

Introducing tools of reflective learning into peer supervision groups in a social work agency: An action research project

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Summary: This article describes an action research project carried out by the authors in conjunction with a group of Irish hospital based social workers. The aim of the research was to investigate the introduction of reflective learning tools into peer supervision groups. Twenty-one social workers engaged with the research process. Data was collected from nine focus groups over a twelve month period. Findings chart the development of practitioners' understandings of reflection. Engagement with the tools of reflective learning in peer supervision groups led to increased awareness and mindfulness (as described by Langer [1989]) in practice. Some of the challenges of peer supervision group processes are also explicated leading to the identification of further research questions.

Keywords: social work; reflective learning tools; continuing professional development; peer supervision groups

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Introduction

One of the central preoccupations in contemporary social work literature and practice is the perceived assault on professional identity by managerialist and technicist approaches to practice. However, there are now some studies emerging which suggest that these claims may have been exaggerated. One example of this is Ferguson and O'Reilly's (2001) study in the west of Ireland, which demonstrated that social workers in child protection practice provided considerable support to children and families which went well beyond risk assessment and protection. Another example is Robinson's (2003) work on the use of the LSI-R (Level of Service Inventory – Revised) within the Probation Service in England. Her research concluded that the use of technical innovations such as the LSI-R, is shaped to a significant extent by context, service users, and the perceptions of the professionals involved. The probation officers in the study did not view this instrument as a threat to their professional skills. Rather, they saw it as an aid that supplemented a professional clinical assessment. Further evidence of social workers' determination to retain professional autonomy is the demonstrated interest by these workers in accessing opportunities to extend their learning and ongoing development through supervision. The work of the practitioners involved in the research project described in this paper is a case in point.

Context of the study

The authors present the findings from an action research project, carried out in collaboration with a group of Irish social workers in a large urban teaching hospital. The impetus for the study arose from a shared interest by the researchers and the social work team in reflective teaching and learning. The authors, who constitute this research team, have written elsewhere (Dempsey et al., 2001; Halton et al., 2007) about their work over a number of years in constructing a systematised approach to reflective teaching and learning on the Master's in Social Work course at University College Cork (UCC). The hospital social work team had been working for some years, on developing peer group

supervision to supplement their individual supervision programme. Seven out of the twenty-one social workers on the team were, at the time of the research, UCC graduates, four in the recent past, when the reflective teaching and learning model had been fully structured into the professional course. Some other members of the social work team were also pursuing research and practice interests in the reflective learning area. The hospital social workers expressed interest in having input from the research team on reflective tools which they could incorporate into their newly re-structured peer groups. In turn, the research team expressed an interest in working collaboratively with the social work team, to track the effects of introducing these tools into the peer groups. The process developed into an action research project involving the evaluation of the tools of reflective learning in a specific work environment. These tools included an autobiographical written exercise (see below), journaling (through the use of reflective daily logs), presentation of reflective logs in the peer supervision groups, feedback to presenters from other members, followed by discussion of the learning process for the presenter. These parallel the tools used by the authors in the educational setting, where student learning journal entries and portfolio learning incidents are presented in tutorial and placement peer groups, with feedback to presenters, followed by discussion (Halton et al., 2007).

Methodology

An action research method was employed in this study. Alston & Bowles (2003) suggest that in the first phase of the action research cycle a new practice that incorporates the hopes and concerns of the participants should be developed. An initial information and discussion meeting was facilitated by the research team with the social workers who participated in the study (n=21). At this meeting the theoretical underpinnings and practical tools of reflective teaching and learning used by the researchers in their work on the social work programme were introduced and described. A discussion was also held to ascertain what the social workers hoped to achieve through collaboration with the research team. Their concerns about time were addressed by the research team, who had initially considered that the social

workers might write learning journals as part of the process. Instead, it was agreed that participants would write at least one daily log in between group supervision sessions. All the social workers present at the meeting agreed to participate in the study. This constituted the first aspect of the action research process. As noted by Sewpaul & Raniga (2005, p. 269) 'action research involves a feedback loop in which initial findings generate possibilities for change. These are then implemented and evaluated as a prelude to further investigation within a developmental approach. The success of the research depends on the full participation and engagement in the research process'. In accordance with this construct, practice and research takes place simultaneously as integrated activities. The mechanism used in this project to carry out the next step involved in action research, i.e. data gathering, was a series of three sets of focus group interviews involving participants (totaling nine focus groups). Over a period of twelve months, participants wrote daily logs, presented them in their peer group sessions, were given feedback by colleagues and discussed their learning from the process. In the focus groups, held at three monthly intervals, participants were asked to comment on the experience of writing and presenting in the peer groups. The discussions between participants and the research teams during the focus group interviews led to participants making some changes in how they conducted their peer sessions; for example, managing time so that everyone got a turn to present. Thus the research process fed into a cycle of continuous revision of practice.

The decision to use focus groups was influenced by the fact that they are regarded as particularly well suited to studies of organisations and of professional issues, in settings where there is a web of social networks already in place and involving participants with shared interests. Patton (1990, p. 335) defines the focus group as: 'an interview with a small group of people on a specific topic. Groups are typically six to eight people, who participate in the interview for one and a half to two hours.' He sees the focus group as a highly efficient qualitative data-collection technique. It provides, he suggests, some quality controls on data collection, in that participants tend to provide checks and balances on each other that 'weed out' false or extreme views.

The researchers found that group interaction helped to access, not just the attitudes and views of participants, but also facilitated in-depth probing of responses, thereby producing new ideas and fresh insights.

The hallmark of focus groups is the explicit use of the group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group. (Morgan, 1988, p. 12)

A further advantage of focus groups is that they 'stimulate answerers and support them in remembering events, and that they can lead beyond the answers of the single interviewee' (cited in Flick, 1998, p. 115). Blumer (1969, p. 41) holds that the element of group dynamics is very important:

A small number of individuals, brought together as a discussion or resource group, is more valuable many times over than any representative sample. Such a group, discussing collectively their sphere of life and probing into it as they meet one another's disagreements, will do more to lift the veils covering the sphere of life than any other device that I know of.

Nielsen (1977, p. 64) suggests that there is value in using real groups, that is, groups 'that are concerned by the issue of the group discussion also, independently of the research.' He mentions as a reason for this, the fact that real groups start from a history of shared interactions in relation to the issue under discussion, and thus have already developed forms of common activities and underlying meaning. A focus group with a real group also gives the researcher a view of the context in which opinions of members are produced, expressed and exchanged in everyday life.

Such groups are not without problems for the researcher, however. Morgan (1988, p. 48) suggests that working with groups of strangers, rather than real groups, is easier. This is because the level of things taken for granted by members of a natural group can make it difficult for the researcher to get behind implicit meanings. The researchers were conscious of the fact that these social workers had a shared history in supervision groups, some of which had run into difficulties. There was also the issue of having a mixture of basic grade social workers and their supervisors in the peer groups. However, this was discussed with participants at the first meeting and they wished to proceed on that basis. It emerged as an issue in the research findings, through its impact on some participants, and will be discussed hereafter.

An ethical issue which can arise in focus groups, particularly groups where supervisors are present, is that some participants may find it

difficult to express their views openly. The researchers addressed this by inviting participants to come to a focus group which suited them, rather than having the focus groups synonymous with particular supervision groups. This meant that people from different peer groups participated in the focus groups. This allowed for contrasting experiences between peer groups to emerge and the researchers aimed to capture the range and diversity of voices across the groups.

Another issue which arose was the complexity of relationships between members of the research team and a number of participants, through prior educational and professional networks. Stanley and Wise (1993) noted that, not alone is it impossible to leave the researcher out of the equation, but that it is important that this involvement be capitalized on, was an important feature of the research process. The fact that some participants had been introduced to reflective teaching and learning by the authors during their professional education was central to the initiation of the whole project. It was apparent from an early stage that these participants were familiar with the reflective tools and comfortable in talking about them. Rather than undermining the research, however, this was seen by the authors as a support to the supervision groups in making use of the daily logs, providing feedback and contributing to the discussion process in the groups. It undoubtedly affected the findings of the research, as will be described, but since the purpose of using qualitative action research was to participate in a collaborative exercise with the practitioners in uncovering the value of reflection in peer supervision, the more participants themselves could contribute to the process, the better. Thus the core constructions of action research, collaboration, participation, the development of opportunities to bring to voice individual narratives, and to explore possibility for change, were used to construct interwoven knowledge between the researchers and practitioners. This approach to knowledge construction is highly compatible with the values of social work itself and with reflective teaching and learning.

The focus groups

The focus groups consisted of between five and seven participants. They were facilitated by one member of the research team, whilst another looked after the audio-taping and a third researcher took notes

to supplement the audio recordings. Individuals were encouraged to share their views on their experiences of reflective learning within the peer group setting.

The objective of the first focus group was to collect data on participants' understanding and existing use of reflective approaches in their peer groups. The researchers introduced a reflective exercise called 'Where I come from, what I bring' (adapted from Nakkula & Ravitch 1998) and further discussed group members' willingness to keep a daily log in between peer group sessions. Two key elements of reflective teaching and learning were introduced through these exercises. Firstly, developing a consciousness of the influences participants brought to their practice from previous work, educational and life experiences and secondly, a mechanism for journaling - the daily log sheets.

In the second focus group, the researchers facilitated discussion about the daily logs – the participants' experiences of writing or attempting to write them, of reading them in the peer groups, and of giving and receiving feedback in the peer groups. The final focus group addressed issues and concerns of participants regarding the future development of their peer groups and collected data on the experiences of the practitioners in engaging in the overall process.

Data analysis and findings

The data was analysed using an open coding process. Transcripts from the focus groups, augmented by researchers' notes, were carefully read, coded by topic and summarised into emergent themes. The ensuing themes are presented here in the order in which they first emerged in the group discussions.

Participants' initial understanding of reflective learning

Some participants had a very clear understanding of how reflective learning could be applied in their work situation. It was generally described as providing the opportunity to stand back from the work in order to clarify why practitioners were approaching it in a certain way, and to consider whether there might be alternative ways of doing it:

A tool to use to try to be more present to yourself in every way – how you are impacted by social work interaction, how the client is impacted.

A set of skills which equip you, provokes you, keeps you interested, fresher, questions I can ask of myself.

Two participants felt they were not so clear, particularly as they had not encountered these concepts during their professional education:

Feel a bit intimidated – other people have more background in this. Probably been using it all along without naming it, but I'm not yet comfortable about using it in the group.

These kinds of things were not named for me in college, there was no structure for it. I would have liked to have had these tools to make sense of my learning and practice.

It made me think about (college) again. It's hard no matter when you do it, even if you've done it before. It changes. It's good, but a hard thing to be doing.

A clear divergence emerged between participants who were familiar with the concepts and methods of reflective teaching and learning and those who had not encountered systematic approaches to reflection during their professional education. The latter group suggested that, whilst they could see the benefits for the peer groups, and for their practice, they found it more difficult to write the daily logs, and to know exactly how they should do this, than their colleagues. This persisted, even to the end of the research process, suggesting that in a future project, more time should be given to ensuring that participants new to reflective learning should receive more direct input and mentoring.

Experiences of participating in existing peer groups

Participants described a variety of experiences of engaging in the groups. These can be grouped into three broad ranges of experience. The majority of the workers said they had a positive experience of being in the peer groups:

Our group, in contrast, (to one described as having difficulties) works. People feel safe, if something has gone really wrong at work, we can say it.

This is a different experience from our last experience of peer group supervision, which was just a chat. You know what you are there for, what it's about.

A minority of participants described having negative experiences of participation. Some of this was considered to be due to the fact that a particular group had 'not got going properly' yet. Some participants felt that they themselves had not put enough time or energy into it, due to pressures of work and annual leave. However, there were also more fundamental issues related to group composition and negative history of previous group supervision being brought into these new peer groups:

The trust element has not been built up.

The history of the group is important and not enough emphasis in the group has been given to how comfortable we are in (this new) peer group.

Differences in position change things- your boss is your boss, not a peer. I am comfortable enough sitting in the group with the Principal Social Worker but you can't remove the power thing. It's not to do with her, it's her position and her role. Of course, there are differences between seniors.

It was apparent from the data that experiences of participants varied considerably across the groups, and the importance of group dynamics is an issue that arose as being of considerable importance. There are a number of issues which emerged here to be considered, such as group composition, size, facilitation, agreements regarding conflict resolution, trust building and engagement of member commitment to agreed goals/ actions. A third small group of participants described an experience of how things did not necessarily go easily or smoothly from the start of the group or all the time thereafter, but how group members put a lot of work into the running of the group to ensure its success:

My group is different again. We spent a lot of time at the beginning working on the process of the group. This was a big issue for us, creating trust, so that it would be a safe space for us.

We had a review session where we talked about what worked well, what didn't work.

We have had extraordinary moments in our group when there were bursts of openness, risk-taking and sharing. Then we go back a bit. There is a process of over and back. Some questions are too difficult to answer in the group. Why is it difficult sometimes?

Introducing central tools of reflective engagement

The above findings provided the context for the researchers in addressing the research question. The researchers wanted to explore how the introduction of daily logs and the discussion of these logs would impact on the experiences of the participants in the existing groups. The 'Where I come from, what I bring' exercise (adapted from Nakkula and Ravitch, 1998) was chosen to start a process of building awareness amongst participants about what influences their day to day practice, and decisions about how they carry out their work. It was used as a once off exercise in this instance and was conducted as a privately written exercise for the focus group participants. Prior to completing the exercise, group members were advised that they would not be requested to share the content of what they had written, but to discuss the process of carrying out the exercise. Immediate responses to using this exercise were mixed:

I would need a lot more time to do this exercise. At the moment, it's too reflective for me.

It made me think about my own work, and how I do things, and the people who did influence me. It raised questions about why I did go into social work. We were fostering children at home (my parents were) I admired an uncle and aunt who were doing development work in Africa – it influenced me in relation to social justice etc. I became aware of how these things influenced me.

The daily log as a tool for reflective engagement

The social work team were looking for a structure to help them to make their peer group supervision more productive. The research team considered the introduction of portfolios to the peer groups, the portfolio being a well tested developmental tool for scaffolding reflective learning (see Lyons, 1998). This would entail requesting peer group members to select an aspect of their work that was puzzling or of concern to them, and constructing a portfolio entry about it, which they would present in their peer group. However, as described above, the participants had spoken about the pressures of time they all experienced and how difficult it would be to commit extra time to be spent on 'homework'. Instead, writing and presentation of daily logs was introduced as an ongoing reflective tool for use by individuals and in the peers groups. The daily log provided an introduction to reflective journalling, where respondents were requested to write descriptive accounts of a particular day's work, and reflections on what they had written. All participants agreed to keep daily logs and to present them in their supervision groups. At the second set of focus group meetings, it appeared that participants, with the exception of two, had written daily logs. One of the people who had not kept a daily log had been on annual leave, the second person referred to time limitations, saying:

(Within the peer group) there was a little bit of being guilty at not having done it myself. I didn't take the time. Generally I am pretty reflective of my work. Monday and Tuesday I was considering doing it. I was frustrated with work so I didn't want to open up a can of worms. I was frustrated, maybe another time I would be keen to do it.

Effects for participants of using daily logs

Participants who completed their daily logs described the process as useful, helpful, interesting and, in some cases, surprising. Two main themes emerged from discussion of writing the logs namely, a heightening consciousness of their actions and increased consciousness of their feelings in particular situations.

Consciousness of actions

People became more aware of what they were doing, why they were doing it in certain ways, and that they had certain 'styles' of working. They questioned themselves about how they might have approached doing things differently. They became more aware of exactly what they had accomplished in a day, in some cases surprised that they had done so much, in one case surprised because the respondent thought she had done more than she actually did. Respondents' accounts of the writing process described a slowing down, a stepping back from immersion in what they were doing, a greater sense of awareness.

'What it was like to write it? It was surprising. That particular day, if you asked me what I did, I would have said I attended a team meeting and followed up a few referrals. When I wrote the log, it was a bit different. The second thing that struck me was that I went down to ensure I got information from a secretary – this was effective use of my time. I could see my own style of working. There is a difference between writing about what you do and thinking about it. The elements of my style that I could see were trying to get things done on time, as quickly as possible.

I did find it very helpful when I documented my reflections. For the first time I acknowledged environmental factors and how they affect my work and who I am as a social worker. How I feel vulnerable going into particular wards, and how I work differently in different environments.

It had the effect of raising my consciousness of why I do things. . . . It was a different thought process for me. Documenting it was different, more in-depth. It was a different type of exercise, writing it down. I saw things differently.

My job is quite task centred. When doing the reflection I saw what I do differently. I come away from a situation thinking differently about something than if I had not reflected.

To do the log you have to really look at what you are doing. What? Why? How? Seeing three families back to back. Do we deliberately choose not to go down that road? Do as I say, not as I do? We're spending our time getting our clients to look at their feelings.

Consciousness of feelings in particular situations

The second major issue that emerged from discussing the writing process was how it made respondents more conscious of their feelings in particular situations. Most found this helpful, giving them explanations

for how they responded to certain people and events. Two people talked about this as difficult, even 'scary'. They suggested that ongoing reflection could paralyse them in getting the work done. These were people who also described themselves as being task orientated:

'What struck me was the tapping into my feelings really early in a case – realizing I was anxious about a particular phone call.

On the day I wrote my log, I had a counselling session, and attended a multidisciplinary meeting. I looked at the process when I was writing, and looked at how I was feeling in the meeting. It brought threads out of frustration, powerlessness. It was pretty powerful in creating that awareness in myself.

Reading of daily logs in peer groups

A third tool for reflective engagement introduced in the groups was making the daily writing public through reading it aloud in the groups. Respondents were asked to discuss the experience of reading their logs in their peer groups. Some participants who did not share their writing in the group said this was due to time pressures, although two groups had met on an extra occasion in order to ensure all members had the opportunity. A small number had not read their logs because of the issue of trust in their peer group. Of those who read in the group, there was an overwhelmingly positive response. Some of the positive effects described included affirmation, learning from others, practice development and trust building in the peer supervision group.

Affirmation

Participants spoke of receiving positive feedback and encouragement from colleagues and of the transformative effect of the process.

It was very affirming and positive. Yeah we do have busy days, we often tend to look at what we don't do in the day. It was good to see, yeah I did a lot. It was a little bit challenging as well – although not in a negative way.

Positive feedback in social work is a rarity. It is a demanding job.

The research team was somewhat surprised by the strength of feeling demonstrated by the social workers when they talked about this issue. However, it is less surprising when the normal contexts of social work practice are considered, for example that most social workers work

alone in their offices or the homes of clients, and although they meet as groups to discuss business type issues, there is rarely time allocated for detailed discussion of how they go about their work.

Learning from others

Feedback also provided new ways of thinking about their work. All group members talked about how interesting it was to hear what their colleagues did on a daily basis and how they thought about their work. The issue of work styles arose again, with group members becoming more aware of their own approach through the process of hearing about colleagues' perspectives and priorities.

'Giving and receiving feedback was good. People were looking at things in different ways. Some people gave suggestions. Some were looking at how it was for me, others were more task focused. The mix was good. I tend to focus on the process – and sometimes I need to be more task orientated. It was not that people were necessarily saying that to me, but I had a consciousness of the need for both. Writing it down created a step outside and made me aware of other factors involved.

I was interested to hear what people said about why they worked in particular ways. It was not their education but a person who influenced them or their family (that most influenced how they worked).

Group trust building

Reading logs in the group had effects not only on individuals but also on the group dynamic, specifically on trust building:

'It dispelled fear and anxiety. It moved our group on to another level. I was waiting for this and am delighted it has happened. People became open to expressing their feelings and supporting each other. The exercise facilitated this. This is what's expected of the group now – to be supportive. Not everybody did it at once. People came back to be present for people who hadn't had a chance to present.

I wanted to be selective about the nature of the work (I shared in the group). I didn't feel trusting. I was happy with some of the group members but not with others. In the end I was selective about what I chose to bring to the group. I had control over what I brought to the group. It was good, especially nice to get good feedback.....

Challenges associated with developing reflective supervision in peer groups

The final issue that arose, and one that the practitioners really wanted to grapple with, was how to address issues in a peer group that is not working well. Concerns expressed by staff centered on issues of trust and group composition. Where such concerns were present in a group, staff members were actively trying to address them. Options that they were considering included opening up discussions about carrying negative experiences from past groups into the new peer supervision group, engaging an outside facilitator and having separate groups for senior staff members.

'There have been different experiences of the peer groups. There was a joint feeling of anxiety as well as hope. I hoped it would be reflective, helpful, supportive. We re-jigged the format – decided this was how we were going to do it...'

There are still issues of lack of trust in our group, not for me. For me it has moved forward. It has helped, has healed past issues, people are more comfortable. There is still some distrust. How are we going to bring this up in the group? Which is where it should be dealt with. I find this hard, to discuss this here.

Discussion and analysis

Nakkula and Ravitch (1998) suggest that it is in the explicit articulation of ordinary, everyday acts in our own practice that we can become aware of the immediacy and pervasiveness of our constant interpreting processes. Without this awareness, we can retreat into routinised ways of approaching our work. Langer's (1989) research suggested that professional and other workers frequently try to reduce their cognitive activity on the job, and to use minimal cues to guide their actions, efforts that lead to what she calls 'mindlessness'. Mindlessness entails a routine reliance on ideas and perceptions formed from habitual actions. Behaviour based on mindlessness is rigid and rule governed, while that based on mindfulness is rule guided. Mindfulness is not effortful or difficult, Langer contends, but it is dependent on opportunities for

reflection on process as well as content, in the work sphere. Laing's (1987 cited in Mezirow, 1991) poem succinctly captures the objectives of using reflective methodology in professional practice:

The Pursuit of Meaning
The range of what we think and do
Is limited by what we fail to notice.
And because we fail to notice
That we fail to notice
There is little we can do
To change
Until we notice
How failing to notice
Shapes our thoughts and deeds.

The social workers in this action research were well aware that they needed to provide for themselves, in the course of their very busy working lives, opportunities for reflection on the process and content of their work. There was a high level of commitment at both basic grade and managerial levels of the social work department to ensure that this happened. As the data reported here demonstrates, there had been mixed experiences of engagement by staff in the existing peer group supervision. Their motivation in engaging in this action research project was to improve the structure and functioning of these groups.

Mezirow (1991), and other reflective educators, suggest that the opportunity to engage in reflective writing, along with subsequent conversation about these writings with peers, mentors or colleagues, provides a scaffold for the development of our reflective abilities, using the tools of reflection. It would appear that, for the majority of the participants in this project, the daily logs provided such a developmental opportunity. At a basic, private level, it gave people pause about what they were doing and how they were doing it. It was also apparent that writing daily logs was easier for practitioners who had encountered similar practices during their initial professional education. They were not caught up in questions of how to do the writing, whether they were 'doing it right' as others were. It would appear, therefore, that developing such writing habits has long lasting effects. Even for those who experienced the writing as challenging, however, there was appreciation of its benefits, being described as different from just

thinking about the work, helping participants to think about their work in different ways. This kind of change in thinking processes can be seen as transformative learning. Mezirow (1991, p. 1) defines transformative learning 'as the process of making new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation, and action'.

The second part of this process, reading logs aloud in peer groups, was also experienced by the practitioners as, in the main, helpful to their work. It provided a structured format through which they became aware of how others carried out and thought about their work. It also provided affirmation through colleague feedback, as well as challenge to current ways of doing things. It helped some peer groups to open up and build trust so that discussions were more productive. This supports the contention that engaging in systematic, public exploration and interrogation of professional practice leads to building a 'community of learners' which again can be developmental as well as transformative.

The data from this action research project also raises some questions about peer group structure and composition that warrant further exploration. Do peer groups function better if all members are at a similar grade in the workplace hierarchy? It would appear from this research that the integration of senior and basic grade staff in the same peer supervision group is significant in terms of some peoples' capacity to engage with, and benefit from, the process. The hierarchical nature of the workplace can challenge, and be challenged by, the collegiate value base of reflective engagement. As in all group work contexts the issues of roles, relationships and responsibilities are dynamics that must be considered in developing reflective peer supervision groups. A question that emerges from this work relates to the effectiveness of having staff with formal line supervisory responsibilities for other staff members in the same group as their supervisees. Participants connected this issue to trust building, a fundamental aspect of group development. While issues of group dynamics emerged for the participant group, it was also apparent that the tools of reflective engagement introduced to the groups provided a systematic structure which helped to mediate these difficulties in at least some cases.

Participants referred to previous history impacting on their ability to engage in the peer supervision groups. The researchers used the 'Where I come from what I bring' exercise at the beginning of the action research process to facilitate participants to look at past influences which impact

on their current practice. It is interesting to speculate whether this exercise would have been useful later in the peer supervision group process to address historical factors which may impinge on effective group development. While it is apparent from the data in this study that the reflective tools introduced provided a systematic format which facilitated the building of trust and thus developed the peer groups there will always be group composition and group dynamics issues to be considered. This group of practitioners have already demonstrated a strong commitment to engaging in peer supervision so it is likely that they will continue to give attention to making the process work by grappling with issues such as group dynamics, work environmental factors and the impact of hierarchical organizational structures.

This piece of action research has taken forward the researchers' work on reflective learning from the educational environment to its application within agency practice. While the research has highlighted the value of reflective tools in peer supervision, it has raised interesting issues that warrant further exploration. These include consideration of the implications for organizations of the introduction of reflective peer supervision. A further issue concerns the interrogation of additional tools of reflective learning which may need to be incorporated into peer supervision groups to ensure their sustainability in the face of structural and relational challenges as described above.

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