experience something, and also have an awareness and appreciation that you are experiencing things from your standpoint as well. I reflect on what that means moving forward and for the bigger picture." Coretta says

"So 'bigger picture' macro societal structures?" Jack asks.

"Yeah," Coretta adds, "there are a bunch of things that create the lens through which we reflect and the spaces that we occupy.   Socio-historical structures, societal discourses, lots of things that we're potentially not cognizant of."

 "You all beat me to the punch," Finn jokes, "for me reflexivity is reflecting back in many areas about myself, how I interacted with that person, I play it back in my head. How did it work? How didn't it work? I'm thinking about the environmental factors and power imbalances- do I have more power than that person and how does that interplay with one's relationships." This reminds me of what Vicki and Jack were saying. I'm pleased that the different meanings of reflexivity, based on a range of personal and professional factors, are coming out so early in our conversation.

"Thanks everyone. From what I'm hearing now and previously in our interviews, reflexivity is complex. In our individual conversations, as well as here,

you each identified in your own way that reflexivity is not something passive, but rather it is an active, engaged process. Vicki, was this what you meant when you just said reflexivity was a retroactive *assessment* of power and structural imbalances?" I ask.

"Yes, I'd say so." Vicki agrees, Coretta along with others nodding. I flip the chart paper and continue, "Shadan, you mentioned reflexivity is *acknowledging* the ripple effect and Jack you noted you *think* back to your interactions, Finn you *play* back interactions in your head. Assessing, acknowledging, thinking, playing, these verbs highlight the active engaged process of reflexivity, underscoring reflexivity as a complex action. Additionally, when describing what reflexivity meant, you each identified different facets. Jack, you spoke about reflexivity to seek solutions like "what tool is best with this population"; Coretta, reflexivity for you involved seeking answers to questions like "what are the macro structures at play here" or perhaps to seek a deeper meaning and understanding of oneself with questions like "what does that say about me?" Shadan, you discussed reflexivity in
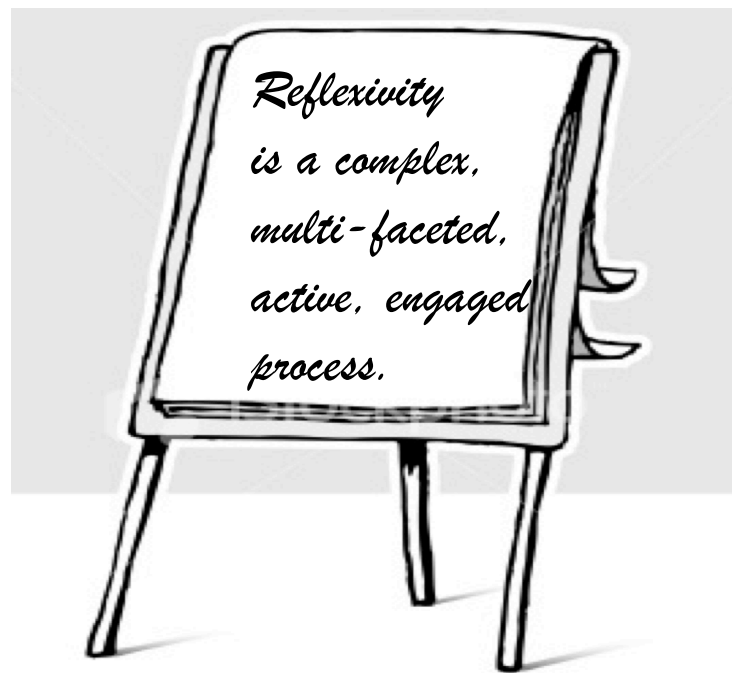
light of the negotiation between the personal and professional self. All of these

features combined give us a broader understanding of reflexivity as a complex,

multi-faceted, active, engaged process." I pause, as the group reflects on the flip

chart and our discussion.

2. Factors That Hinder Reflexivity

"Reflexivity as a process necessarily implies that there are factors that can

hinder that process." Aware that Heike hasn't spoken in a bit, I decide to urge her

forward. "Heike, when we spoke, you highlighted some factors that hinder

reflexivity. Care to share those with us?"

Heike smiles, "right now reflexivity is something that I'm trying to avoid

because I don't think I come out looking very good!" She jokes, half serious. "The

hospital is pushing the lean mantra, so you're supposed to focus on the hospital

budget rather than patients and when you look at that in terms of social work ethics

you just can't really comply with what you want to do. So I question my own work as

a social worker. I question my worth as a social worker." We all nod knowingly,

presumably because we've all experienced the pull between clinical and budgetary

demands, professional ambition and personal values. I'd like to know more, hoping

a stronger connection to reflexivity is made, and ask "How so Heike?"

"Well one of the things I'm supposed to do as a social worker is engage in

social justice, and when you're in the hospital trying to discharge people you can't

fight for social justice, in fact you do the opposite and you wind up enforcing that the

poor get nothing because generally it seems the more support people have on the outside the more support they get on the inside of the hospital. Anyways, I'm rambling, my point is that I'm so pressured to discharge patients quickly because of Alternate Level of Care bed allocation requirements… stuff that… I just feel so pressed for time." Heike says.

Coretta adds. "I agree that time affects your ability to engage in reflexivity. I think managerialism and accountability play a role as well. I recall working in a social work environment where significant power dynamics had been instituted as a result of neoliberal practices. They're quite inescapable within the organizational structure that now permeates much of the agencies that we work within. Mind you nobody goes around saying "hello neoliberal tactics," but they're there and they're stressful!" We chuckle collectively and Coretta continues, "I definitely think, in terms of supervisors, they're feeling the pressure too. Just as much as our job is on the line, their job is on the line and their boss' job is on the line as well. There is huge pressure in terms of accountability; we're accountable to the clients, to ourselves and there's a whole additional layer of accountability towards the managers and the agency and it just keeps snowballing, which leads to the funding piece so if it's the ministry that's providing funding you are accountable to them as well. It's all interconnected. It's those structural things that impact the decisions we make, our ability to engage in reflexivity, and that impact on your personal being doesn't make it any less stressful. During the day to day, its hard in those moments to see that those things are happening also, but it takes a toll." Coretta pauses and I can see the

group nodding. I feel connected to the group-they've experienced things like me, I am not alone.

"From our conversations, it often feels like we don't have time to really reflect on anything more than how bad the coffee is from the gift shop, while we rush off to rounds or the next meeting!" I say turning the flip chart as the group collectively chuckles. "Both Coretta and Heike's stories highlight the impact of neoliberalism on institutional social work practices from the top down. Moreover, there are all these macro structures; time, fiscal constraints, accountability and managerialism that are challenges to the reflexive process." I add.

Challenges to Reflexivity

- *Neoliberalism*
- *Time*
- *Fiscal Pressures*
- *Managerialism*
- *Accountability Structures*
- *Some Policies and Procedures*

"It takes a toll," Heike says, her voice sounding slightly strained conveying her frustration, "this definitely speaks to

neoliberalism; fiscal cutbacks and an introduction of managerial models, where

clinical time is cutback and there is less time to work with patients and

families. Actually there is no time to work with families because your allotted time

is for patients and the allocation of resources. There is no time to breath let alone

engage in reflexivity." The group seems to agree and the nodding continues.

      "Thanks Heike. The inability to engage in reflexivity for lack of time, because

of these macro challenges, also speaks to the intersection between our personal and

professional selves. Both Coretta and Heike noted that these challenges to

reflexivity take a toll. That toll is felt professionally, with packed schedules and

fiscal demands, but it's also felt personally, with increased stress as Coretta

mentioned and concerns with ethical duties, perceived value and worth as Heike

discussed. I think about Heike mentioning the avoidance of reflexivity because she

might come out looking bad, but then questioning her worth later in her story. In

terms of accountability and social justice, ideas that were just raised, would

protected time to engage in reflexive inquiry help us navigate the intersection

between the personal and professional self?" I ask. "Shadan, during our interview,

you discussed the importance of reflexivity in spite of neoliberalism. Can you share

that with the group?"

3. Factors That Promote Reflexivity

"Sure," Shadan says, "I understand the pull of neoliberal constrains much more now that I've shifted into a supervisory position." Shadan continues. "I've found that I don't operate well in secrecy. So being really open and honest with the team has become a huge source of strength for us. Now I really see an umbrella picture of things and see why supervision is so important. I see how as a supervisor I can encourage reflexivity, which in the long run keeps my staff healthier and happier." Shadan smiles. ok.

"Thanks, can you tell us some of the ways you encourage reflexivity?" I ask.

"Absolutely, I promote a team approach. In truth, we are an extremely fortunate agency because it's always, always, always been about reflexivity; "how are you doing with your clients", "tell me about your client", "how is that making you feel". I mean we're all very open with each other. Once a month we do our individual clinical supervision, once a month we do a team clinical supervision where we get together and will celebrate anybody who had a birthday that month and we talk about what's going on. Oh! And that's in addition to our weekly team meetings. We have lots of personal interaction with each other because every five minutes we wind up talking about what's going on in our lives. But honestly, reflexivity has always been a focus."

"Great thanks Shadan. So now in addition to challenges, we have several enablers to reflexivity including interconnectivity and collegial bonds, interpersonal

relationships, supervision which promotes reflexive inquiry and a team approach to practice." I say, flipping the chart paper.

"The one's listed here speak to macro and external factors. What about internal processes?" I ask the group.

Enabling Factors of Reflexivity
- Interconnectivity
- Interpersonal Relationships
- Supervision
- Collegial Bonds
- Team Approach

4. Internal Processes That Influence and Effect Reflexivity

"The supportiveness of your agency is impressive. But there are times when colleagues or supervisors may be the cause of your need to engage in reflexivity. Then, I think you have to recognize your own need to reflect and do it, even if it's on your own." Coretta says.

"I agree," Heike adds. "I think engaging in reflexivity is important and if it must happen in isolation, well, it must, but that's so hard. I remember working with a young girl who had killed a little boy." Heike takes a long pause. I recall that this is a difficult story for her to share, but she continues, explaining the girl's

difficult childhood. "Anyways, long story short, I worked with her for years and we had grown very close. Finally, her trial came. While testifying, I was asked if I thought she would reoffend. I knew my answer would impact the decision to sentence her as an adult, which meant she would get out quicker, which the girl wanted, or as a youth, which would result in a longer stay in the system but would get her intensive counseling. I also knew she felt bad about what she had done and while she didn't want to reoffend, her temper tantrums were bad. I was sitting on the stand, this young girl starting at me, pleading with her eyes that I would finally be someone who would help her, in the way she thought was best. Also staring at me, eyes pleading for justice to be served, was the mother of the child the girl had killed. I desperately wanted to make the girl happy, she'd be through so much hell, but I also couldn't imagine the hell the mother had gone through, having her child murdered. So, I just said that I wasn't a psychiatrist and didn't think I was qualified to answer. I could see her face, it broke her heart." Heike pauses and continues, "There was no one to talk to, no one to help me reflect on the situation and examine what in me led to such strong emotions. I think the agency I worked for should've had somebody there to speak to her and to me because I calmed her down and then I went home… and was on my own."

"Thanks Heike. Your desire to engage in reflexivity, even though it was difficult to do so by yourself, highlights the necessity of internal processes in the reflexive process. Through interviews, and this conversation, its clear that one must have a desire, a willingness to engage in reflexivity, even though the process may be incredibly

difficult.

"Your story also raises the experience of not being supported to reflect in difficult practice moments, not having an opportunity to reflect with a supervisor or someone who understands the work. When we met the first time, it was clear how emotionally connected you were to this experience and you noted that the feelings of loneliness, almost as if you had been abandoned by your work, had stayed with you. It took effort and an awareness of yourself to pursue reflecting on this experience." I say, turning the flip-chart paper. Heike nods.

Internal Processes that influence or effect Reflexivity

- *Willingness*
- *Desire*
- *Effort*
- *Level of Self-awareness*
- *Mindfulness*

"Shadan, during our discussion, you noted that you prompt your staff to examine emotions that are raised during practice situations, specifically you just said, "how does that make you feel", which to me addresses the internal process of mindfulness. Is that what you meant?" I ask. Shadan nods and I continue, "that connection to one's physical body can offer queues to one's emotional experiences. So mindfulness is an internal
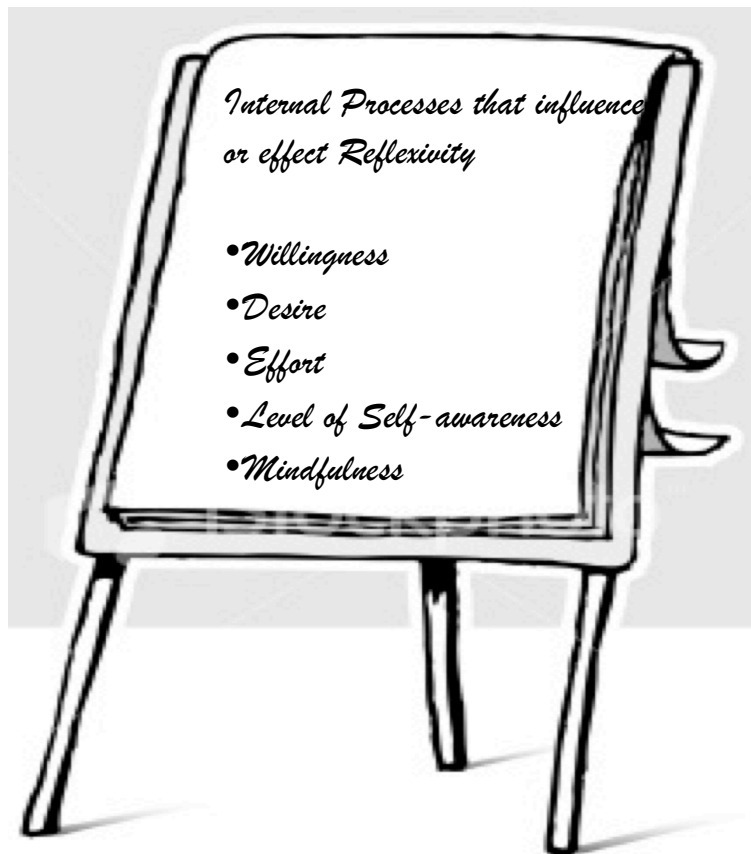
process that can influence or effect reflexivity and it can also be a reason why we choose to engage in the reflexive process, i.e. we are searching for deeper meaning about an intense emotional or physical response to a practice." I say. The group nods, reading the flipchart. I think we're all pleased to be co-constructing meaning about reflexive inquiry. "If everyone is ok with things so far, I think this is a good spot to build on our topic of mindfulness and expand our discussion into more of the reasons why people engage in reflexivity."

5. Why People Engage in Reflexivity

During our earlier discussion of the multiple meanings of reflexivity, we identified some of the reasons why people engage in the reflexive process.

Coretta continues by sharing, "I have an experience that stayed with me for a long time. A colleague and I approached a woman in the shelter and the woman began saying that she was being discriminated against based on her mental health status and her ethnicity. During the discussion she pointed at me and said something along the lines of "you get it, you've been called a monkey." Coretta pauses and then continues, "I think she was suggesting that we had a shared understanding of having been discriminated against. But it all happened so fast. The colleague with me cut her off immediately and didn't let her finish. The woman was forced to leave and my colleague went to management and explained that from her vantage point, it's lucky we got this woman out of there because "she started to target Coretta". So management freaked and looked mortified and kept asking me if

I was ok and I remember that I never clarified that that's not how I interpreted it. I

realize now, the situation was an opportunity for me to ally with someone who was

feeling they had been discriminated against. I questioned my silence in those

moments for very long time. There was such a profound hurt when I saw this

woman with her stuff, at the doorway in the middle of the night, pleading with us

"where am I supposed to go" because it's a homeless shelter, right. "Where am I

supposed to go?" If this is a homeless shelter, for a homeless woman and we're

booting her, and I didn't do anything to try and advocate or prevent that…it's a huge

amount of shame. I felt my colleagues and mangers had contributed to the creation

of this situation, I couldn't "talk it out" with them. Instead, for a long time

afterwards, I wondered what all of that said about me. I tried to make sense of why I

remained silent throughout the whole thing because it was an injustice to the

woman and I felt guilt, shame, hurt…like I was a liar, I felt dishonest…I felt

weakened. That situation challenged me to think of who I wanted to be and perhaps

who I was in that moment and left me questioning how do I reconcile the two. I

don't have an answer for that. I can say I doubted myself for a bit "geez, why would

you act that way in that moment" I asked myself but I think that's where those

subtleties in the relational dynamics between people come into play and whether

consciously or not we somehow fall into, or we interact in a way that is within

ourselves, so its not beyond who we are, but its not necessarily who we want to be.

But its all still linked. Especially when we examine ourselves in light of all the things

standing in the way of reflexivity." Coretta pauses and I ask, "Is there a connection

between reflexivity and authenticity?"

"Although it's very difficult to have the authentic self come through,

reflexivity makes discovering the authentic self easier." Coretta replies. "I was

searching for answers, meaning and understanding of my authentic self."

"A similar situation left me seeking answers also," Finn says. "While I was

working at the distress centre, I answered the phone and the caller told me that she

was really sad, very depressed actually." He pauses and I make eye contact, knowing

this is a difficult story for him to share. "She said she hated her parents and had

attempted suicide many times in the past and felt like a complete failure because she

hadn't succeeded. This time she had a very detailed plan." Finn's voice trails off and

I can see on his face that he is brought back to that call, to that moment. He

continues, voice softened, "she had a staircase and she was going to hang herself and

I guess there was a light fixture at the top. My supervisor was there and I wanted to

call the police. I had a horrible feeling, but my supervisor said no, he didn't want to do

that; she was a 'frequent caller'. I was overpowered, I mean he'd been there for over

20 years so was very seasoned, but I remember in that moment thinking that he

wasn't making the right call. Anyways, I could tell the caller was increasingly upset.

Police?

no

CALL POLICE

NO

CALL POLICE!!!!!

NO. *Just talk, listen to her*

In my mind I can see the paper my supervisor and I wrote on and passed back and forth.

I tried to make her feel supported, like she wasn't alone, but the more she talked the more she sounded so sure of what she was going to do. I was becoming increasingly anxious, my voice was getting higher and higher, I was sweating, it was all happening so fast. She said, I'm gone, I'm doing it and in a frantic voice I said No! Stay! Let's talk some more. But the line went dead…and as far as I can tell, that was the last time she called." Finn takes a sip of steaming black coffee, "I felt guilty. Afterwards, I reflected with my supervisor and I wondered if there was something I could have done differently."

"Thank you both." I say to Coretta and Finn. "These two experiences highlight more of the reasons we're driven to engage in reflexivity. Coretta, it sounds like you engaged in reflexivity to understand an intense, emotional experience as well as understand the dynamics between and within yourself and others. Finn, it sounds

like you were engaged in reflexivity as a way to understand a crisis filled situation."

Both Coretta and Finn nod as I flip the chart paper.
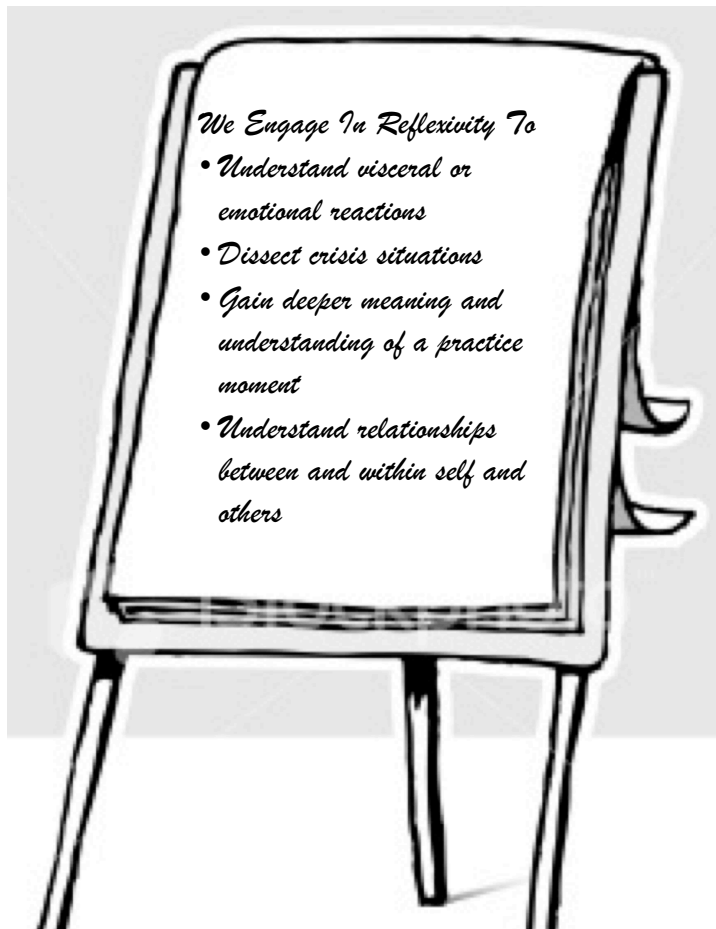
"We see in both these stories how reflexivity became a mechanism to seek deep meaning and understanding, to make sense of what was experienced in your practice and to learn about oneself, engage in self-discovery or exploration. Illustrated here, another reason we engage in reflexivity is to explore the relationship between ourselves and our colleagues and managers, as Coretta noted. Another reason is to gain deeper meaning and understanding of a practice moment." I say, visually checking in with the group. Finn smiles, leaning back in his chair, hiking his right ankle up onto his left knee, crossing his arms over his chest.

We Engage In Reflexivity To
- *Understand visceral or emotional reactions*
- *Dissect crisis situations*
- *Gain deeper meaning and understanding of a practice moment*
- *Understand relationships between and within self and others*

"Both of these stories speak to reflecting after the experience, either with a supervisor as in Finn's story or by oneself, as in Coretta's. These stories highlight the experience of not being heard and engaging in practice decisions that were out of the social workers' control. There wasn't time to reflect in the moment. In both stories, the social workers, Coretta and Finn, were consumed with intense emotion and engaged in reflexivity after the fact to understand a difficult practice moment and the physical and emotional result of that experience. Shadan, during our interview, you spoke about reflexivity in the moment. Can you share that with us now?"

6. Reflexivity in the Moment

"Sure. Contrary to the other stories where reflexivity happens after the experience, I have an experience where reflexivity happened in the moment," Shadan says. "I was in a session with an elderly woman who was struggling to cope with a partner who engaged in abusive behavior towards her. She was financially strained and didn't see a way out. While the client was telling me her story, I felt a large, warm tear slide down my cheek. The client viewed it as me just being very empathetic, so it didn't affect the therapeutic relationship, but as soon as I felt the tear, reached up and wiped it away, I remember thinking, "normally I'm on, but this time I'm not. What about this is making me so upset? I need to address this with my family and siblings." I'm human and I'm going to have those human moments, it's

what I do with those human moments that matters, which is why I always strive to be reflexive in the present."

Heike adds to this theme of reflecting in the moment. "Hearing Shadan speak about the experience with the elderly female client, and then hearing about physical reactions, I'm thinking about another story, where I'm reflecting in the moment also. When I am with elderly women, I often feel sad because I think of my mother. She's alone and lives too far away for me to see her. Working with this population, I think about it a lot... and I think about my grandmother and I guess, to a certain extent, myself. Many of these women have lost their partners and they don't have an income, they're poor. In the moment I can hear myself thinking, "I don't want to be 70 and poor. I don't want this to happen to me. What can I do to avoid this, to ensure I'm cared for?" I mean, maybe that's selfish thinking." Heike notes.

"But should "selfish thinking" necessarily carry a negative connotation when the social worker uses that moment as a point for reflexive practice? I wonder, reflexivity by definition is "self" "centered" as it is centered on the self." I say. "I'm thinking more about your last story Heike, which speaks to reflexivity as the site of self-discovery, which necessarily points to the intersection between the professional self and personal self, underscoring the importance of self-awareness and the ability to engage in reflexive inquiry as a means of self-care, promoting health and wellbeing." I add.

"The more I think about it, and reflect in the moment, ha-ha, I think Finn and Shadan's earlier stories speaks to the need for connection between our reflecting

selves and our bodily selves, because our bodies can alert us to a situation or response that warrants reflexive exploration." I say.

"Hearing all of this, I'm beginning to think engaging in self exploration promotes the achievement of personal and professional balance. I bet it decreases burn-out and vicarious trauma," Jack notes. "I wonder this too Jack. When we spoke earlier about the pull between professional ambition and personal values and the toll that macro challenges on reflexivity take on oneself, the toll that not engaging in reflexivity takes on ourselves, I wonder about the ethics of not being able to engage in reflexivity. If we are to maintain accountability to ourselves and be as strong as we can to engage in the often emotionally draining work that we do as social workers, isn't there an ethical implication to engage in reflexivity? Wouldn't reflexivity be part of a balanced self-care routine?" I ask, the group nodding. "If this is the case, what is the impact on our agencies and places of employment?

"Yeah I definitely think so," Shadan says. "I like to use a bus analogy. Your life is your bus and you're the bus driver and you always need to check in your review mirror (engage in reflexivity) and check that you are, in fact, the bus driver, or is someone else the bus driver? Is someone else running your life? If so, you need to stop and let them out." We all chuckle at the analogy, but find truth in it. "It's about that constant check-in, that ongoing reflexive piece. If I'm talking to my clients about self-care and checking in with themselves, then I need to apply it for myself, just as much as I'm asking them to apply it for themselves."

"Maintaining an authenticity between what you're saying an what you're doing." I add.

"Absolutely!" Shadan says, "Absolutely. And that's why I think it's so important to engage in reflexivity and encourage my staff to do the same, because it supports balance between all the people you have to be. You're 4 people at once; the engaging person (listening, replying), the processing person (critically thinking), the person employing forethought, and your core person, your authentic self, that never goes away. So yeah, being present and being mindful of how those pieces work together is so important to maintaining balance and wellbeing. Reflexivity enables us to keep track of those 4 people."

"Reflexivity is much more complex than I'd ever thought before." Jack notes, smiling.

Final thoughts and queries
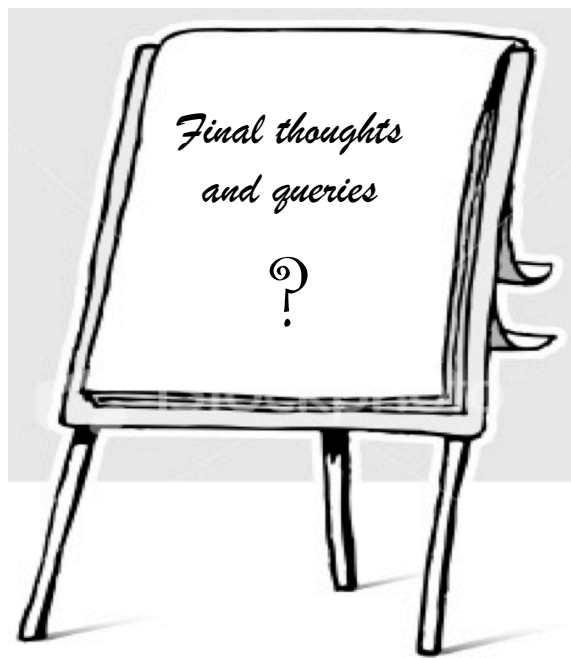
"It is." I agree, flipping the chart paper. "I've learned from you that in social work, sometimes we have personal physical or emotional professional experiences. Sometimes we only recognize that the professional experience needs reflexive engagement, by recognizing our strong personal

and/or bodily reactions. For instance a tear, or anxiety, or sweating, or feeling that

knot in your stomach. The personal and professional domains of ourselves are

inextricably linked and reflexive inquiry can serve to navigate that interconnection

by providing a forum to seek solutions and answers or understand our deeper,

epistemological selves in greater detail. This has raised more questions for me.

What happens if we're disconnected from our body and aren't able to engage in

mindfulness-informed practice? How do we become reconnected to our bodily

selves in order to utilize this critically important, physiological warning sign that

reflexivity is needed or could be beneficial? So much literature says that self-

awareness is a prerequisite to competent social work practice. Indeed, I've lived

that realization. Why then, doesn't social work education contain this as part of the

curriculum?" I ask, recalling my own experiences with Penny, rife with neoliberalism

and lacking supervision. "Basically, I can be as reflective as I want, but if I've

disconnected from my "inner being" (i.e. my feelings or emotions or whatever feel

good noun you prefer), my reflection can only be superficial because really, as

Kondrat (1999) asked, who is the self, in 'self aware'? Ultimately, can we really know

ourselves if we really don't already know ourselves?" Deep thought dances across

the group's faces and I think this is a perfect rhetorical question to finish off on.

"Thank you for your stories, everyone. I hope you are pleased with the outcome of

our individual conversations. These findings are very interesting to me. I'm

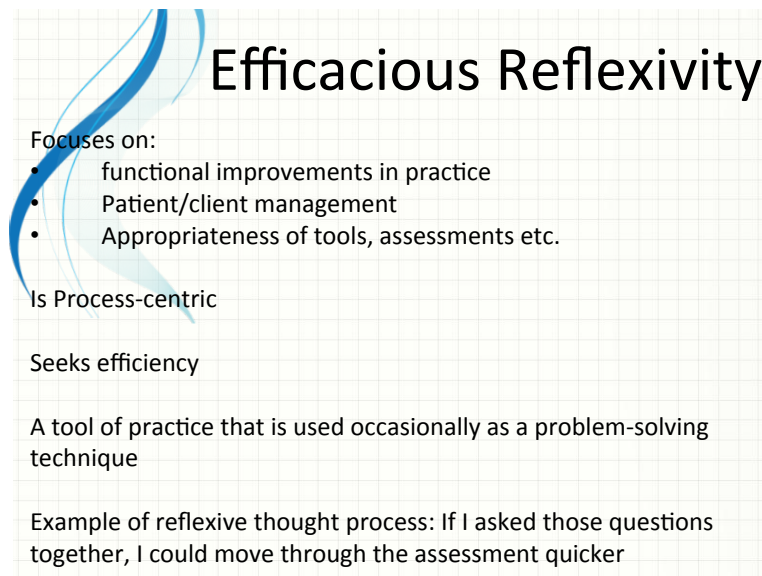honored to have heard them these conversations over coffee with you."

Epilogue:
Finding a Penny's Worth
(Discussion)

Through my conversations with Heike, Vicki, Jack, Finn, Shadan and Coretta six themes that emerged that resulted in my deeper understanding of the broader notion of reflexivity. These included; reflexivity's multiple meanings, factors that hinder reflexivity, factors that promote reflexivity, internal processes that influence and effect reflexivity, why people engage in reflexivity and reflexivity in the moment highlight reflexivity as a complex, multi-faceted, active, engaged process. Moreover, the interviews illustrated that reflexivity serves as a key component to navigating the inevitable interconnection between our personal and professional selves by providing a forum to seek solutions and answers or understand our deeper, epistemological selves in greater detail.

What emerged from these findings were the multiple ways that practitioners engage in reflexivity that are not found in the current literature in this area. Based on my interviews/conversations it appears that reflexivity holds very different tenants, depending on its context, yet when deconstructed, no one definition I had come across encapsulated the intricate character of this term. Therefore, I have created multiple definitions to broaden the scope of reflexive inquiry and to give a name to how different types of reflexivity can be viewed.

The first group of definitions is efficacious reflexivity, exigent reflexivity and entrenched reflexivity. These are defined in terms of four key components, which

emerged during the interviews; the focus of the reflexivity, what the reflexivity is

centered on, what the reflexivity seeks and the degree to which reflexivity is utilized

as a tool of practice. These definitions shed light on the varying depths of reflexive

inquiry. I was compelled to include a category for efficacious reflexivity because,

through discussion, many people interpreted reflexivity to be an exercise, which

focused on process improvements, rather than self-exploration, a more superficial

action, which contradicted what I had read in the literature in so far as reflexivity

was typically referred to as something that brings about deeper meaning. Initially, I

urged people to look deeper and view reflexivity as something that necessarily

involved inward examination. Through discussion though, I realized that I was

avoiding a key shift in social work discourse. Perhaps reflexivity used to be viewed

in terms of an inward examination, but now many social workers have adapted the

word to focus on practice efficiency and superficial functionality. As such, I have

defined efficacious reflexivity.

Efficacious Reflexivity

Focuses on:
- functional improvements in practice
- Patient/client management
- Appropriateness of tools, assessments etc.

Is Process-centric

Seeks efficiency

A tool of practice that is used occasionally as a problem-solving technique

Example of reflexive thought process: If I asked those questions together, I could move through the assessment quicker

Jack's discussion of reflexivity highlighted this shift in discourse towards an understanding of reflexivity that focuses on external issues. He engaged in efficacious reflexivity when he focused on functional improvements, like which tool would work best in his practice environment. He illuminated efficacious reflexivity as being concerned with process and sought to increase efficiency in his work. In Jack's example, efficacious reflexivity became a tool of practice that he used occasionally to problem-solve efficiency issues.

Next, I've defined exigent reflexivity. This type of reflexivity is experienced as a crucial component of understanding an experience as it seeks answers to internal feelings or questions that the worker has. It is often driven by a desire to understand atypical feelings or situations and is undertaken as a mechanism to return the self to a state of homeostasis.

Exigent Reflexivity

Focuses on:
• Understanding workers' emotional and visceral responses
• Coping with and seeking clarity about a crisis situation

Is experience-centric

Seeks answers

A tool of practice that is often used as a coping mechanism

Example of reflexive thought process: why did that happen?
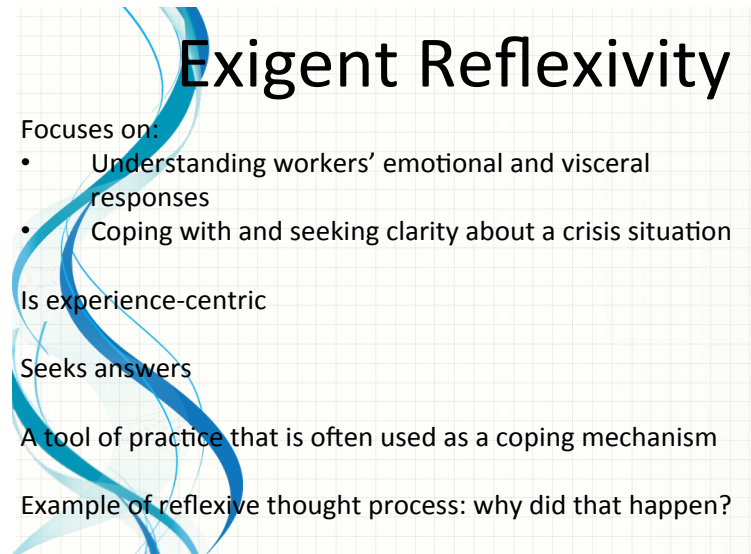
You can see, for example, Coretta experienced this when she sought understanding about the emotional and visceral responses she experienced while working at the women's shelter with the woman who was asked to leave. We saw this again when Finn engaged in exigent reflexivity as a coping mechanism, a tool of practice that is often engaged in to understand stressful situations. Finn wanted to seek clarity about the crisis situation he experienced at the distress centre. Both of these stories focused on the participants' experiences and involved a reflexive thought process, which questioned why something happened.

Finally, I have defined entrenched reflexivity. This type of reflexivity is embodied within the worker as a part of who they are and is manifested through an innate desire to seek meaning or greater epistemological understanding of the self.

Shadan embodied entrenched reflexivity because each story she shared during the interview and discussion contained an element of natural reflexivity that was not prompted by anything external, but rather was simply a part of her being. Shadan spoke about reflexivity being ongoing and consistently used. Shadan's bus analogy speaks to how (entrenched) reflexivity is engrained in everything that she does. She spoke about constantly checking in with yourself, even in the actual practice moment, to seek meaning and achieve balance, health and wellbeing, highlighting that this is a critically important practice given that social workers have to be four people at once.

Through the analysis of the interviews, I found that these types of reflexivity aren't mutually exclusive but rather there is an interconnection between them. Moreover, I would suggest that people who engage in entrenched reflexivity potentially engage in all three types of reflexivity frequently because the ideal of

reflexive inquiry is so engrained in who they are. That's not to say that someone who typically engages in efficacious reflexivity won't experience points in their work where they delve deeper into exigent reflexivity or entrenched reflexivity. I did not create these definitions of reflexivity to suggest a value hierarchy, but rather to illuminate the differing layers of reflexive inquiry. Neither type of reflexivity is better or worse than the other. I felt broadening the scope of reflexive inquiry adds to an increased understanding of the phenomenon as a practice tool.

While entrenched reflexivity may occur at any point in the workers experience, efficacious and exigent reflexivity generally occur after the experience has passed. As was the case with Finn's crisis experience in the distress centre. He was unable to engage in reflexivity in the moment, but was able to do so after the fact, while debriefing with his supervisor. The timing of reflexivity is important because it can indicate the type of reflexivity occurring and can highlight to the worker when an experience needs to be reflected upon. For example, in a crisis moment, one may not realize that they are impacted by the situation, however if the situation reoccurs in their mind days or months later, it suggests the experience needs further reflexive inquiry. I am calling this distinction extant reflexivity and revenant reflexivity.

Extant Reflexivity:
Occurs in the moment;
where reflexivity and experience
coincide

Revenant Reflexivity:
Engaged in retroactively;
Where reflexivity occurs after
the experience
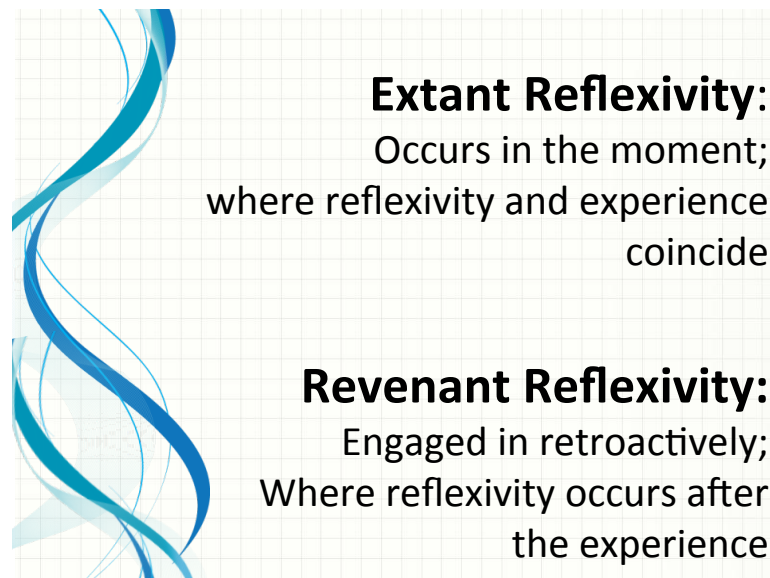
Extant reflexivity was illuminated clearly in Shadan's story about tearing up during an interview with a female client, stating "as soon as I felt the tear, reached up and wiped it away, I remember thinking, normally I'm on, but this time I'm not. What about this is making me so upset? I need to address this with my family and siblings. I'm human and I'm going to have those human moments, it's what I do with those human moments that matters, which is why I always strive to be reflexive in the present".   Shadan's experience of extant entrenched reflexivity contrasts with Finn's crisis driven experience of revenant exigent reflexivity at the distress centre, where he was unable to engage in reflexivity in the moment, but was able to do so after the fact, while debriefing, communally with his supervisor.

Finn's communal debrief highlighted another key component of reflexivity, namely the context in which it is undertaken; in isolation or communally. As such, I

put forth these two additional definitions: polycentric reflexivity and monocentric reflexivity.

Polycentric Reflexivity:
Undertaken with or prompted by communal, interpersonal supports

Monocentric Reflexivity:
Undertaken independently of interpersonal supports
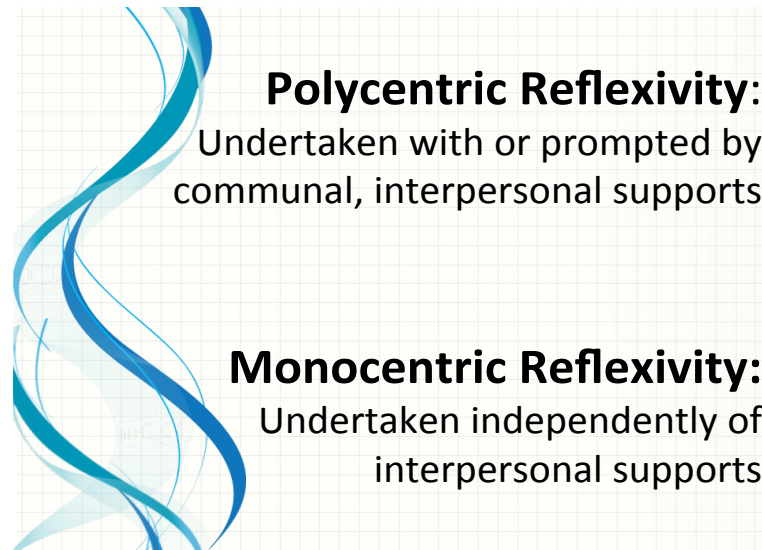
Shadan highlighted polycentric reflexivity in her discussion about monthly individual and team clinical supervision meetings as well as weekly team meetings. She indicated that she encourages reflexivity by promoting a team approach and asks her staff and colleagues questions like "how are you doing with your clients", "tell me about your client", "how is that making you feel".   In contrast to this, Heike and Coretta spoke about engaging in monocentric reflexivity. Heike noted that "there was no one to talk to, no one to help me reflect on the situation and examine what in me led to such strong emotions. I think the agency I worked for should've had somebody there to speak to [the client] *and* to me because I calmed [the client] down and then I went home… and was on my own." Coretta echoed reflexivity in

isolation, when she shared her story about engaging in monocentric reflexivity after the client was removed from the women's shelter, noting that her need to engage in reflexivity was spurned by a differing interpretation of a mutual practice situation. Coretta was unable to approach management or colleagues to reflect because she noted that she did not feel comfortable or free to do so. Coretta's experience of this practice situation highlights meso-level agency barriers to her ability to engage in exigent polycentric reflexivity, which was provoked by agency adherence to fixed policies and procedures.

For me, the culture of impassivity within the jail and the institutional condemnation of emotion underscored by workload pressures made engaging in any form of reflexivity difficult. There wasn't space for polycentric efficacious reflexivity to occur, let alone entrenched reflexive inquiry. Both Heike and Coretta identified the contemporary socio-political reality of the waterfall effect of neoliberalism, managerialism, as well as fiscal and accountability pressures as macro, systemic barriers to their reflexivity. As Heike noted, "there is no time to breath let alone engage in reflexivity." Coretta reinforced this sentiment by speaking to her inability to engage in extant, exigent reflexivity; "during the day to day, its hard in those moments to see that those things are happening also, but it takes a toll".

The toll on the personal and professional selves speaks to the consequences of one's inability to engage in reflexive practice. For each social worker, "the toll" is experienced differently. For me, as a social work student on practicum in a jail, having engaged in a difficult practice moment that was so intimately connected to a

personal trauma, "the toll" meant struggling to process an intense professional experience and carrying around a heavy professional guilt and confusion for a long time, while navigating it's interconnection to a personal trauma that happened in my work environment. I doubted my vocation as a social worker and I almost left the field. I recognized my struggle but had internalized my supervisor's words to be 'if I couldn't make it there, I wouldn't make it anywhere'. Luckily, I made it and can appreciate the enablers to reflexivity on a much deeper level than before.

As Shadan highlighted, the incorporation of interconnectivity and collegial bonds, interpersonal relationships, supervision that promotes reflexive inquiry and a team approach to practice can strengthen the individual social worker by honoring the four persons that make up the professional self; the engaging person, the processing person, the person employing forethought, and one's core, authentic being. The promotion of reflexivity within the practice environment supports the synthesis between the professional and personal selves.

How Do We Make This Happen? Education and Practice Implications

While applying the types of reflexivity to the practice setting we see the definitions blurring into one another and yet maintaining clear differences. These definitions lend to a deeper understanding of reflexivity as a multi-faceted and complex process. They also give clarity and language to a phenomenon that is widely utilized, but at times misunderstood. Practically speaking, an increased

understanding of these terms could lead to their increased incorporation into contemporary social work discourse as a required tool of practice. This could be achieved through dissemination in the social work literature, but also through inclusion in social work education.

Reflexive inquiry on all levels can lead to positive outcomes, be it through increased efficiency or worker satisfaction through the deeper meaning and understanding of the emotionally charged situations social workers engage in on a regular basis. However, it is important to note the ethical implications of striving to engage in polycentric reflexivity. There are potential situations where some types of self-disclosure may not be appropriate in a working environment, or may carry ramifications. Some environments do not support reflexivity, as was my experience within the correctional facility. The potential benefits and harms of polycentric reflexivity must be weighed by each social worker, as they make the decision of which type of reflexivity to engage in. Many questions should be considered such as, "How will my supervisor, colleague etc. receive this personal information about me?" "Can making this disclosure negatively affect my credibility, status etc.?" Additionally, there is vulnerability and risk associated with engaging in any type of reflexivity, especially exigent and entrenched reflexive inquiry. We must be conscious of this risk and ask ourselves clear questions before embarking on a reflexive journey; will engaging in reflexive inquiry will be beneficial, even if I have to do so alone? Is it ethical to engage in reflexive inquiry knowing that I may not have the support systems in place to move through the potential emotions revealed

through that reflexivity? If emotions do arise through reflexive inquiry that I am not able to grapple with, where or how can I seek assistance? Ensuring a safe space and ongoing support is an important part of reflexivity. This lesson can be underscored in school, where the process of understanding reflexivity begins.

My broadened definitions of reflexivity and their subsequent incorporation into social work practice could be taught and practiced in the classroom, prior to engaging in the work. Reflexive worksheets and interactive case studies can serve as opportunities for social work students to identify and become familiar with the expanded language of reflexivity. Review of case studies, practice interviews and discussion of emotionally charged topics and issues already occurs as part of the curriculum. Disseminating these definitions would only require a small step forward, prompting students to identify the type of reflexivity taking place, and the kind of questions that could be answered by engaging in that reflexivity. Indoctrinating bourgeoning social work students to view reflexivity as a necessary part of their practice will go a long way to ensuring that reflexive inquiry is implemented in the working environment.

Taking this development within theory (i.e. the construction of expanded definitions of reflexivity) and making it an applied reality can occur through in depth supervision that involves the supervisor asking probing questions, like the one's raised by Shadan. However, the neoliberal context in which supervision occurs may not allow for this depth of reflective inquiry. Therefore, peer supervision may offer a mutually beneficial reflexive exchange that promotes collegial bonds, but also

polycentric reflexivity. In this context, reflexivity could be encouraged between colleagues as a sort of check-in. When one person is struggling with a client or feels that an element to the therapeutic relationship is lacking, they can turn to their fellow social worker peers to engage in joint reflexivity and problem solving. This could potentially free supervisors to focus on complex or sensitive issues raised in the reflexive process that are not comfortably or adequately addressed within peer supervision. Moreover, supervisor's time is freed to address the neoliberal demands of management, while offering advocacy to their staff or lending their voice, if need be.

A Penny For My Thoughts
(Conclusion)

Following my literature review, interviews and analysis, I am left with more questions than answers about the interconnection between the professional and personal selves within the context of the practice environment. Indeed, utilization of my expanded definitions of reflexivity may lead to a more concrete understanding of this phenomenon and its related themes, namely reflexivity's multiple meanings, challenges and enabling factors, it's link to internal processes, rationale for usage and timeliness of inquiry. Perhaps, with the aid of these expanded definitions and their incorporation as a required tool of practice, the statement that stayed with me for so long can be rewritten to read, "social work isn't for everybody, but if you can make it reflexively, you can make it anywhere".

Yes, there are both limitations and strengths to my research methodology. As Bochner (2000, p. 271) suggested, some critics of autoethnography may, indeed, view this methodology as a "victim art or confessional." But I wonder, in a profession that is so intimately connected to the heart, where the personal is necessarily political, how does one separate who they are from what they do? My desire to engage in this research began from a voyage of understanding, an attempt to seek meaning from my experience and better navigate the interlaced realities of my personal life and my professional undertakings. My experience in the jail, that day, with my first client, will remain indelibly etched in my mind as the starting point to my journey of self-discovery, deeper meaning and professional awareness, through reflexive inquiry. My impetus for disseminating these broadened definitions is my belief that their incorporation into contemporary social work discourse and utilization as a required tool of practice will further promote the integration and support of the dual existences of the professional and personal selves; that their procurement into practitioner pedagogy will lead to dedicated space within the practice setting that enables one to be an emotional being, complete with emotional realities while simultaneously coexisting as a social worker, complete with social work related realities. I believe this will result in increased efficiency and productivity to serve and care for our clients, as well as increased worker health and wellbeing, to serve and care for ourselves. Because in the end, a Penny saved is a Penny earned.

Appendices

McMaster
University

McMaster University Research Ethics Board (MREB)
FACULTY/GRADUATE/UNDERGRADUATE/STAFF
APPLICATION TO INVOLVE HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
[Behavioural / Non-Medical]

Date: May 18, 2012	Application Status: New [X] Change [ ]	Protocol#:

<**Helpful Hints**> Mouse over bold blue hypertext links for help with completing this form.

Please refer to the McMaster University < Research Ethics Guidelines and Researcher's Handbook >, prior to completing and submitting this application. If you have questions about, or require assistance with, the completion of this form, please contact the Ethics Secretariat at ext. 23142, or 26117 or ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

HOW TO SUBMIT:
If you are submitting hard copies of your typewritten application send this form and all accompanying material in duplicate (2 copies) to the Ethics Secretariat at the address below.
If submitting by e-mail, send your typewritten application plus attachments, and forward the original signed signature page to the **Ethics Secretariat, Research Office for Administration, Development and Support (ROADS), Room 305 Gilmour Hall, ext. 23142,** ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca.

If you intend to change a previously cleared protocol, please submit the "< Change Request >" form.

SECTION A – GENERAL INFORMATION
1.

TITLE: Conversations Over Coffee: Reflexivity and Social Work Praxis
(a): **Title:** (If different from above i.e. the grant title.)

2. **Investigator Information:** This form is not to be completed by < Faculty of Health Science researchers > .
For research by faculty and staff, complete section above the black bar in the table below. Student researchers should complete the table below the black bar.

	Name	**Department** & *or name of university if different from McMaster*	**telephone number(s)** *& Extension*	**E-mail address** (*Address you regularly use*)
Principal Investigator				
Co-Investigator(s) *(Insert additional rows as required.)*				
Research Assistants or Project Coordinators				
Student Investigator(s)	Aisha Applewhaite	Social Work	416-264-7871	applewav@mcmaster.ca
Faculty Supervisor(s)	Saara Greene	Social Work	(905) 525-9140 ext. 23782	greenes@mcmaster.ca

3. **Start and End dates:** June 2012-September 2012
(a) **The date you plan to begin recruiting participants or obtain their permission to review their private documents?** *(Contact the Ethics Secretariat at X 23142 or* ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca *for urgent requests.)*

P:/ethics/forms/appln.doc
- 1 -

(b) **Estimated completion date for data collection with human participants:** Estimated Completion:

4. Indicate the location(s) where the research will be conducted. Move your mouse over this **< Helpful Hint >** for more information on foreign country or school board reviews. If you are conducting research in a **foreign country or countries** please contact the Ethics Secretariat at X 23142 or 26117 for further information on possible additional requirements:

(a) McMaster University **[X]**
(b) Community   **[   ]** Specify Site(s)
(c) Hospital   **[   ]** Specify Site(s)
(d) Outside of Canada   **[   ]** Specify Site(s)
(e) School Boards   **[   ]** Specify Site(s)
(f) Other   **[   ]** Specify Site(s)

5. **Other Research Ethics Board Clearance**
(a) Are researchers from outside McMaster also conducting this research? If yes, please provide their information in Section 2 above.   **[   ] Yes   [X] No**

(b) Has any other institutional Research Ethics Board cleared this project?   **[   ] Yes   [X] No**

(c) If **Yes** to (5b), please complete the remainder of this application form and provide the following:
 (i.) A copy of the complete application submitted to the other institution together with **all** accompanying supporting documents including all communication between the researcher and that ethics review board and any changed documents or changed procedures made to the original research plan.

 (ii.) Provide a copy of the ethics clearance certificate /approval letter. N/A

(iii.) Please provide the following information: **N/A**

Title of the project cleared elsewhere
Name of the other institution:
Name of the other board:
Date of the other ethics review board's decision:
Contact name & phone number for the other board:

 (e) Will any other Research Ethics Board(s) or equivalent be asked for clearance? **[   ] Yes   [X] No**
If yes, please provide the name and location of board(s*).*

N/A

6. **Research Involving Canadian Aboriginal Peoples** i.e., First Nations, Inuit and Métis (Check all that apply)
(a) Will the research be conducted on Canadian Aboriginal lands?   **[   ] Yes   [X] No**

(b) Will recruitment criteria include Canadian Aboriginal identity as either a factor for the entire study or for a subgroup in the study?   **[   ] Yes   [X] No**

(c) Will the research seek input from participants regarding a Canadian Aboriginal community's cultural heritage, artifacts, traditional knowledge or unique characteristics?   **[   ] Yes   [X] No**

(d) Will research in which Canadian Aboriginal identity or membership in an Aboriginal community be used as a variable for the purpose of analysis of the research data?   **[   ] Yes   [X] No**

(e) Will interpretation of research results refer to Canadian Aboriginal communities, peoples, language, history or culture?   **[   ] Yes   [X] No**

If you have selected "Yes" for any of the above 5 questions (6.a-6.e) please note that the TCPS

(Chapter 9) requires that researchers shall offer the option of engagement with Canadian Aboriginal communities involved in the research. http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/initiatives/tcps2-eptc2/chapter9-chapitre9/.For advice regarding the application of the new TCPS guidelines for conducting research with Canadian Aboriginal people please contact Karen Szala-Meneok at X 26117 or szalak@mcmaster.ca

(f) Please describe the <u>nature</u> and <u>extent</u> of your engagement with the Aboriginal community(s) being researched. The nature of community engagement should be appropriate to the unique characteristics of the community(s) and the research. The extent of community engagement should be determined jointly by the researchers and the relevant communities. Include any information/advice received from or about the Aboriginal community under study.
The TCPS notes that, "although researchers shall offer the option of engagement, a community may choose to engage nominally or not at all, despite being willing to allow the research to proceed. If your study will be conducted with several Aboriginal communities or sub-groups, please use headings to organize your information.
ATTACHMENTS: Submit a copy of any documents that support how community engagement has been or will be established such as letters of support where appropriate.

N/A

(g) Has or will a research agreement be created between the researcher and the community?

[ ] Yes [X] No

If **Yes**, please provide details about the agreement (e.g., Will it be written or verbal etc.?) below.

N/A

ATTACHMENTS: Submit a copy of any written research agreements, if applicable. See the MREB website for a sample customizable research agreement
http://www.mcmaster.ca/ors/ethics/download/Sample%20agreement.doc or visit the CIHR website http://www.cihr- irsc.gc.ca/e/documents/ethics_aboriginal_guidelines_e.pdf

(h) Are you are seeking a waiver of the community engagement requirement? (A waiver may be granted if the REB is satisfied that, Aboriginal participants will not be identified with a community or that the welfare of relevant communities will not be affected by the research.)   **[ ] Yes   [X] No**

If **Yes,** please provide the rationale for this waiver request in the space below.

N/A

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7. **Level of the Project** (Check all that apply)
[ ] Faculty Research   [ ] Post-Doctoral   [ ] Ph.D.   [ ] Staff/Administration
[ ] Master's (Major Research Paper - MRP)   [X] Master's (Thesis)
[ ] Undergraduate (Honour's Thesis)   [ ] Undergraduate (Independent Research)
[ ] Other (specify)

8. **Funding of the Project**
(a) Is this project currently being funded?   **[ ] Yes   [X] No**
(b) If **No**, is funding being sought?   **[ ] Yes   [X] No**
(c) Period of Funding: **From:** [N/A   ]   **To:** [N/A   ]
                                     (mm/dd/yyyy)   (mm/dd/yyyy)

(d) Agency (funded or applied to) & agency number (i.e., number assigned by agency) if applicable. **N/A**
[ ] CIHR & agency #   [ ] NSERC & agency #
[ ] SSHRC & agency #   [ ] ARB & agency #
[ ] Health Canada & agency #   [ ] CFI & agency #

[ ] Canada Graduate Scholarship & Agency #
[ ] Post Graduate Scholarship & Agency #
[ ] USRA & grant #   [ ] Other (specify): & agency #

9. **Conflicts of Interest**

(a) Do any researchers conducting this study, have multiple roles with potential participants (e.g., acting as both researcher and as a therapist, health care provider, family member, caregiver, teacher, advisor, consultant, supervisor, student/student peer, or employer/employee or other dual role) that may create real, potential, or perceived conflicts, undue influences, power imbalances or coercion, that could affect relationships with others and affect decision-making processes such as consent to participate?   [ ] Yes   [X] No

(i)   If **Yes**, please describe the multiple roles between the researcher(s) and any participants.

N/A

(ii)   Describe how any conflicts of interest identified above will be avoided, minimized or managed.

N/A

(b) Will the researcher(s), members of the research team, and/or their partners or immediate family members:
(i) receive any personal benefits (for example a financial benefit such as remuneration, intellectual property rights, rights of employment, consultancies, board membership, share ownership, stock options etc.) as a result of or being connected to this study?   [ ] Yes [X] No

(ii) if **Yes**, please describe the benefits below. (Do not include conference and travel expense coverage, possible academic promotion, or other benefits which are integral to the conduct of research generally).

N/A

(c) Describe any restrictions regarding access to or disclosure of information (during or at the end of the study) that the sponsor has placed on the investigator(s).

N/A

GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS AND HELPFUL TIPS (Please read first):
*Please be as **clear** and **concise** as possible. Keeping in mind that your protocol will be read by reviewers who may not be specialists in your field, **please avoid technical jargon**. Feel free to use headings, bullets and bolding to organize your information. Content boxes on this application expand.*

SECTION B – SUMMARY OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH

10. **Rationale**
For the proposed research, please describe the *background* and the *purpose* concisely and in lay terms, as well as any overarching research questions or hypotheses to be examined. ***Please do not cut and paste full sections from your research proposal.***

This research aims to explore the relationship between social work praxis and self-awareness. *Drawing upon work by Dewey (1938) and Stratre (1996), reflexivity in this sense is self-conscious awareness that reflects back over what has happened so as to extract meaning. Praxis is practice distinguished from theory.*
Frequent discussion in social work literature notes self-awareness as a prerequisite to competent social work

practice. The process of professionalization into the role of a self-aware social worker begins in school and typically stresses self-awareness in relation to the client; cultivating social workers' awareness of the effect of power imbalances and oppressive structures of society on the client. Thus, we are taught that the self is defined in light of the self's impact on the client. However, given the stressful nature of current social work environments, this research aims to examine the impact that social work practice has on the social worker's self, through the social workers experience(s) with reflexivity.

This research, therefore, is an exploratory study that asks social workers questions like:

1) Does reflexivity play a role in your work?
2) If so, how is your work affected by reflexivity?
3) *Neoliberalism is typified by the governments push for citizen engagement in the market to produce self-sufficiency, thus offloading the government's role in social responsibility. Some common examples of neoliberalism are welfare-to-work policies and decreased funding to social programs. In Ontario during the early 2000's, Premier Mike Harris furthered neoliberalism through the large cuts to social program funding and fiscal claw-backs.* Does neoliberalism, supervision, changing clinical discourse play a role in your ability to engage in reflexivity?
4) If so, how?
5) *Can you describe an experience where a client interaction has directly or professionally challenged, weakened and/or strengthened you and led to personal growth?*

11. **Methods**

Describe sequentially, and in detail, the methods to be used. Include all procedures in which the research participants will be involved (e.g., paper and pencil tasks, interviews, focus groups, lab experiments, participant observation, surveys, physical assessments etc. —*this is not an exhaustive list*). Include information about who will be conducting the research, how long it will take, where data collection will take place, and the form in which the data will be collected (e.g., computer responses, handwritten notes, audio/video/photo recordings etc.). If your study will be conducted with several sub-populations or will progress and expand in successive phases, please organize your information using sub-headings.

ATTACHMENTS: Please provide a copy of all questionnaires, interview guides (i.e., list of questions), test or data collection instruments. These and other documents should be identified as appendices (e.g., Appendix A or 1) and should accompany this application rather than being pasted into it. Please click this link for samples: "Templates and Samples".

This study is informed by narrative theory as it provides a means to conceptualize commonalities amongst participants lived experiences, offering the ability to better understand the relationship, or lack thereof, between reflexivity and social work praxis. *(Definitions of the terms reflexivity, praxis and neoliberalism are found in section 10.)*

Utilizing narrative analysis promotes an open space for participants to express their understanding and experiences, free from restrictive or prescribed questions. Rather, understanding and meaning will emerge organically through discussion. Additionally, drawing upon autoethnography as a mechanism for presentation of the findings, allows for the continued robust and creative expression of the participants stories, images and meanings. Autoethnography also promotes increased authenticity and transparency in presentation of findings because it offers a mechanism for the researcher to address her reactions to the discussions being led by the participants.

The processed followed will be:

1) When potential participants contact me in response to recruitment (Appendix B and Appendix C), I will provide additional information including mailing, or delivering an informed consent form (Appendix A) or meeting with them in person to do this. **Please note that the language used within Appendix A, B and C is common language to the social work profession and as such is appropriate given that the participants are practicing social workers.**
2) I will meet with the participants at a location the participant chooses, but which ensures privacy. The meeting will begin with me reviewing the informed consent form, answering questions and obtaining consent.
3) I will ask the questions detailed on the informed consent and, with participant permission, will record the interview. *It is anticipated that interviews will take approximately 90 minutes. It is expected that participants will attend 1 individual interview.*
4) Following the interview, the recording will be transcribed.

> 5) All participant information will be pseudonomyzed.
> 6) Final data will be made available to participants in the form of a written summary.

12. Experience

What is your experience with this kind of research? Include information on the experience of all individual(s) who will have contact with the research participants or their data. *For example, this could include your familiarity with the proposed methods, the population(s) and/or the research topic or issues.*

I have several years of academic experience gained through completion of an undergraduate Bioethics degree and my master of social work coursework. In my social work experience, interviewing can be a powerful tool, whereby enabling the person being interviewed to freely and openly tell their story and share their experiences. I have interviewing experience gained through a specific interviewing course, as well as through two internships where I interviewed numerous people.

13. Participants

Please describe:
(a) the number of participants required for this study
(b) any salient characteristics (e.g., age, gender, location, affiliation, etc.) *If your study will be conducted with several sub-groups please use headings to organize your description of participants' characteristics for each group.*

I estimate between 4-6 people will participate. The sampling frame is that participants are social workers who interested in exploring the impact that reflexive practice has on themselves both personally and professionally. I will only recruit within the Hamilton and Greater Toronto Area. To ensure at least 4-6 participants, I am seeking REB approval of 6-8 participants, to circumvent potential attrition.

14. Recruitment

Please describe:
(a) how each type of participant will be recruited
(b) who will recruit participants
(c) the relationship (if any) between the investigator(s) and participant(s) (e.g. instructor-student; manager-employee, family member, student peers, fellow club members, no relationship etc.)
(d) any permission you have or intend to obtain, for your mode of recruitment (if applicable)
ATTACHMENTS: Please provide a copy of any posters, advertisements letters, flyers, and/or email messages etc. to be used for recruitment. Please click this link for samples: "Templates and Samples".

To obtain permission, I will discuss contact information with my thesis supervisor and the Social Work department head to send the email to our anonymous distribution lists. Recruitment will take place through email distribution to agencies that employ social workers. Saara Green, thesis supervisor, will send out email to various agencies and the anonymous distribution lists through the social work department. Those wishing to take part can contact me directly. There will be no direct relation between the investigator and participants.

15. Compensation

	Yes	No
(a) Will participants receive compensation for participation?	[X]	[ ]
Financial	[ ]	[X]
Other (specify)	[X]	[ ]

(b) If yes was answered for any of the above choices, please provide details.

Participants will be provided with a $10 Tim Horton's gift card in appreciation of their time. The gift card will be given during the interview.

(c) If participants choose to withdraw, how will you deal with their compensation?

Participants will not be asked to return gift card's once received.

SECTION C – < DESCRIPTION OF THE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH >

16. **Possible Risks**
    a. Indicate if the participants might experience any of the following risks:

    i.) Physical risk (including any bodily contact or administration
    of any substance)?   [ ] Yes [X] No

    ii.) Psychological risks (including feeling demeaned, embarrassed
    worried or upset)?   [X] Yes [ ] No

    ii.) Social risks (including possible loss of status, privacy and / or
    reputation)?   [ ] Yes [X] No

    iv.) Are any possible risks to participants greater than those the
    participants might encounter in their everyday life?   [ ] Yes [X] No

    b. If you checked **yes** for any of questions **i – iv** above, please describe the risk(s) in the space below.

There is a small chance that some participants may become upset recalling their experiences of more challenging moments in practice. *Additionally, While participants will be pseudonymized, sometimes identification can take place by the stories we tell.*

    c. Management of Risks: Describe how each of the risks identified above will be managed or minimized. Please, include an explanation regarding why alternative approaches cannot be used.

Risk of upset is s minimized as participants selected will be social workers who have a working knowledge of self care, their own successful coping strategies and resources available to them. Additionally, if through initial conversation, a participant appears to be emotionally vulnerable or considerably distressed by the discussion, I will suggest that it might be best for them to not participate in the research at this time. If my comments are insufficient to allay the upset a participant feels, I will suggest the participant connect with their employee assistance program, their support services/networks and/or I will provide them with details of counseling services.
Risk of participant identification is minimized through the assigning of a pseuydonym. If needed and wherever possible, specific identifying details of a story can be altered or not included (for example: agency name) to maintain confidentiality and integrity of the experience.

    d. Deception: Is there any deception involved in this research?   [ ] Yes [X] No

    i.) If deception is to be used in your methods, <u>describe</u> the details of the deception (including what information will be withheld from participants) and <u>justify</u> the use of deception.

N/A

    ii.) Please describe <u>when</u> participants will be given an explanation about <u>why</u> deception was used and <u>how</u> they will be debriefed about the study (for example, a more complete description of the purpose of the research). ***ATTACHMENTS: Please provide a copy of the written debriefing form or script, if applicable.***

N/A

17. Possible Benefits

Discuss any potential benefits to the scientific community/society that justify involvement of participants in this study. (***Please note: benefits should not be confused with compensation or reimbursement for taking part in the study***).

Participants will not receive direct or material benefits from participating in this research, but the study may benefit the greater social work community by increasing awareness of the lacking ability to engage in reflexivity. This knowledge could be used to impact social policy, agency policy and social work education.

SECTION D – < THE INFORMED CONSENT PROCESS >

18. The Consent Process

(a) Please describe how consent will be documented. Provide a copy of the Letter of Information and the consent form (if applicable) to be used.
Click the above link <THE INFORMED CONSENT PROCESS> for the McMaster REB recommended sample Letter of Information/Consent Form. The letter of Information/consent form should be written at the appropriate <reading level – See Plain English Writing Sample > for the participants.

If a written consent form will not be used to document consent, please explain why and describe the alternative means that will be used. While verbal consent may be acceptable in certain circumstances, it may still be appropriate to provide a Letter of Information to participants about the study.
ATTACHMENTS: Please provide cop(ies) of the Letter of Information and Consent form(s) or the content of any verbal or telephone script(s) that will be used in the consent process for each of your study populations (if applicable).

A Letter of Information and written consent form will be used (Appendix A)

(b): Please describe the process the investigator(s) will use to obtain informed consent, including who will be obtaining informed consent. Describe plans (if any) for on-going consent.

The researcher will review the informed consent form (Appendix A) with potential participants, ensuring their understanding of the information and answering all questions before requesting their signature.

19. Consent by an authorized party

If the participants are minors or for other reasons are not competent to consent, describe the proposed alternate source of consent. ***ATTACHMENTS****: Please provide a copy of any permission / information letter to be provided to the person(s) providing the alternate consent.*

N/A

20. Alternatives to prior individual consent

If obtaining written or verbal documentation of an individual participant's consent prior to start of the research project is not appropriate for this research, please explain and provide details for a proposed alternative consent process. ***ATTACHMENTS****: Please provide any Letters of Information and or Consent Forms.*

N/A

21. Providing participants with study results

How will participants be able to learn about the study results? (e.g., mailed/emailed brief summary of results in plain language; posting on website or other appropriate means for this population).

Participants will be provided with a written summary of the results, if they so indicate on the consent form (Appendix A)

22. Participant withdrawal
a) Describe how the participants will be informed of their right to withdraw from the project. Outline the procedures which will be followed to allow the participants to exercise this right.

Participants will be informed verbally and in writing on the informed consent about their right to withdraw at any date after signing the consent or part-way through the study. Participants will be informed that they *can no longer withdraw from the study after the results have been written, approximately August 31, 2012.*

b) Indicate what will be done with the participant's data and any consequences which withdrawal might have on the participant, including any effect that withdrawal may have on the participant's compensation or continuation of services (if applicable).

Participant's data will be removed from the study after withdrawal, unless they indicate otherwise. Participants will not be required to return the Tim Horton's gift card if they withdraw.

c) If the participants will not have the right to withdraw from the research, please explain.

N/A

23. SECTION E – CONFIDENTIALITY
a) Will participation be anonymous (i.e., no one, not even the researcher, will know the participant took part)?
                                                                                              [   ] Yes [X] No
b) If yes, describe the procedures to be used to ensure the anonymity of participants.

c) Will the data be treated as confidential? (i.e., how the researcher will protect the personal information with which s/he has been entrusted.)   **[X] Yes [   ] No**

d) Describe the procedures to be used to ensure the confidentiality of data during (i.) data collection (ii.), use of the data, (iii.) the release of study findings and (iv.) the final storage or disposal of the data.
In your description, explain who will have access to the data, how written (paper) and electronic records, video/audio tapes, questionnaires and other data will be held or moved securely.

Consent forms will contain participant's names and will be kept in a locked filing cabinet at the researcher's residence.

Notes will not contain participant's names. These will also be kept in a locked filing cabinet at the researcher's residence, with no way of linking them to a respective consent form or client name.

All audio recordings will be digital. The digital recorder will remain in the personal possession of the researcher or will be locked in a filing cabinet at the researcher's residence. As soon as practical, following the recording of an interview (usually within 3-4 hours), digital recordings will be transferred to a password protected hard drive and erased from the recorder. These audio files will remain on a password protected hard drive within a password protected computer.

Digital recordings will be destroyed after analysis is complete, approximately 2 months.

Digital recordings will be transcribed by the researcher who will listen and transcribe to a portable, fully

encrypted, password protected computer, within a password protected drive folder. Only the researcher will have the 3 different passwords needed to access the computer, the drive and the folder within the drive on the computer to access the data. No passwords will be written down.

Study findings will be pseudonomized and will not contain participants' names.

e) If participant confidentiality is not appropriate to this research project, please explain: including details on how all participants will be advised of the fact that data will not be kept confidential.

N/A

SECTION F -- MONITORING ONGOING RESEARCH

24. **Adverse Events, Change Requests and Annual Renewal view**
   a) **Adverse events** (Unanticipated negative consequences or results affecting participants) must be reported by faculty researcher or supervisor to the REB Secretariat (Ethics Office – Ext. 23142) and the MREB Chair, as soon as possible and in any event, no more than 3 days after they occur. See: http://www.mcmaster.ca/ors/ethics/faculty_guidelines_handbook.htm#12

   b) **Changes**: To obtain clearance for a change to a protocol that has already received ethics clearance, please complete the "**< Change Request >**" form available on the MREB website or by clicking this link. Such changes may not begin before they receive ethics clearance.

   c) **Ethics clearance is for only one year**. The minimum requirement for renewed clearance is the completion of a "Renewal/Project Completed" form at least 1 month in advance of the annual report to process the renewal. In this section please indicate whether any additional monitoring or review is appropriate for this project. *PLEASE NOTE: It is the investigator's responsibility to complete the Annual Project Status Report that is sent each year by email 8 weeks in advance of the anniversary of the original ethics clearance. Otherwise, ethics clearance will expire and the Research Ethics Board is obliged to notify Research Finance who in accordance with university and funding agency regulations will put a hold on funds.*

N/A

25. **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**
   (Use this section or an additional page if more space is required to complete any part of this form, or if there is any other information relevant to the project which you wish to provide to the Research Ethics Board.)

N/A

26. **POSTING OF APPROVED PROTOCOLS ON THE RESEARCH ETHICS WEBSITE**
   a) Effective January 1, 2006, it is the policy of MREB to post a list of cleared protocols on the Research Ethics website. Posted information usually includes: title, names of principal investigators, principal investigator department, type of project (i.e. PhD; Faculty; Masters, Undergraduate etc)
   b) You may request that the title be deleted from the posted information.
   c) Do you request that the title be eliminated from the posted information? **[   ] Yes [X] No**
   d) The ethics board will honour your request if you answer **Yes** to the above question **26 c**) but we ask you to provide a reason for making this request for the information of the Board. You may also use this box for any other special requests.
   e) < List of MREB Cleared Protocols > < List of Undergraduate SREC Cleared Protocols >

N/A

REMINDER: Are all of your supporting/attachments documents included?

< SECTION G – SIGNATURES >   **< HOW TO SUBMIT > and the review process.**

27**. Faculty or Administrative Staff Researcher Assurance:**

[   ] *"I confirm that I have read the < McMaster University Research Ethics Guidelines and Faculty Handbook >, and I agree to comply with the conditions outlined in the Guidelines.*

_____

Signature of Faculty or Staff Investigator   PLEASE TYPE/PRINT NAME HERE   Date

28**. Graduate or Undergraduate Research Assurance:**

For graduate or undergraduate student research where:
[X] the supervisor is the primary supervisor for a dissertation, thesis or major research paper:
Or
[   ] the supervisor is not the primary supervisor, and where the research is not for a dissertation, thesis or major research paper (e.g., independent study, experiential learning etc.):

[X] *"I confirm that I have read the < McMaster University Research Ethics Guidelines and Faculty Handbook >, and I agree to comply with the conditions outlined in the Guidelines.*

[X] *"I have read the application and proposal and deem the project to be valid and worthwhile, and I agree to provide the necessary supervision of the student(s) and to make myself available should problems arise during the course of the research."*

_____

Signature of Faculty Supervisor   PLEASE TYPE/PRINT NAME HERE   Date

_____

Signature of Student   PLEASE TYPE/ PRINT NAME HERE   Date

As this application was submitted via email, a hard copy Signature page will follow via mail.

LETTER OF INFORMATION and CONSENT

Conversations Over Coffee: Reflexivity and Social Work Praxis
A Study about Social Workers and Reflexivity

Student Investigator:
Aisha Applewhaite
Department of Social Work
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
mail: applewav@mcmaster.ca

E-

Faculty Supervisor:
Dr. Saara Greene
Department of Social Work
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
(905) 525-9140 ext. 23782
E-mail: greenes@mcmaster.ca

Purpose of the Study

This research aims to explore the relationship between social work praxis (i.e. practice distinguished from theory) and reflexivity; the self-conscious awareness that reflects back over what has happened so as to extract meaning. Frequent discussion in social work literature notes self-awareness as a prerequisite to competent social work practice. The process of professionalization into the role of a self-aware social worker begins with social work education that typically stresses self-awareness in relation to the client; cultivating social workers' awareness of the effect of power imbalances and oppressive structures of society on the client. Thus, we are taught that the self is defined in light of the self's impact on the client. However, given the stressful nature of current social work environments, this research aims to examine the client's impact on the social worker's self. I am doing this research as part of my Master of Social Work thesis.

You are invited to take part in this study on reflexivity, which will involve a 60-90 minute interview. Every effort will be made to accommodate your schedule

During the interview, I am hoping to gain a better understanding of the role of reflexivity in your work. Some of the questions you may be asked include:
1) Does reflexivity play a role in your work?
2) If so, how is your work affected by reflexivity?
3) Neoliberalism is typified by the government's push for citizen engagement in the market to produce self-sufficiency, thus offloading the government's role in social responsibility. Some examples of neoliberalism are welfare-to-work policies and decreased funding to social programs. In Ontario during the late 1990's and early 2000's, Premier Mike Harris furthered neoliberalism through the large cuts to social program funding and fiscal clawbacks. Does neoliberalism, supervision or changing clinical discourse play a role in your ability to engage in reflexivity?
4) If so, how?
5) Can you describe an experience where a client interaction directly or professionally challenged, weakened and/or strengthened you, leading to personal growth?

Procedures involved in the Research

- We will meet at a location you choose, which ensures privacy.
- Our conversation will involve discussion of reflexivity in your social work practice and the impact engaging in reflexive practice has or has not had on you personally. The length of our conversation will largely depend on you as you will share as much or as little as you feel comfortable. It is anticipated that our discussion will take approximately 60-90 minutes. I am flexible with this to accommodate your schedule.
- Our interview will be audio recorded and then transcribed.
- Once I have completed my thesis, a copy will be made available to you.
- Final data will be made available to participants in the form of a written summary.

Potential Harms, Risks or Discomforts

It is expected that there will be minimal risks to you in taking part in the interview. You may feel some discomfort discussing your personal experiences with reflexivity, but you can stop at any time. While a pseudonym will be assigned to you, sometimes identification can take place by the stories we tell. I will take every measure to safeguard your confidentiality.

Potential Benefits

You will not receive direct or material benefits from participating in this research, but the study may benefit the greater social work community by increasing awareness of the lacking ability to engage in reflexivity. This knowledge could be used to impact social policy, agency policy and social work education.

Compensation

As a symbol of my gratitude for your time and openness in discussing this topic, I would like to extend a small token of appreciation with a $10 Tim Horton's gift card.

Confidentiality

You are participating in this study confidentially. I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified. You will be given a pseudonym in the presentation of findings. Only I will know whether you participated unless you choose to tell others. If needed and wherever possible, specific identifying details of a story can be altered or not included (for example: agency name) to maintain confidentiality and integrity of the experience. I will undertake to safeguard the confidentiality of the discussion.

The information/data you provide will be kept in a locked cabinet where only I will have access to it. Information kept on a computer will be protected by a password. Once the study has been completed, the data will be destroyed.

Participation and Withdrawal
Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to be part of the study, you can decide to withdraw after signing the consent form or part-way through the study. Participants can no longer withdraw from the study after the results have been written, approximately August 31, 2012. If you decide to withdraw, there will be no consequences to you and you are welcome to keep the $10 Tim Horton's gift card. In cases of withdrawal, any data you have provided will be destroyed unless you indicate otherwise.

Information about the Study Results
I expect to have this study completed by approximately September 9, 2012. If you would like a summary of the results, please let me know how you would like it sent to you.

Questions about the Study
If you have questions or need more information about the study itself, please contact me at applewav@mcmaster.ca. We can arrange a telephone conversation if that is more convenient.

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance.

If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

> McMaster Research Ethics Secretariat
> Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142
> c/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support
> E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

CONSENT

- I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Aisha Applewhaite of McMaster University.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study and to receive additional details I requested.
- I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I may withdraw from the study at any time.
- I have been given a copy of this form.
- I agree to participate in the study.
- I agree that the interview can be audio recorded [ ] yes [ ] no
- I would like to receive a summary of the study's results   [ ] yes [ ] no
- If yes, please send them to this email address _____
  Or this mailing address _____
                          _____
                          _____
- I agree to be contacted about a follow-up interview, and understand that I can always decline the request.
  [ ] yes. Please contact me at: _____
  [ ] no.

Signature: _____

Name of Participant (Printed) _____   Date: _____

<u>**SAMPLE APPENDIX C**</u>

**Email Recruitment Script
Sent on Behalf of the Researcher
by the Holder of the Participants' Contact Information**

**Aisha Applewhaite, HBA, HBSW, RSW
Masters Candidate in Social Work**

Study Title:
Conversations Over Coffee: Reflexivity and Social Work Praxis
_____

Sample E-mail Subject line: A study exploring the relationship between social work praxis and self-awareness

Dear Employees,
Aisha Applewhaite, a Masters Candidate in Social Work at McMaster University, has contacted [Name of Agency] asking us to tell our employees about a study she is doing on reflexivity in social work practice. This research is part of her MSW degree requirements.

The following is a brief description of her study. If you are interested in getting more information about taking part in Aisha's study please read the brief description below and or **CONTACT HER DIRECTLY** by using her McMaster telephone number or email address. **Tel: 905-525-9140 Ext: 23782** or **applewav@mcmaster.ca**

Aisha Applewhaite is inviting you to take part in a study on social work praxis (i.e. practice distinguished from theory) and reflexivity (i.e. the *self-conscious awareness that reflects back over what has happened so as to extract meaning)*, which will involve a 60-90 minute interview. Every effort will be made to accommodate your schedule. As such, if it is your preference, scheduling of the interview and focus group can be on separate days, to minimize the impact on your schedule.

Aisha hopes to learn more about the role self-awareness plays in your work and hear your experiences with reflexivity that have directly or professionally challenged, weakened and/or strengthened you and led to personal growth.

In addition, this study has been reviewed and cleared by the McMaster Research Ethics Board. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is being conducted you may contact:

> McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat
> Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142
> c/o Office of Research Services
> E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

Sincerely,
Name
Position
Agency Name

McMaster University

Appendix B: Recruitment Poster

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR
Interview

Conversations Over Coffee:
Reflexivity and Social Work Praxis

Are you a social worker who has experienced an "ah ha" moment in your social work practice? *Have you experienced reflexivity, i.e. a self-conscious awareness while reflecting back on a situation to extract meaning?* Would you like to share your experiences with reflexivity that have directly or professionally challenged, weakened and/or strengthened you and led to personal growth?

Then this study is for you!

Participation involves a single one-on-one discussion. Every effort will be made to accommodate your schedule.

In appreciation for your time, you will receive a $20 Tim Horton's gift card.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study, please contact:

LISTEN
RESPOND
ENGAGE
SURPRISE
APPRECIATE

Aisha Applewhaite HBA, HBSW, RSW
Department of Social Work
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
(905) 525-9140 ext. 23782
E-mail: **applewav@mcmaster.ca**

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance by the McMaster Research Ethics Board.

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