

Encouraging self-reflection in social work students: Using Personal Construct methods.

Abstract

We report on a research study in which we introduced undergraduate social work students in England to two methods originating in Personal Construct Theory (PCT) as a way of encouraging in-depth self-reflection. The methods were first piloted with four students and subsequently used with two large classes of second year students. The students often found the methods challenging, but many felt that these enabled them to reflect upon social work practice and upon their own assumptions, values and behaviour in a fresh and thought-provoking way. We argue that such methods could usefully be added to existing methods for encouraging reflexivity in social work students. Teaching materials and instructions for delivering our teaching session using these methods are available online at <http://www.hud.ac.uk/research/researchcentres/capr/projects/personal-construct-methods-in-reflective-practice/>

Key words: social work education; critical reflection; values; personal constructs; laddering.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN SOCIAL WORK

Social work has typically enjoined its practitioners to reflect on what they do and why, and this emphasis on reflective practice has emerged in the context of increasing concerns about competence-based learning in social work education (Wilson, 2013). There is a strong belief that critical reflection can promote effective change (for example, Morley, 2014) and it has therefore become a key part of both practice-based and class-based

teaching in social work education. In assessed practice, social work students are required to engage in critical reflection on their practice and the legislative, policy and ethical context of their interventions. In the class setting, students are often required to write reflective assignments that demonstrate the insights they have gained.

Placement students engage in critical reflection on their practice, for example through keeping learning logs and reflecting on critical incidents, and are provided with professional supervision to help develop their reflective skills (Lam *et al.* 2007). The value of such professional supervision in practice has long been recognised in theory, although not always realised in practice (McGregor, 2013), especially in the crucial developmental years following formal qualification (Munro, 2012). In an effort to redress this problem, the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment was introduced in England in September 2012, successful completion of which is necessary for full professional registration with the regulatory body, the Health and Care Professionals Council.

Drawing on the work of earlier scholars (e.g. Argyris and Schön, 1976); Gibbs (1988); Kolb, 1984; Ruch, 2002; Schön, 1983), Yip (2006: 777) describes reflection as “a process of self-analysis, self-evaluation, self-dialogue and self-observation”. As such, it may be contrasted to a formulaic “tick-box” approach to practice that emphasises adherence to procedural guidelines, recognising that there is much in contemporary social work practice that is ambiguous, uncertain and contested (Fook, 2012; Parton, 1998). In the UK, the Professional Capability Framework (PCF), developed by the Social Work Reform Board and subsequently owned by the recently-disbanded College of Social Work, provides an overarching professional standards framework, comprising nine interdependent core capabilities representing the knowledge, skills and values required of social workers in order to practice effectively (1. professionalism; 2. values and ethics; 3. diversity; 4. rights, justice and economic wellbeing; 5. knowledge ; 6. critical reflection and analysis; 7. intervention and

skills; 8. contexts and organisations, and 9. professional leadership). It will be seen that the PCF identifies critical reflection and analysis as essential components of the social worker's "toolkit". The PCF further defines different levels of capability at different stages in a social worker's career, from point of entry to the profession through expectations of student social workers and continuing professional development following qualification, to advanced and strategic social work roles, each of which reflect the complexity of work that an individual possessing those capabilities would be expected to manage (The College of Social Work, 2012, 2014).

Despite an acknowledged lack of clarity in terms such as 'reflexivity', 'critical reflection' and 'reflectivity' in social work (D'Cruz *et al.*, 2007), it is clear that active reflection upon oneself and one's practice is now felt to be a key characteristic of the effective, professional practitioner. As Sheppard and Charles (2014) point out, the core proficiency of critical reflection includes the social worker's ability to reflect upon and analyse their own experience (COSW, 2014). Their work suggests that social work students are able to demonstrate a range of critical thinking skills, but their operational definition of critical thinking did not include the ability to critically reflect on one's own assumptions and conduct. Indeed, critical self-reflection often appears to imply a rather narrow focus, namely the social worker's reflection on particular cases in which they have been involved.

Whilst there is some research on the development of critical thinking in placement students (for example *Ford et al.*, 2005; *Wilson*, 2013) there appears to be no research which has addressed the development of criticality in students outside of placements. Additionally, whilst critical thinking is taken to incorporate self-reflection, including reflection on one's own knowledge and taken-for-granted-understandings (*Ford et al.*, 2004) and emotional responses (*D'Cruz et al.*, 2007), there is little research evidence suggesting how such critical self-reflection might be developed in students, as opposed to skills such as the evaluation of evidence, or the linking of theory and practice.

In order to develop self-awareness, Constable (2013) encourages students to keep a reflective journal in which they pose themselves questions such as ‘what assumptions am I making?’ and ‘what does this tell me about my beliefs?’ (p56). However, reflecting upon one’s assumptions and beliefs is not necessarily easy to do, since these are often ‘ground’ rather than ‘figure’ for us; we may need assistance to render them ‘visible’ to us and therefore available for inspection. Structured exercises can be helpful here; for example, Constable suggests the use of a SWOT analysis. But even exercises like this depend upon the ability to identify key features of one’s character simply by thinking about it. Furthermore, there is some evidence that a significant minority of social work students may be dissatisfied with what they see as “‘routinised’ and instrumental approaches to reflection” (Wilson, 2013: 170). Similarly Bravington (2011) in a study of placements in nursing and midwifery found that, whilst students valued a structured approach to reflection, some found the use of standard reflective models laborious, restrictive or repetitive.

The present study therefore builds on previous research by focussing on reflection that does not rely on the evaluation of specific cases in the student’s practice experience (such as during placements), at a relatively early stage of students’ social work education, and using methods that offer a structured though not ‘routinised’ approach to reflection.

PERSONAL CONSTRUCT THEORY AND METHODS

PCT originated in clinical psychological practice with the work of George Kelly (1955). It has since developed a number of techniques for enabling people to gain insight into their own thinking, and has been successfully applied in organisational, educational and health and social care contexts.

Kelly argued that people 'construe', or perceive, the world in their own idiosyncratic way. Each person develops for themselves a 'construct system' through which they interpret their experience. Our construct system is like a lens through which we perceive the world, giving it a particular appearance and meaning. This system consists of a number of bi-polar dimensions (constructs), such as careful vs impulsive or communicative vs secretive. In PCT terms, if we want to understand a person we must gain some insight into their construing, and this involves gaining some appreciation of the constructs they use to understand their world and themselves.

However, we are often not consciously aware of our construing; it is our taken-for-granted way of seeing things. Our construing can have a powerful influence on our interactions and relationships. For example, when one social worker meets a new service user for the first time, they may be (non-consciously) asking 'is s/he going to be open or defensive?' whereas another may be asking 'will I be able to help, or will I feel frustrated?' Their relationship with the service user is inevitably shaped by this construing. The aim in PCT therapy is to enable the service user to inspect and articulate their own construing in order to allow them to understand and transcend their psychological difficulties, and PCT practitioners have developed a number of effective techniques for enabling people to reflect upon and gain insight into their own construing and conduct. At the heart of all of these techniques is the aim of enabling the person to reflect in depth upon their own conduct and the personal view of the world that informs this.

PCT methods often focus on concrete examples from the person's experience, and this has advantages. As outlined above, it can sometimes be difficult for people to access and articulate complex aspects of their experience, and focusing on concrete examples can aid this. With some participant groups it can also be difficult to avoid socially desirable responses, for example where practitioners are keenly aware of what is regarded as 'best practice' in their field. This is arguably the case with social work students, who are regularly

reminded of the principles underlying best practice. Using concrete examples provide a means of accessing accounts which reach beyond socially desirable or common-sense responses since they avoid asking participants direct questions about what is important to them.

According to PCT, our construct system is arranged hierarchically, with relatively concrete and mundane constructs, used in relation to quite narrow aspects of life, at the bottom of the hierarchy and more abstract constructs relating to our overarching values and beliefs at the top. For example, lower level constructs might include 'rhythmic vs melodic' (in relation to music) or 'talkative vs reserved' (in relation to colleagues or friends). A construct higher up the system, to which the lower ones will be related, might be 'stimulating vs dull' as this could apply to both music and colleagues/friends. This might in turn be subsumed under an even higher-order (or 'superordinate') construct such as 'life-enhancing vs life-limiting'. The two methods we used with the social work students in this research are designed to enable people to gain insight into their own construing and to reflect upon the more value-laden construing that might be said to lie towards the 'top' of their construct hierarchy. These methods are 'construct elicitation' and 'laddering' respectively.

Construct elicitation

Construct elicitation typically entails the comparison of concrete examples, which are referred to as 'elements', in groups of three (referred to as 'triads') and asking the participant to think of any way in which two are similar and different from the third. A 'pool' of elements is first developed. Where the topic under investigation concerns our construing of other people and our relationships with them, these elements would typically consist of people known to the individual. The number of elements used is not important, but there should be enough to enable several different comparisons to be made. They might be asked to compare, for example, their mother, their best friend and their brother, and they may answer "Two of these people are outgoing but the other is shy." The bi-polar construct

elicited by this comparison is 'outgoing – shy'. Comparison of different triads of elements would produce further constructs, such as 'warm - reserved' or 'thorough - in a hurry'. Inspection of the list of constructs obtained in this way can in itself provide insight into the individual's world-view and can promote useful discussion with them about this. For example, Butt, Bell and Burr (1997) used this method to examine people's sense of self in their relationships with others. One participant, Katherine, produced the constructs in Fig. 1. Inspection of these constructs suggests a theme of wariness and self-protection.

Fig. 1
Katherine's Constructs

feel defensive.....not defensive
 feel uncomfortable.....feel comfortable
 I'm guarded.....I'm open
 feel disinterested.....feel concerned
 unsure.....relaxed
 wouldn't share my feelings.....would share my feelings
 want to protect myselffeel comfortable
 feel resentful..... don't feel resentful
 unstimulated..... stimulated
 feel vulnerable.....don't feel vulnerable
 distrust them..... trust them

Authors' own (2014) also used this method to explore women's identities using shoes as the elements. Pictures of a wide range of footwear formed the pool of elements. Triads of images were presented to the women and they were asked to compare these in terms of the 'personality' the shoes might be said to have, or the kind of woman who might wear

them. When the women were invited to reflect on the elicited constructs, this produced rich insights into their sense of self.

Laddering

Laddering takes one or more previously elicited constructs and uses these to explore the person's superordinate constructs, those that say something about the values and taken-for-granted assumptions that inform their conduct. First described by Hinkle (1965), it is used to help a person to articulate dimensions of meaning that are of central importance to them. It is especially helpful when the participant has difficulty in reaching for and articulating their abstract values and beliefs, or explaining the reasons for their behaviour. One of the person's previously elicited construct dimensions is selected and written down. This is usually a construct that is relatively 'subordinate' or 'concrete'. For example, 'quiet vs talkative'. They would then be asked to say which pole of the construct they would prefer to see themselves at and why, and their response is written above that pole of the construct. They are asked what the contrast would be and their response is written above the other pole. In the quiet-talkative example, the response might be 'hard to relate to vs socially skilled'. These two responses now effectively constitute another, more abstract, construct, and the two constructs constitute the first two 'rungs' of a ladder (see Fig. 2). The same process is applied to the new construct and so on until the person cannot meaningfully 'ascend' any further.

Fig. 2

hard to relate to..... socially skilled



quiet talkative

However, although the constructs that can be elicited through these methods may be interesting, it is important not to think of the identification of constructs as an end in itself. As in psychotherapy, the process of reflecting in depth upon one's construing is likely to be more important than the specific outcomes of the exercises. In our research we were therefore relatively unconcerned with gaining knowledge of students' construct systems but rather focussed mainly on the effectiveness of the self-reflection in which they engaged.

THE RESEARCH STUDY

The participants were undergraduate social work students at a UK university. The research consisted of a pilot study and two subsequent classroom sessions with written student feedback. Ethical approval was given by the Research and Ethics Panel at the researchers' institution. All students gave informed consent to take part and were assured that their role in the research, or any decision to withdraw from it, would have no consequences for their studies. Pilot study participants were assigned pseudonyms, and all feedback sheets were anonymous.

The pilot study

Method

The participants were four female social work undergraduates, Nadia, Caroline, Jenny and Alice; Jenny was in her first year and the others were in their third year. The third year students had gained some experience through their placements. Nadia participated individually, the other three taking part as a group. This enabled us to judge whether such methods were likely to be successful in a classroom setting.

The students first did the construct elicitation exercise. They were given 6 pieces of card and asked to think of 5 people whose social work practice they were familiar with, putting a pseudonym for each person on a piece of card and including people whose practice they felt less positive about as well as those of whom they approved. On the sixth card they wrote 'me'; including this is a way of ensuring that students reflected upon their own conduct as well as that of others. In the case of the first year student, who had not yet gained any social work experience, colleagues from her previous employment in a health and social care setting were used. With each student, the researchers selected three of their cards at random and asked them to provide any way in which two people were similar and different from the third. They were asked to focus on the behaviour and practice of the individuals. We continued offering the participant different combinations of cards, being sure to include 'me' in some of them, until they could offer no new constructs. This procedure typically elicits between 5 and 20 constructs. Jenny's constructs (see Fig 3) are an example.

Fig 3

Jenny's constructs

senior level – entry level

caring – cold

highly strung – calm

harsh – warm

client centred – business centred

detached – mindful of clients

immature – mature

complacent – super keen

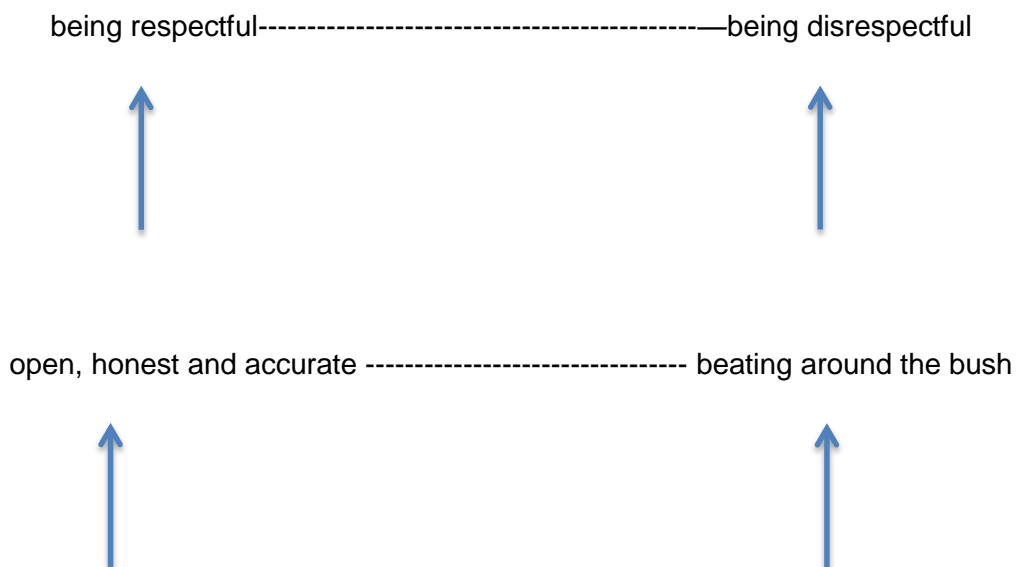
Rather than explore these constructs further, we wanted to use construct elicitation as a first stage in the laddering exercise. We chose relatively 'concrete' or subordinate constructs from each student's list for laddering. For example, Jenny's construct 'senior level – entry level' appears very concrete and would be a better candidate for laddering than 'harsh - warm', which is more abstract.

In the case of each student, a construct was selected from their list and they were asked to say which pole of the construct they would prefer to see themselves at and why, as outlined above, thus generating a new construct. This process was repeated with the new construct until the student could give no new answers. The students each produced between two and four ladders, using different constructs as the starting point each time.

Illustrative findings

We provide below brief examples of these ladders and the reflection they prompted. The ladders sometimes produced counter-intuitive results. For example, Fig. 4 shows Alice's first ladder, starting with the construct 'abrupt - soft'.

Fig. 4
Alice's first ladder



abrupt----- soft

Although this ladder consists of only three 'rungs', it was interesting that an 'abrupt' style (rather than being 'soft') was, for Alice, likely to signal an ultimately more respectful relationship with service users. A next stage in the process of reflection might be to encourage Alice to think about how her conduct might be interpreted by service users and colleagues.

Alice's second ladder (see Fig. 5) was longer and prompted a good deal of reflection.

Fig. 5

Alice's second ladder

better quality of life-----unhappiness, real deep problems



improve standard of living-----negative effect on life opportunities



potentially improving someone's life-----cause problem for people or minimise



realistic, assessed judgment-----dangerous, wrong decisions



you have all that you need -----not have enough information



too nosey-----not nosey enough

In the process of completing this ladder, it was clear that Alice was reflecting on her social work values. At the beginning of the laddering process, it seemed that she was unsure of just how 'nosey' a social worker ought to be. However, as she proceeded with the exercise she reflected on the implications of these two kinds of behaviour and came to the

conclusion that it was important for a social worker to be highly inquisitive about a service user's situation as this was the only way to realistically assess the problem and, ultimately, give the service user a better quality of life.

Participant feedback

After the exercises, we interviewed our participants about their experiences of doing these. They particularly remarked upon the sometimes unanticipated results of their reflection.
service user

Nadia was surprised at the results of one of her ladders. She began with the construct 'doing things their own way - following procedures'. The 'rungs' of her ladder led from 'following procedures' through 'providing the best for the client without delay' to 'able to achieve potential as a person'. Nadia says:

...the following procedures thing, that is just sort of drilled into your head when you're at Uni...you've got to follow the procedures, but I would never have thought that I would have got to the conclusion that I did to talk about that.

For Caroline, laddering helped her to gain insight into her reactions to others' practice:

I didn't realise what my actual main values were in social work until I did that ladder and I didn't realise why sometimes I view things so negatively until I did the ladder. So when I said, erm...'target oriented – [oriented] to service user' and how that led to my values and that's how I must view it when I'm seeing somebody that's more about targets and money, I must be thinking 'well you don't think about the service-users' and that must be why it annoys me in practice.

Such insights are arguably evidence of the kind of thorough and effective reflection that social work educators encourage. The students also suggested that these methods, though challenging for them at times, may result in more effective reflection than the methods they typically use during their course:

We have to write a reflective account at the end of the year...and sometimes you feel like you're just reflecting on the same stuff year in, year out. (Alice)

You're drilling down more, aren't you, doing it this way, the why's, you're questioning even further on that action and then you're questioning on that action. (Jenny)

We asked the participants whether they felt the exercises would be feasible for use with students in a large class setting, and whether this should be restricted to year 3 students. They all felt confident that it was feasible and that second year, and even first year, students could potentially benefit from it.

The classroom study

This feedback encouraged us to trial the methods in a classroom setting. We subsequently conducted a 2-hour teaching session with two consecutive cohorts of year 2 undergraduate social work students in January 2014 and January 2015. The session was part of a module in 'Reflective Practice', with over 60 students in the class on each occasion. These students had not yet undertaken a placement.

Method

After a brief introduction to PCT, we gave the students some initial experience of both construct elicitation and laddering through an exercise on 'friendship'. This was chosen as it seemed a topic likely to be of relevance to them and one they could readily reflect upon. The students were provided with hand-outs explaining how to do the exercises. The researchers first modelled construct elicitation in front of the class, using a number of friends of one of them (plus 'me') as the elements and using the same procedure as above. We then asked the students to do the same exercise in pairs, with one student eliciting the constructs of the other, and circulated among them to resolve any difficulties. When we felt the students understood the process, we asked them to repeat the exercise, this time using social work practitioners known to them as the elements and focussing on their behaviour with service users and colleagues. When the students had elicited a number of constructs, we then modelled the laddering exercise using one of the 'friendship' constructs previously elicited in front of the class. The student pairs then did this exercise themselves, with help from the researchers where necessary, and then repeated it using one of their 'social work' constructs. Finally, we asked the students to provide written feedback on the teaching session. This was structured by 4 questions:

1. How easy or hard was it to understand the exercises and follow the instructions?
2. How helpful did you find the session in facilitating reflexive thinking?
3. Sometimes exercises of this kind only tell us things about ourselves that we were already aware of- were you surprised by anything that came out of the exercise?
4. How confident are you that you could use construct elicitation and laddering to reflect on your social work practice in future?

Findings and Discussion: Student feedback

We received 75 completed feedback sheets in total, 44 from the 2014 cohort and 31 from 2015. We performed a thematic analysis on the answers to each of the four questions. Initial coding was carried out by one researcher and then critically scrutinised by two

others. The findings are presented below for each feedback question, supported by direct quotes from participants.

How easy or hard was it to understand the exercises and follow the instructions?

The majority of students found the instructions easy to follow, or found that the task became clearer as they progressed with it. The first cohort's answers to question 1 were used to make minor changes to the delivery of the session for 2015, and this seemed to eliminate the uncertainty, since all of the 2015 cohort providing feedback reported ease of understanding. The 'modelling', using the friendship example, was seen as especially helpful. Typical comments included: "I thought the subject sounded confusing at first, however, when the examples were shown and we could do it for ourselves the process became clear" and "It was easy to understand the exercise and follow the instructions once an example had been shown to us".

However, although the students found the exercises easy to understand, this did not mean that they found them easy to carry out. Several students reported that the searching nature of the reflection required was challenging: "Instructions were easy but the tasks were hard", "I found it hard especially about comparing social workers, as I already had a view of what a social work should be" and:

Easy to get a grasp of what you wanted us to do (as in the exercise) but putting into practice and doing it was the hard part. Having to really think and look deep into the differences people might have.

Reflection is, by its nature, challenging and we would argue that the fact that students found the tasks hard is evidence that they were engaging in the kind of reflection that is potentially most beneficial to them.

How helpful did you find the session in facilitating reflexive thinking?

The majority of students reported finding the session very helpful, and a new, facilitative way to help them to reflect on themselves and social work practice. A major theme was that the exercises enabled a deeper reflection and focus on themselves:

Extremely helpful. I struggle in reflecting very deeply and looking at where my thoughts come from, what value they come from, and I think this is a very good tool at looking at yourself in depth and enables you to become more self-aware.

This has helped to understand the importance of reflective practise and how it helps to understand who I am and how I relate to others for example service users. I really learnt a lot from the laddering, it gets you thinking.

They reported that it allowed a more searching kind of reflection than they normally carry out: "Very. It made me think of core values not on the surface stuff", "Very helpful, I do struggle with reflection and not making it a 'dear diary', so this really made me dig deeper", and "Very helpful, helped to see our own thoughts rather than the SW principles we may unconsciously repeat."

However, a few students did not find the session particularly helpful. Some seemed to struggle with the nature of reflection itself: "I don't know what reflexive thinking is!" and "The session was interesting and helpful though I still struggled with reflecting." Others were unsure about how to use or apply it in the future "Difficult to see where it would be of benefit.", "I thought it was a useful tool. I'm not sure how much it would help me personally but it could be good to try with service users." A few students made reference to the models they have already become familiar with, and some of these found the contrast helpful: "Very helpful...We have to use theoretical methods in reflection, e.g., Gibbs, Johns. Places the reflection on oneself", while others were less positive: "Neutral, I feel I am already a

good reflector and this may have confused me a little i.e. what model to use.” However, a number of students viewed the exercises as a potentially useful addition to their existing reflective tools: “Quite helpful, it is another tool to add to the collection” and “It was pretty helpful, as it has taught me a new tool to use when I reflect.”

A small number of students had difficulties which they described as ‘going round in circles’: “It showed how to explore and be critical of situations but also took me round in circles at times” and “Showed how to be critical however also showed how you could end up going around in circles.” These comments seem likely to relate to the laddering exercise. Whilst there is some evidence to legitimate the assumption that laddering elicits more abstract, superordinate and value-laden constructs (Gutman and Reynolds, 1979; Neimeyer, Anderson and Stockton, 2001) it has also been noted (Butt, 1995) that laddering may not lead to constructs that qualify as ‘superordinate’; constructs elicited through the laddering process can sometimes appear very similar to those on lower ‘rungs’ of the ladder, creating the impression of ‘going round in circles’. We discuss this issue later.

How confident are you that you could use construct elicitation and laddering to reflect on your social work practice in future?

Again, most of the responses to this question were very positive. The majority of the students said they were quite confident or very confident and many stated a clear intention to use the methods in future, for example: “I am very confident in using this method in my reflections. I found this very beneficial and will use this in my future work”, “I think I will try and use this concept when doing my reflective journals as it was more personal” and “Very confident in applying this to social work practice.” However a few were less sure: “I would feel confident in using it but not sure I would”, “I’m a little unsure as to how I would link it in to my reflections but I’m willing to try it!” and “Fairly confident, however I do feel there are

more useful methods.” However, others felt that they would be confident to use the methods if given a little more practise with them. Others were confident in using the methods again but felt they were unlikely to do so: “I don’t think I would use this again. But you never know!”

and “I feel I could but it is likely I won’t.” These students had found some aspects of the exercises difficult, or had not found the results of their reflection to be particularly enlightening.

Sometimes exercises of this kind only tell us things about ourselves that we were already aware of- were you surprised by anything that came out of the exercises?

Approximately two thirds of the responses to this question suggested that the exercises had led to surprising outcomes. Sometimes these surprises were about the power of the exercises themselves: “I was surprised at how reflective the task made me as I have previously struggled at carrying out a solid thought process”, “How much further our ways of thinking went, leading to deeper reflections”, and:

I found it surprising I was able to reflect, have understanding of why. Which I have failed to do in the past. It really helps to understand my own values. Helps to give understanding of the meaning of words such as empowerment, non-judgemental. How it will help my practice.

Many students also reported that the exercises had resulted in new insights for them: “It challenged my values and found out things about myself which I never thought about in the past”, “Yes I was- it was a great learning tool for me. I thought I was aware of most of my prejudices but found I wasn’t”, and “Not to simply select one side of the construct, e.g. compassionate and practical both have strengths.” Some of these positive comments referred particularly to the laddering exercise: “Yes the challenging and questioning from

the laddering”, “Yes -Some constructs started off so simple, led to finding out more about yourself” and “Yes, some of my views shocked me on the ladder task (which end I wanted to be at).”

However, in approximately one third of the responses to this question, students reported achieving no new insights. Most did not elaborate on this, but a few offered explanations for example “No- we have done a lot of work around exploring our own values”, “No- the exercise told me things I always knew about my values” and “Not so much, reinforced elements of my personality I was already quite aware of.” But despite this, a few students still felt the exercises were worthwhile: “No- but good to confirm these and be assured”, “Not really, just emphasised the need to be more aware of why I do things”, and “Not really, although it prompted me to challenge it.”

Discussion

It is clear that the majority of students who provided feedback found the exercises easy to understand and that they helped them to reflect in a deeper way than they normally do. Most felt confident to use the methods in their future reflections and/or practice, and for the majority the process led to insights that were new for them. Not all students felt this way, however, and so it is also clear that these methods are not universally beneficial, although even students who did not feel them to be especially useful welcomed them as additional reflexive tools. And of course we cannot know the experience of students who did not provide feedback.

As illustrated above, some students described their experience of the laddering exercise as one of ‘going round in circles’. Laddering is widely accepted as a technique which allows researchers to see the organisation of person’s construct system, helping us to access their

superordinate constructs. However, Butt (1995; 2007) and Bell (2014) have challenged this. They suggest that construct systems are not as neatly organised as is implied, and that conceptualising them in this hierarchical way may lead to confusion about what laddering can achieve. They recognise that laddering sometimes can lead 'upwards' to the elicitation of constructs that are more abstract and value-laden than those we begin the exercise with, and this was clearly the case for some of the participants in our study. But sometimes it doesn't, and we can end up 'going round in circles, with the constructs elicited at the top of the ladder looking similar to those we started with. Nevertheless, what laddering does is to help us to explore the implications, for us, of some of our construing. It gives us an insight into how our constructs are related to other constructs and in so doing frequently offers us food for reflective thought. So, 'going round in circles' is not necessarily a problem-interesting issues may nevertheless be revealed in the process. However, given the comments on this by some of our participants it would seem sensible in future to do a little more preparatory work with students on what might be expected and achieved through laddering.

Critical reflection and analysis is a PCF core capability, and this includes the social worker's ability to reflect upon and analyse their own experience (Sheppard and Charles, 2014), and we argue that the methods we have used here can facilitate critical reflection on one's own taken-for-granted assumptions (Ford *et al.*, 2004), emotional responses (D'Cruz *et al.*, 2007) and conduct. In order to develop the kind of self-awareness that Constable (2013) sees as desirable, students should pose themselves questions such as 'what assumptions am I making?' and 'what does this tell me about my beliefs?' However, as noted earlier, reflecting upon one's assumptions and beliefs is not necessarily straightforward and structured exercises can be helpful here. The exercises used in this study, without ever asking these questions directly, enabled the students to explore and articulate their assumptions through the use of concrete examples. It may also be argued that adopting a PCT approach in social work education can contribute to the development of anti-

oppressive practice (see, for example, Carniol, 2005). PCT methods explicitly 'democratise' the relationship between teacher and student, researcher and researched and between service user and practitioner. The perspective of the person whose construing is being explored is necessarily foregrounded and legitimated, and construing is always described in words and phrases that the person themselves has used, thus giving them a 'voice'.

Despite the fact that the students in this research had very little or no practice experience, they were able to fully engage with the exercises, suggesting that their use need not be limited to one stage (placement) of the educational process. We were also struck by how quickly the students grasped the exercises. In our experience, undergraduate students need more time and coaching in order to derive significant learning from their engagement with PCT methods. However, it seems likely that in the case of social work students, their familiarity with other reflective models and with the purposes of reflection meant that they were able to engage rapidly with these new methods. Indeed, we had feared that the three hour teaching slot would have been insufficient, but some of the students reported that we had allowed too much time for some of the exercises.

We did not ask students to compare these methods with the models of reflection they are already familiar with. However, our findings from the pilot study suggest that students may well find these methods refreshingly less routinised and repetitive (Wilson, 2013; Bravington, 2011). Based on the feedback we have received from the students in this study we therefore suggest that the PCT methods trialled here could potentially form useful additional tools for enabling the kind of deep reflection that is required of them. Teaching materials and instructions for delivering our teaching sessions using these methods can be found at <http://www.hud.ac.uk/research/researchcentres/capr/projects/personal-construct-methods-in-reflective-practice/>

REFERENCES

Argyris, C. and Schön, D. (1976) *Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

Authors' own (2014) 'Personal construct psychology methods for qualitative research', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, **17**(4), pp. 341-355.

Bell, R. (2014) 'Did Hinkle prove laddered constructs are superordinate? A re-examination of his data suggests not', *Personal Construct Theory & Practice*, **11**, pp. 1-4.

Bravington, A. (2011) *Using the Pictor technique to reflect on collaborative working in undergraduate nursing and midwifery placements*. Masters thesis, University of Huddersfield. Available at <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/13720/>

Butt, T. (1995) 'Ordinal relationships between constructs', *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, **8**(3), pp. 227-236.

Butt, T. W. (2007) 'Personal construct theory and method: another look at laddering', *Personal Construct Theory & Practice*, **4**, pp. 11-14.

Butt, T., Bell, R. and Burr, V. (1997) 'Fragmentation and the self', *Constructivism in the Human Sciences*, **2**(1), pp. 12-29.

Carniol, B. (2005) *Case Critical: Social services and social justice in Canada*. 5th edition. Toronto, Canada: Between the Lines.

The College of Social Work (n.d.) *Professional Capabilities Framework*.

<http://www.tcsw.org.uk/ProfessionalCapabilitiesFramework/>

The College of Social Work (2012) *An Introduction to Qualifying Standards and Professional Social Work Education*. www.collegeofsocialwork.org/professional-development/educators/.

The College of Social Work (2014) Purpose, development and use of the Professional Capabilities Framework for Social Workers. www.collegeofsocialwork.org/pcf.aspx

- Constable, G. (2013) 'Reflection as a catalyst in the development of personal and professional effectiveness', in C. Knott, and T. Scragg (eds) *Reflective Practice in Social Work*, third edition, London: Sage.
- D'Cruz, H., Gillingham, P. and Melendez, S. (2007) 'Reflexivity, its meanings and relevance for social work: A critical review of the literature', *British Journal of Social Work*, **37**, pp. 73-90.
- Fook, J. (2012) *Social Work: A Critical Approach to Practice* (2nd edn). London, Sage.
- Ford, P., Johnston, B., Brumfit, C., Mitchell, R. and Myles, F. (2005) 'Practice learning and development of students as critical practitioners: Some findings from research', *Social Work Education*, **24**(7), pp. 391–407.
- Ford, P., Johnston, B., Mitchell, R. and Myles, F. (2004) 'Social work education and criticality: Some thoughts from research', *Social Work Education*, **23**(2), pp. 185–98.
- Gibbs, G. (1988) *Learning by Doing: A Guide to Teaching and Learning Methods*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Gutman, J. and Reynolds, T.J. (1979) 'An investigation of the levels of cognitive abstraction used by consumers in product differentiation', in J. Eighmey (ed) *Attitude Research Under the Sun*, Chicago, McGraw-Hill.
- Hinkle, D. (1965) *The change of personal constructs from the viewpoint of a theory of implications*, unpublished PhD thesis, Columbus, OH, Ohio State University.
- Kelly, G.A. (1955) *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*, New York, Norton.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984) *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall.
- Lam, C. M., Wong, H. and Leung, T. T. F. (2007) 'An unfinished reflexive journey: Social work students' reflection on their placement experiences', *British Journal of Social Work* **37**(1), pp. 91-105.
- McGregor, K. (2013) Social work students being given unsupervised responsibility for risk and safeguarding assessments on placement. *Community Care* **1** (November),

<http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2013/11/01/social-work-students-being-given-unsupervised-responsibility-for-risk-and-safeguarding-assessments-on-placement/>

Morley, C. (2014) 'Using critical reflection to research possibilities for change', *British Journal of Social Work*, **44**(6), pp. 1419-1435.

Munro, E. (2012) *Munro Review of Child Protection*, www.education.gov.uk/munroreview

Neimeyer, R.A., Anderson, A. and Stockton, L. (2001) 'Snakes versus ladders: A validation of laddering technique as a measure of hierarchical structure', *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, **18**, pp. 237-252.

Parton, N. (1998) 'Risk, advanced liberalism and child welfare: The need to rediscover uncertainty and ambiguity', *British Journal of Social Work*, **28**(1), pp. 5–27.

Ruch, G. (2002) 'From triangle to spiral: Reflective practice in social work education, practice and research', *Social Work Education*, **21**(2), pp. 199–216.

Schön, D. A. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, New York, Basic Books.

Yip, K. S. (2006) 'Self-reflection in reflective practice: A note of caution', *British Journal of Social Work*, **36**(5), pp. 777-788.

Sheppard, M. and Charles, M. (2014) 'Critical thinking and interpersonal dispositions in those commencing social work training', *British Journal of Social Work*, **44**, pp. 2057-2066.

Wilson, G. (2013) 'Evidencing reflective practice in social work education: Theoretical uncertainties and practical challenges', *British Journal of Social Work*, **43**, pp. 154-172.