

The Mirror method: A structure supporting expertise in social welfare services

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Abstract: *In this article the Mirror is introduced as a reflective self and peer evaluation method, largely suitable for different social work sectors. It shows how Mirror was developed to be a learning structure that goes beyond the boundary between individual and collective. The consequences on knowledge production, learning and well being at work are discussed. It is argued that, when essential elements of the adaptation of the method are met in the operating environment, the Mirror process enhances expertise and well-being at work.*

Key words: *Mirror method; expertise; social work; evaluation; dissemination*

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Introduction

Social work requires time for thought, and space for analysing the experiences arising from one's own work alongside colleagues. While the ability to act is an imperative, social workers should also be allowed to stop and take the time to analyse their experiences in order to learn from them. Trust in one's own professional skills, understanding and experience are necessary, but so too is the courage to acknowledge that one person cannot know everything. Rather, a worker should seek 'mirrors' for themselves and the work community, enabling learning from everyone's own work. Given that social workers must deal with difficult cases and shortcomings in the social welfare system, they must be supported, 'nurtured' and protected in order to prevent any erosion of their working ability. It is therefore vital to find new ways of supporting the work conducted by workers and the work community.

This article reviews the self and peer evaluation method Mirror (*Kuvastin* in Finnish) and its use in social work teams as a practice supporting client work and workers' well-being at work, and also as a structure providing space for thought. The focus is both on the immediate consequences resulting from the method's application and its long-term consequences outside the Mirror user team. Current evidence on methods and practices contributing to the development of an individual's or a community's expertise is scarce (see, however, Vataja 2008). Although this article is mainly method-oriented, it also considers challenges regarding evaluation, reflectiveness and knowledge generation in social work and discusses their link to well-being at work. These themes are looked at within the framework of science and technology studies (Latour 1987; Koivisto 2007).

The key idea of Mirror, a reflective self and peer evaluation method originally developed by a group of social workers in adult services (Mannerström et al. 2005), is to support evaluative ways of working within a social work team and encourage the development of collective expertise. Although a 'light' method, Mirror improves the systematic approach to work. The method is used for analysing team work and supporting learning at work and thus coping at work. The process goes beyond the boundary between the individual and the collective.

The Mirror method was first piloted in 2005, in three social work teams in adult services, co-ordinated by the Finnish Evaluation of Social Services Group (FinSoc) operating under the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health (STAKES). While it seemed that the method could be adopted independently, the first pilot phase showed that its dissemination would in fact require interaction. The first pilot phase led to the creation of the Mirror handbook (Yliruka 2006). Moreover, further piloting and development of the Mirror method was conducted under the sub-project 'Working conditions in social services', funded by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. The sub-project's objective was to enable the larger-scale adoption of Mirror. This pilot phase aimed at adapting the

model to various operating environments and evaluating its effectiveness.

Further piloting was initiated in stages in January–June 2006. The objective of the related *development* was to:

1. create structures enabling social workers' collective learning and to include continuous evaluation in their basic working methods;
2. enhance the method's usability during the process;
3. improve the method so that social workers could themselves help other professionals who want to begin its use; and
4. extend the method to sectors other than adult social work.

The objective of *research* was to examine the consequences resulting from the adoption of Mirror in work communities.

Based on the findings of this research, this article analyses the kinds of work communities and the conditions under which the Mirror method is likely to function successfully; to what extent the method was anchored as a permanent operating structure within the participating social welfare organisations; and how the social work communities benefited from using the method.

Basis of the Mirror method

The Mirror method originated from a desire to harness tacit knowledge for developing self-evaluation methods in social work (Yliruka 2000). The original developmental context for the method was a municipal social services office, where social workers worked with adult clients, with about 100 clients per social worker. Social work was delivered mainly through benefit provision. Social workers worked 'behind closed doors': there was considerable professional autonomy, but little professional discussion within the organisation. Weekly case meetings were focused on questions about living allowances and administrative issues. Social workers were interested in doing social work more holistically, and, when the social services department reorganised the living allowance work, the time and possibility to develop social work was found. There was a professional interest in developing an evaluation method that could be used in work settings. The central aim was to develop a continuous evaluation method and 'learning through living'.

The theoretical basis of Mirror includes the ideas of Ian Shaw (1999) on reflective evaluation, which emphasises two interlinked statements:

1. knowledge arises from action and exists for action; and
2. knowledge is tested in real-life situations.

The motivation for this development derived from the urge to improve social work from the professional perspective and to identify how best to generate practice-based social work evidence in order to respond to the effectiveness requirements set for it (for example, Macdonald 2000). In the method's research and development process, theoretical support was sought from debates on expertise (for example Hakkarainen 2000; 2003; 2004; Saaristo 2000; Nowotny 2000; Fook 2002; Parton & O'Byrne 2000; Bereiter & Scardamalia 1993; Tynjälä 1997) and from theories of knowledge formation and learning communities (for example, Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995; Wenger 1998; Hakkarainen 2003). Structuring the method was closely related to the research project 'The Tricky Social Work' of Helsinki University, concerning social welfare expertise (see, for example, Karvinen-Niinikoski et al. 2005).

The Mirror method involves the use of forms designed to support the documentation of one's own work and self evaluation, common peer evaluation meetings, follow-up of the work's progress, and the concluding assumptions of effectiveness. Themes included in the forms are open, rather than based on indicators. The objective of such open themes is to activate the social worker to analyse social work. *Mirror is designed to be used in parallel with the evaluation of social work process conducted together with the client.* The reflective self and peer evaluation process of Mirror consists of four steps:

1. self evaluation of the social worker's own work and preparation for the peer evaluation meeting;
2. peer evaluation discussion within the social work team and the assessment of further work;
3. follow-up in formative or summative evaluation meetings
4. drawing conclusions: team's conclusions on the boundary conditions for social work and on specific themes requiring monitoring or improvement.

Step 1

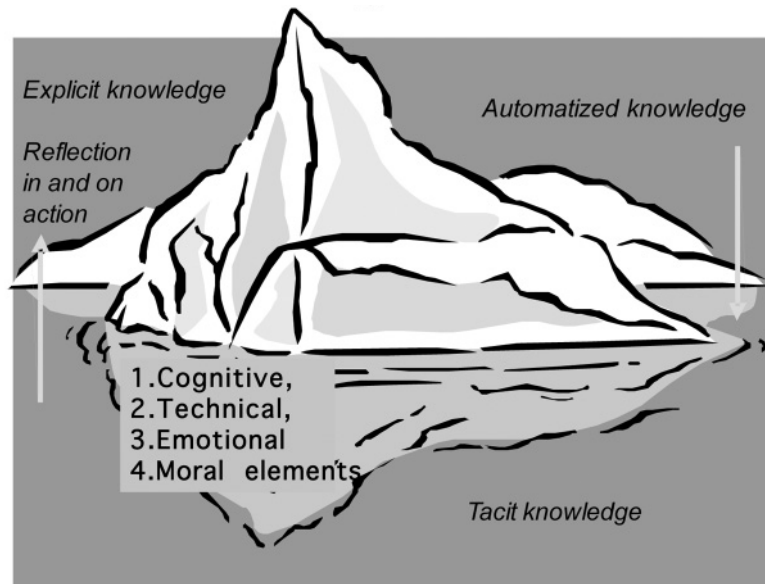
The method's Step 1, self evaluation by the social worker of his/her own work, uses the Mirror Hall self evaluation form. Step 2 peer evaluation discussion is built on the Internal Mirror of Peer Evaluation form. The structure for Step 3 peer evaluation discussions is provided by the Rear View Mirror and Internal Mirror of Formative Evaluation forms. Finally, Step 4 involves common knowledge creation, and is supported by the Prism form. Steps 3 and 4 take place during the same peer meeting.

In Step 1, a social worker begins the Mirror process by selecting the client case¹ which is to be analysed through self evaluation and for which he/she desires peer group support. *The essential object of scrutiny is the social worker's own way of*

Figure 1 Mirror supporting client work.



Figure 2 Social worker's knowledge base.



conducting client work. Then, the worker reviews the information related to the case and prepares a free format description of the client's situation to serve as material for the peer evaluation. Other material can also be used, such as notes, plans and other client work documents. At this stage, self evaluation is guided by the Mirror Hall form. The name of the form, Mirror Hall, refers to reviewing one's own work from various angles in a certain context. Mirror seeks to inspire the social worker to express his/her own operational theory and articulate tacit knowledge as far as possible (Polanyi 1983; Yliruka 2000) and in a holistic manner: the relationship between goals and means and the factors that affect one's work – both personal and professional (cognitive, technical, emotional and moral elements) (figure 2) and contextual, structural factors, edge conditions. The idea is to reveal thinking and assumptions which are usually not written into the official records.

When using the Mirror Hall self evaluation form, the worker reviews:

- any opportunities and obstacles for change in the client's life situation;
- established internal and external factors;
- resources and risks;
- social work targets;
- working method choices;
- assumed impacts on working methods;
- the worker's experience on interaction with the client;
- their expertise-orientation in the client relationship;
- their role as a social worker in the client relationship;
- assumptions on how the situation may be influenced by factors related to self (gender, values, attitudes), previous experiences or the current situation of the client relationship under review or structural factors facilitating or hindering client work (such as the service system, established social work practices, legislation and resources)

The worker also evaluates the influence of context on the client relationship and professional concern for the client's situation on a scale from 1 to 4. Finally, the opportunities to utilise one's own professional competences in the client case are evaluated.

Step 2

Step 2 involves a peer evaluation meeting in which the social worker explains the themes he/she has entered into the self evaluation form, while the other listens without interrupting. The evaluating peers are encouraged to participate in an internal dialogue (Bakhtin 1982) using the Internal Mirror form. While listening, the peers jot down questions, thoughts and feelings, work-related suggestions and

tips on related reading. The form is designed to steer the peers towards providing positive genuine feedback for the worker whose work is being evaluated. In the peer evaluation discussion, each peer has a turn to speak. The themes included in the Mirror Hall form are considered and subjected to an evaluative debate. All work-related suggestions are collected by the self-evaluating worker for further processing.

Step 3

Step 3 comprises common formative evaluation meetings for monitoring how the client case has progressed since the first peer evaluation: Which work-related suggestions were or were not implemented? Have there been any changes in the worker's interpretation of the client situation or working possibilities? Additionally, the worker assesses what he/she has learned during the process, using the Rear View Mirror form as a support tool.

Step 4

Step 4 is the concluding part. The team will draw their common conclusions on the boundary conditions for conducting social work and on specific themes requiring follow-up or improvement. The team will also make effectiveness assumptions. The Prism form is the support tool for this step.

The method's second pilot phase applied the principles of a 'slow' process ('HIDAS' in Finnish) developed by Kari Pääskynen (2004). A 'slow' process is:

1. personal (something more for oneself, evaluation work supports the worker's own work, peer evaluations increase the team's expertise);
2. target-oriented (focusing on the essential rather than superficial dabbling);
3. open (each member of the community shares their knowledge and experiences; open review of work prevents remaining hidebound by one's own views);
4. dialogic (creative operating culture allows collective thinking); and
5. valuing tacit knowledge (identifying the core of one's own thinking and action, reviewing and verbalising one's own routines).

Mirror in the pain spot of client work

Mirror is particularly used for analysing and evaluating client work situations involving factors which are burdening or worrying the worker. The worker has indeed recognised that this particular client case causes concerns for him/her, its processing may have become prolonged or have stagnated or there may be problems in initiating the work. A literature review of international research concerning working conditions in social welfare (Meltti & Kara 2009) indicates that clients requiring intense work efforts may negatively influence workers' job satisfaction (Gimbel et al. 2002). On the other hand, enabling a change in a client's life has been found to be a strong individual driver of job satisfaction and motivation (Carpenter 1999). In this light, it is very important to achieve a clearer understanding of the types of situations which may cause the worker to feel incapable of enabling change in client's life situation. The basic elements of client work includes commitment and continuity. It is crucial to prevent the worker from losing hope in client work should the client's situation fail to progress as planned, or if the client does not commit to co-operation. The work conducted should be considered in its context: Which means are used in the work? What are the worker's decision-making powers? What limitations, boundary conditions to or opportunities for overcoming the limitations exist in the case in hand? This approach is called contextual social work, and its aim is to provide social workers with a meaningful manner of conducting social work (Fook 2002: 140–144; Yliruka 2005).

Development environment

The development project was co-ordinated by the Finnish Evaluation of Social Services Group, FinSoc (operating under the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health, STAKES). The project included ten social work teams from various social welfare sectors. Eligible teams were sought through a nationally published advertisement at the beginning of 2006. While the selected workers' backgrounds were heterogeneous in terms of education and experience, an interest in obtaining a common vision of their work was common to everyone (Haapamäki & Yliruka 2006; Säiläkivi 2007).

The teams participating in the Mirror development project came from the Greater Helsinki area. This area is characterised by a complex operating environment, a dispersed service sector, a high staff turnover posing challenges to the formation of functioning and co-operative relationships, and the fact that some people remain outside the services (Sosiaalibarometri 2007). Owing to a complex operating environment, a larger city is often better equipped to use Mirror, since social welfare teams often already exist in city organisations, whereas, in smaller localities, a

peer group might be harder to find. Among the interested teams, six functioned in child protection and one specialised in family care. Adult social work was represented by two adult social work teams operating in social welfare offices and one team functioning in the Probation Service. Moreover, one team was engaged in youth work within emergency social services, while another represented school social work. Eight of the participating teams existed already, while three had been formed specifically for the Mirror work. The project also included monitoring of the unsupervised adoption of Mirror by a gerontological social work development project in the Greater Helsinki area.

The method was proposed to the teams as a basic structure for their own work, but two of the teams defined the use of the method for promoting inter-team dialogue on social work. Training, tutorial assistance and network meetings were arranged for all participating teams at two month intervals, involving a total of four sessions. In order to support the teams, a virtual working forum was set up on *Sosiaaliporssi*, a Finnish website dedicated to social welfare professionals. Each team was steered towards defining its own objectives according to which it would proceed within the general pilot process.

The teams had various expectations. Some related to the adoption of Mirror as a method, such as its ease of use or targeting, finding space for it and the method's outcomes (through consideration of one's own working methods, enhancing the methodical nature of one's work, understanding the client processes). Other expectations concerned the team's functioning (increasing the ability to listen, sharing knowledge, learning from the others' personal working method as, the team's enhanced ability to support an individual worker, integrity of work) or, in the case of two teams, inter-team learning.

Team-specific tutorial assistance for adopting the method was arranged for all teams. The researcher visited all work communities, guiding the teams in implementing the method. In these meetings, discussions were held on the method's suitability as an evaluative model for the type of client work carried out by the team and, on the other hand, agreements were made on the kind of material each team would be providing for research purposes. Each work community was given electronic forms related to the method, a presentation slide show and material for assembling a Mirror folder. Mirror handbooks were also provided. The teams began Mirror work at different times. While nine teams had commenced by May 2006, the tenth team adopted the method in September 2007. The research data was collected until May 2008.

The whole research data included data on forms from the Mirror meetings, group work material from network meetings, video and audio tape material, final team evaluation forms or recorded discussions, the researcher's study journal and two work community surveys, one conducted before the method's adoption (Haapamäki & Yliruka 2006) (n=87) and the other at the end of the development project in the spring of 2007 (n=44) (Säiläkivi 2007). One of the work community

survey's targets was to provide an understanding of the work community as a socio-material network – of its expert practices and orientations, working culture and support structures. Another target was to test the essential elements determined for the Mirror method (Yliruka 2006). These elements define the basic requirements for a socio-material network in order for Mirror to generate the expected outcomes (Koivisto 2007). The analysis has been made by using quantitative methods in the survey data, and interpretative approach in analysing the data as a whole.

Given that the researcher had been among the method's original developers, a reflective development and evaluation approach was important. The researcher had an interest – one shared with the teams – in testing the method and redeveloping it to provide genuine support for work communities. In the evaluation, reliability was sought by separating the development phase and the data analysis phase, and by utilising diversified data, which was also subjected to an analysis by an external researcher. Research authorisations were applied for in the participating teams' cities.

Dissemination of Mirror

Human activity and interaction are mediated processes (Latour 1987; Koivisto 2007). Social work teams can be examined as a formation of socio-material relationships consisting of human and non-human factors such as workers, methods, tools, principles, rules, laws, norms and conventional habits. A team's activity can be seen as a continuous achievement: the team renews its existence through its actions. Methods represent but one factor in team activity (Latour 1987; Koivisto 2007). Consequently, the results or consequences of the Mirror method cannot be explained from only one point of view. The Mirror method as such is an artefact, a crystallization of the essential elements of client work defined during the development work on the basis of negotiations, actions and the creation of meanings (Wenger 1998, 55). It is important to understand that when another work community adopts the method, it needs to reconstruct this hybrid within its context. In other words, the method's minimum requirements must be ensured in the operating environment.

The Mirror development project was primarily a method-based one (Alasoini 2007), but it also sought to implement the principles of the open innovation environment. Instead of attempting to create a ready-made and binding method, the project set out to produce a method which could be adapted according to the operating environment's requirements and which would be open for development and to various actors' ideas. This is a realistic starting point with regard to disseminating the method, since a method will transform once it is transferred to a new operating environment. In addition, the project set out to see how certain

core elements of the method would function in various environments. The usability of the method's structure was questioned: Was it essential to separate listening and discussion? Were the selected self evaluation themes meaningful? Would all teams consider documentation as important? Would documentation and follow-up meetings bring further insight to social work processes? Would the structure be seen as supporting or limiting the reflective working process? Furthermore, the project also sought to test the requirements determined as being critical for the method adaptation (Yliruka 2006).

In order to obtain answers for these questions during the project, initial team meetings included a rough assessment of the method's suitability to the working environment. The teams were encouraged to take a critical attitude towards the method. If the method seemed to require changes, this was possible. Network process was also utilised for the method's further development alongside the dissemination. Respecting the idea of open innovation, the method's guidelines and related forms were made freely available during the project through an online environment at the Sosiaaliportti website, subject to registration with the Mirror group.

Findings

In the following, I will explore findings from the Mirror pilot project. I will discuss the aspects of structures produced by the method, the method's further development and its transfer to different social work sectors. The transfer is examined through the consequences of the method adoption in the social work teams (interaction and knowledge creation, learning, well-being) and discussed in relation to the minimum requirements or critical elements of the method.

Peer evaluations were held by the teams every two to three weeks. During the project, all participating teams succeeded in integrating Mirror work as part of their operating structures. The usability of the method was enhanced through editing the forms, on the basis of feedback. However, using the forms in printed versions turned out to be relatively laborious. With regard to the method's further development and the implementation of the project's so-called first-degree changes, it appeared that a method-based network is not necessarily a very effective model (Alasoini 2007, 17), where the aim is primarily the method's dissemination rather than its development. The project did, however, succeed in improving the method based on experiences shared in network meetings and on the researcher's team visits. Furthermore, the teams themselves conducted the changes they considered necessary.

The most tangible development results achieved during the project were related to forms. Two new forms, the Internal Mirror for formative evaluation and the Prism

form, were created and the form used in peer evaluation was amended. Although the Prism form was issued during the course of the project, there was not much time for testing its use. In the follow-up survey (3/2008), only one team reported having used the Prism form. According to the team's feedback form:

The Prism has helped our Mirror team members to clarify the contents of social work and the field of operation, to understand that workers may have various approaches and working methods. Using the form has entailed a common learning process, in which we jointly focus on the contents of social work. Through client cases, we have considered structural means of influencing frequent social work phenomena, such as the increased use of substances by older women (from individual to general level). (P1)

Mirror as a permanent work practice

According to a follow-up survey conducted in March 2008², four teams out of ten had adopted Mirror as a permanent work practice. The teams' final self-evaluations preindicated their adoption of the method. It was common to the communities in which the method was rooted that they had achieved at least one team-set target for the Mirror work. At its best, anchoring a method means that it is no longer seen as a project but part of everyday work which the superior can also include in his/her management strategy.

It has not even crossed my mind that this is just some project that we are conducting right now ... (KL3)

Yes, it is a natural part of my own work. Since we agreed that we want to retain this among our team's working methods and to make room and time for it in our schedules next autumn, this aspect has also been strengthened. (KL4)

Within four teams, the method was rooted on a conditional basis. One user team had been transformed due to an organisational reform and another due to team structure reform. This meant that the two teams which had originally joined the Mirror project were dissolved, and the method was transferred by individual workers to two new teams. Two other participating teams announced that they were taking a break and expressed their desire to simplify or adapt the method before continuing its use. These adaptation needs related to the incorporation of ethical questions and a child's perspective on the forms. A supervisor in one of these teams reported having preliminary agreed with another social work team in the same sector on developing the method further. In total, the method was more or less rooted in a total of eight work communities.

Two teams announced that they would stop using the method. Workers from one of these teams revealed that their superior had failed to commit to the method to begin with, and a regular structure for the Mirror work had never been created. The other team stated that they did not consider the method suitable for the type of short-term social work they conducted, and they had neither the desire nor sufficient support to adapt the method.

The Mirror's high adaptability

The project reinforced the belief that Mirror is largely suitable for various social work sectors. The Mirror work functions both in settled work communities and those in transition. In work communities in transition, the use of Mirror is often limited to Steps 1 and 2, self and peer evaluations, since transition often entails personnel changes or restructuring consequences for client work, such as interruptions in client work processes. In such situations, Mirror may function as a structure bringing clarity to chaos. Furthermore, the method has proven useful in the orientation of new workers.

Dialogism and monologism in teams

With respect to analysing one's own work, team support was considered important. The participating teams were categorised based on two extremes: the 'dialogic team' at one end and the 'monologic team' at the other. The rest of the teams can be placed in between and most teams were clearly located *closer to the dialogic type*.

Successful Mirror work requires mutual trust between team members and an interest in common knowledge building. This forms the essence of dialogism (Bakhtin 1982; Mönkkönen 2001). Dialogism is a concept embedded in the interaction section in the Mirror Hall form and it can also be used for analysing interaction within the Mirror user team. Dialogism can be defined as a mutual relationship influencing both or all parties involved (Mönkkönen 2002, 53–56). The characteristics of dialogue-oriented interaction include awareness, interaction under both parties' terms, dialogic reflection (vs. self reflection) and responsible power (vs. denying the existence of power) (Mönkkönen 2002; Järvinen 2007, 16). According to Etienne Wenger (1998), learning in a community of practice – such as a work community in the social welfare sector – involves learning by doing, generating meanings, the formation of identity and participation in the community. Thus, working in one's own social work team does not only involve knowledge building carried out together, but also co-construction which affects the members'

expertise, identity, knowledge and skills.

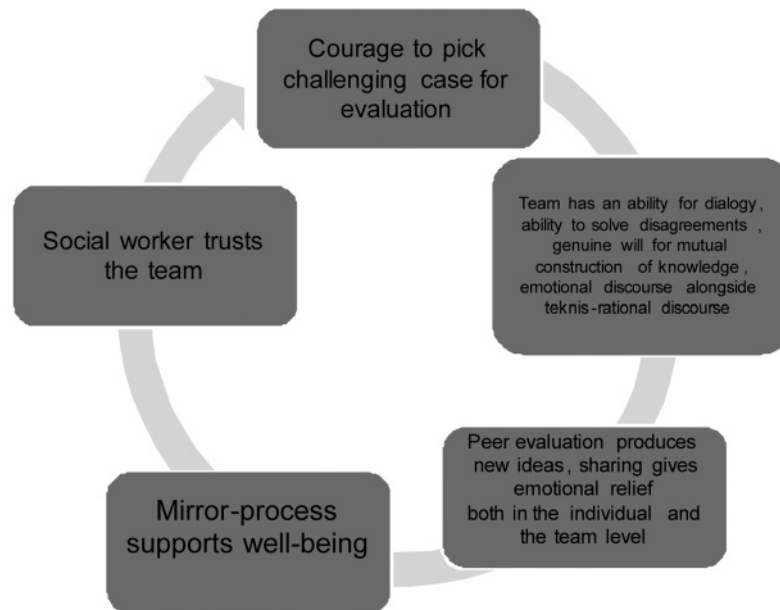
In some teams, Mirror seemed to support dialogism. Due to the common processing of cognitive, emotional and practical issues, the workers reported a reduction of anxiety related to client work (cf. Ruch 2005, 115). The 'dialogic team' reported that its members' well-being at work had increased during the process (fig 3). According to Matti Kuittinen (2007), team work may indeed increase job satisfaction, motivation and well-being at work since it satisfies the individual's primary psychological needs, that is to say, social needs, autonomy and competence. In particular, the 'dialogic team' was characterised by the presence of emotional discourse and the ability to process conflicts as a team. Such conflicts were related either to the nature of the case under review or to team activity. This team added its own emotion-related themes to the method's forms. Originally, emotions were included as a theme only in the Hand Mirror reaction forms which were to be filled in for research purposes. This type of activity in a team is an indication of trust between its members. Based on the team-specific work community survey, this team's strengths included trust in the work community even before using the method. This observation was reconfirmed when the same survey was repeated later. The 'dialogic team' also managed to fade the method's structure into the background in the sense that it by no means constrained discussion. On the other hand, the team reported that no major requirements for flexibility had emerged. The Mirror structure supported the team's workflow by freeing members from having to debate the process steps or format, enabling them to concentrate on the core of the issue at hand. Mirror method's peer evaluation structure produces fruitful dialogue, since it does not attempt to predetermine certain attitudes on issues as being desirable (cf. Seikkula & Arnkil 2005, 15) or to limit options.

... and the thinking now enabled goes so deep, the supporting questions provided a lead in the kinds of issues which would not normally emerge in ordinary client work meetings. (KL7)

The work community survey of the 'dialogic team' indicated that work had become more methodical, while targets had grown more distinct and meetings more meaningful. Moreover, opportunities for influencing internal decision-making had improved remarkably, trust in collegial support had increased further, and the sense of solidarity had been reinforced.

By contrast, in the 'monologic team' joint knowledge building was less frequent. Not all team members trusted in the ability of others to produce practicable ideas and solutions, and this affected the whole team's work. In the Mirror peer evaluation discussions (Step 2), various work orientations did emerge but addresses remained monologic. Discussions occurred between those who employed similar work methods, but to a lesser extent among those who represented different types of work orientations. In fact, various perspectives existed merely side by side (cf. Järvinen 2007, 154). One's own working method was expressed but genuine input

Figure 3 The positive cycle of well-being mediated by Mirror.



from others was not expected. It was even considered impossible that others might comprehend one's own client relationship. In the 'monologic team', the utility of the Mirror peer work remained more modest or derived mainly from the insights the workers had obtained from conducting their self evaluation (Step 1). If a peer evaluation discussion is monologic, the worker presents his/her self evaluation form to the team and indicates by tone of voice, expressions or non-verbal communication that no input from other team members is expected. Referring to Kuittinen (2007), it may be that the worker perceives the evaluation as a threat to individual autonomy or competence and sees the method as leading to a herd mentality, rather than resulting in increased collective expertise.

A monologic peer evaluation quickly covers the themes on the self evaluation form, but does not dwell on them. Bypassing the themes may also be due to peers considering that the worker's issues are complete in themselves, true and acceptable or that they should be rejected forthwith. Once issues are deemed complete, there is no room for an evaluative discussion or reflection. When monologism is respectful it does not cause problems to the relationships between team members but hinders joint knowledge building (step 4). If the causes underlying monologism include power

struggles, mistrust of the team or supervisor or other phenomena complicating group dynamics, such monologism can become a negative, frustrating and paralysing cycle. Such sessions can also plausibly undermine well-being at work. The work community survey results of the 'monologic team' (Haapamäki & Yliruka 2006) predicted that the method would function poorly within the team. Improving team support and the working atmosphere was defined as a challenge for the work community.

It is possible that, for a 'monologic team', Mirror is not a suitable working method or that more support should be provided alongside it, such as using an external facilitator or supervisor. It should be noted, however, that dialogism and monologism may alternate within a single team depending on various factors. As a consequence, a team cannot be associated with pure dialogism or monologism. Arnkil & Seikkula (2005, 11) state that dialogism is a way of thinking and acting which can be fostered through methods promoting collective thinking and being heard. While Mirror is designed to support a reflective and dialogic team approach, it cannot guarantee dialogism by itself.

The evidence indicates that it is possible to progress from monologism towards dialogism by firmly adhering to those Mirror elements which support dialogism. Improving the quality of dialogism is possible in teams where the essential elements (such as trust) are at a sound basic level. In such circumstances, the method can deepen discussion and promote joint knowledge creation. Dialogism in itself is, however, a quality which needs to be practised.

What kinds of situations were examined with Mirror in various sectors?

For the pilot social work teams working in adult social work and in the Probation Service, the study revealed that client cases deemed difficult and thus selected as Mirror issues involved 'interim-distance client relationships' which caused mental pressure for the worker. If a worker's work is 'interim-distance', he/she is attempting to involve the client in 'close-distance' work but the client clearly rejects at least some aspects of the co-operation relationship. The worker often attempts to attract the client to 'close-distance' work by using various means or by creating external structures for it, using a variety of 'baits' (Järvinen 2007, 109). By contrast, Mirror issues in child welfare services, school social work and family care mainly included problems in inter-professional work or seeking help in analysing a multi-faceted case and finding an appropriate working method.

The method created clarity in pressured social work

At first, the team representing gerontological social work development was anxious that the method would prove too laborious. In the beginning, the team reported the need for both rapid meetings for discussing several acute client cases at a time and, on the other hand, in-depth meetings for focusing on one client case using a worker's self-evaluation. Free-form description of client work had been used instead of the Mirror Hall. In these cases, discussion remained brief or confusing, or as the gerontological social work team put it: 'poor preparation and an unorganised structure in meetings lead to chaos' (Kaisla 2006). It can thus be concluded that a defined structure supports the organisation of communal activity and sharing acquired experiences (cf. Hakkarainen 2000, 91).

After testing both rapid and in-depth Mirror meetings gerontological social work team considered Mirror-based meetings more important and, as the method became more established, the need for the rapid acute meetings reduced (Kaisla 2006; Liikanen & Kaisla 2007). Indeed, the method, which seemed laborious at first sight, became *a structure providing clarity and reducing the need for acute-type meetings*. Thereby, Mirror brought organisational clarity (Ruch 2005) to client work and rendered it more comfortable for the workers. Several other teams ended up using Mirror once or twice a month, in the context of team meetings on current issues.

Essential elements

The essential elements required of the adopting network for the use of Mirror were specified in the pilot phase. In order for Mirror to generate the expected outcomes, consideration should be given to these elements before using the method. The work community survey was used to illustrate the status of essential elements within the work community. Although the questions did not directly address the essential elements, such an application was possible based on the answers. Based on the first piloting, essential elements included: the capacity to discern the operating environment as multi-dimensional; interest in oral and written reflection; and the ability to provide constructive feedback and dialogic skills (Yliruka 2006, 39–43).

The initial status of essential elements according to the team was then compared with the team-specific Mirror process flow and outcomes. Internal relationships in the team were found to play a critical role. Based on the project, further essential elements were defined as follows: producing knowledge and learning from work as an acknowledged part of social work; social work being understood both as individual and collective work; the immediate supervisor committing to using

the method as a tool for developmental management (Rasanen 2008) and doing so consciously; the client's overall situation being used as a starting point for the work; the existence of a peer group; dedicated time reserved for peer evaluation; the predictability of peer evaluation schedules; and the use of the method forms in the process.

Mirror as support for the team's expertise: Working on the various levels of reflection

The project regarded self-directive and reflective activity as the basis for dynamic and network-based expertise. Network-based and dynamic expertise (Hakkarainen et al. 2004) refers to a type of expertise which creates knowledge and competences in innovative ways and requires the presence of common and functioning interaction structures in work communities to support the construction of knowledge. Dynamic expertise sets out to develop each member's individual competences and to go beyond the prevailing operating practices in its network- and community-based processes of creative problem-solving.

Mirror, in its essence, is an analysing and structuring tool for social work meetings. It can also be characterised as a 'slow' method which creates room for itself in the hectic social work environment, generating its impacts in small steps. Workers in all teams stated that, at its best, the working method produced in-depth discussion on social work and its boundary conditions. Teams with long-term client relationships – a condition set for the method's application – considered that monitoring progress in client work was meaningful.

Mirror work conducted in the teams has been analysed, on one hand, based on reflective question types (reflective questions of level 1, 2 and 3) presented in peer evaluation meetings and, on the other hand, through the learning results produced during the process.

Continuing Raeithel's (1983) ideas, Yrjö Engeström has proposed meanings for the various levels of reflection:

- Questions of reflection type 1 relate to the individual's work: How will I proceed in this task? Is my method the right one and effective? Could my method be better and more effective? What am I actually learning and what do I remember?
- Questions of type 2 are outward-looking and refer to the common task: What is the essence of this task, why is it like this: what is its aim? What approaches might be considered for this task? Could the task be formulated and defined in a wiser way?
- Questions of type 3 combine levels 1 and 2 and review the work's object by going beyond the individual and the community boundaries: What is the essence of

our common activity, what within it creates problems and what are we trying to achieve? In which direction do we want to modify or develop our activity? How can we organise our co-operation in the wisest way possible? (Engeström 2004, 97–98.)

Based on a compilation of returned Mirror Hall data made in December 2006, of 25 reasons for cases, 16 represented reflection level 1, 6 represented level 2 and 3 reasons indicated level 3 reflection.

Since Mirror focuses on burdensome situations which are causes for concern, the Mirror work was mainly constructed through individual workers' concerns. Frequently, the reason for subjecting a case to peer evaluation as stated on the Mirror Hall form implied that the worker desired confirmation and support, particularly in improving his/her own way of working. This represents reflection type 1. When the reason for self evaluation was defined from the view point of an individual social worker, Mirror guided to use reflection levels 2 and 3 for evaluating the case. Structural themes on the Mirror Hall form guided individuals to look outwards – the worker was steered towards considering his/her work in the light of its limiting and contributing factors. Thus, the Mirror process triggers the whole social work team to think about the level 3 reflective question: What is this common activity and where are we heading for ?

The worker's and the client's targets were kept separate in Mirror Hall form in order to ensure an analysis of the worker's own activity. In some cases, workers had difficulties in separating the client's targets from their own work targets. This indicates that the worker had determined his/her work targets in an expert-oriented way, suggesting it was solely for the client – rather than the worker too – to modify his or her activity.

Reasons representing level 2 reflection in the Mirror Hall data included the following issues: How two activity types in a single organisation might join forces in order to support the client? In terms of the case under evaluation and the effectiveness of the methods used, what is the significance of network or pair work conducted at the office? In one case, a worker desired that other team members would express their opinions on the client's situation, in order to predict future risks or other items which should be addressed.

Level 3 reflection was implied in stated Mirror reasons relating to the acknowledgement of various cultural backgrounds of families in child welfare services, an operational problem within the organisation revealed by a client case and providing support for immigrant children at school.

What was learned from the Mirror process?

Learning results can be analysed, for instance as first- and second-degree results or as generative results (Alasoini 2007, 8). First-degree learning results refer to changes from the participant's point of view, which can be achieved immediately through work. Second-degree results refer to permanent changes, such as a participant's improved reflective ability and competences. Generative results, by contrast, designate work results which may benefit people outside the team.

With regard to direct impacts, previous observations from first piloting (Yliruka, 2006) were confirmed in the sense that direct peer evaluation impacts and use needs were similar in various sectors. From a single worker's perspective, the evaluation practice supports a social worker's basic work due to the optional working methods suggested by the peer group. The method provides the social worker with the opportunity to discuss a difficult case without rushing and in a way that provides team members with the possibility of understanding the client process which a member is or was going through. Mirror also offers an opportunity to auto-analyse one's working processes. The method helps the worker document and observe his/her work and provides support for coping in difficult client work situations.

For the peer group, Mirror proposes a structured and economical way of analysing client issues. In a multifaceted client case, the method helps to raise essential issues for follow-up and produce in-depth peer evaluation. Mirror provides insight on a colleague's thinking since, in addition to facts, subjective interpretations are also analysed. The approach prevents participants from arriving at hasty interpretations and conclusions on a colleague's work and creates an opportunity to share success stories. A discussion generates collective understanding of social work and insight, creates an excellent opportunity to keep the core issues of social work on the agenda and enables the exchange of the relevant knowledge and expertise (Yliruka, 2006).

From effectiveness to deeper understanding

The teams did not formulate direct effectiveness assumptions, that is suppositions on whether a client's well-being had improved due to the process. However, the workers did draw conclusions on what seemed essential to successful social work and on what they had personally learned from the process. One might say that they sought *evidence for themselves* on the client's work's effectiveness. This does not refer to attempting to prove that they had made no errors, but to constructing an understanding of social work and its prerequisites and dealing with imperfection. These types of conclusions were written in the Rear View Mirror forms. While

they can be categorised as first-degree learning results, they also indicate second-degree results in that the workers' knowledge formation and reflection structure had developed as a shared practice.

I think it is particularly important to go back to the client cases and to review what was really done after the team session. This enables us to illustrate social work processes, which is in accordance with the spirit of the times anyway. (E-mail 6.3.08)

Bearing the child's benefit clearly in mind adds meaning to one's work. (K16)

The network formed by the authorities may provide resources for this type of client relationship. (K16)

Consistency and limitation will yield results in the long term. (K16)

I have learned that one should observe how deep one goes into the client process. To succeed in one's work, one should at times attempt to come closer and at times to back off. I have the desire to go deep in the client process in order to understand the issues and persons involved. (K16)

An illustration of generative learning includes an example of how the client process became clear to the worker and how the process was then documented. The worker utilised his/her Mirror case description in order to justify the organisation of a seminar.

Thanks to the case, I was able to promote the idea of organising a seminar and raising the interest of the Criminal Sanctions Agency. (Kr3)

Another example of a generative result lay in some workers reporting having shown their Mirror summaries to their clients in the spirit of open documentation (Wilczynski 1981). A third example of generative impact was the creation of an immigrant parents group (Lindblom & Maahi 2008, 7).

How does Mirror support renewal? According to Engeström (1995), teams should be capable of identifying contradictions as a source of expansive learning in the team. A more harmonious approach is suggested by the organisational knowledge creation model by Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995). Emphasising trust, emotional elements and communal learning states, this model proposes that new knowledge is generated through alternating between tacit and explicit knowledge. Models of developmental evaluation, in turn, focus on mirrors which catalyse the work community's reflection on its activities. One of the most effective mirrors is the voice of the client (Vataja et al. 2007, 367).

In the Mirror method, retrospective and evaluative monitoring functions as the

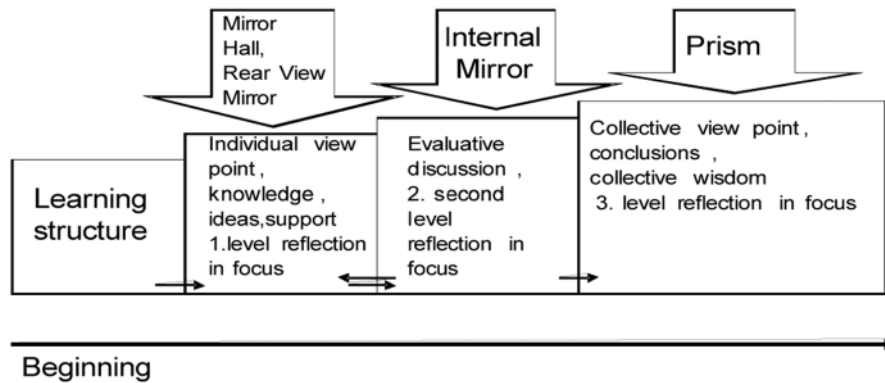
mirror, while joint conclusions form the development engine. Furthermore, Mirror constituted a team tool for evaluating whether the social work measures conducted had been sufficient, and for testing a planned working strategy. For instance, one team discussed whether a family's situation should be influenced by reinforcing the role of the family network or by investing in the inclusion of the family's father. The team also discussed whether a Family Group Conference or some other methodical approach would be worth considering.

Reviewing structural factors in peer evaluation also revealed a type of non-functioning co-operation with other bodies providing assistance, a problem which was not solvable within the team. Seikkula & Arnkil (2005, 17) underline that in a multiple problem case, several actors will take an interest in the client. Each specialised body, acting within the framework of its own basic task, will then attempt to trigger change. If the desired progress is not achieved within the overall situation, the workers involved will increase their efforts to change one another. This forms a repeated interactive pattern involving both clients and workers. Perceiving the existence of such patterns is the key to changing them. With Mirror, a team may indeed observe the need for a multi-professional forecasting dialogue, designed to open up this type of problem, or organise a collaboration meeting on co-operation issues.

Some teams also noted, however, that there is a risk that the team's ability for renewal might weaken over time. The teams therefore tried to keep their boundaries flexible and promote individuals' personal development through further studies, for instance. One team made conscious efforts to include students and workers from other teams in their peer evaluation meetings. By offering a method-learning opportunity to visitors, the team also received outsiders' input through their peer evaluation. Indeed, Wenger (1998, 256) suggests that richness of boundary processes is an indication of learning within a community.

As a consequence of piloting, additional meanings were attached to the working method. Mirror also became *support for supervisors' duties*. In the midst of organisational reform and continuous personnel changes causing pressure, Mirror was seen as an operating method supporting continuity. Supervisors also emphasised the importance of joint discussion as a tool for providing them with insights on an individual worker's support and guidance needs. This feeling was mutual: one worker reported that Mirror had been a means of having their voice heard within the team, in addition to providing personal understanding of the client case. In the peer evaluation feedback form, the worker noted that prior to the peer evaluation they were unable to assess whether a situation was difficult or not, or whether their working method was effective in the client case. They had been previously vaguely concerned about their Mirror case, but were unable to present the issue in a manner that would have led to any measures being taken by others, or to him/her obtaining case-related feedback. For the worker, the conducted peer evaluation discussion produced guidelines for the future, provided analytical help

Figure 4 Mirror's importance for social work teams.



in working with the client, and made the worker feel that they had been heard.

Figure 4 illustrates the importance of Mirror work for a team. For all team members, the working method provides a learning structure. Motivation for self evaluation mainly derives from a single member's own work and the desire to seek support for it. The Mirror Hall is an aid for such an analysis (1. level reflection). Also the use of Rear View starts from the individual worker's view point. Peer evaluation generates material for 2. level reflection, supported by the Internal Mirror. Over time, the method enables reaching inductive conclusions on larger themes based on an individual case, through monitoring the client process. Such conclusions can be noted down on the Prism form (3. level reflection).

The following case illustrates the Mirror process. It is based on the true events, taken from different cases. This narrative illustrates experiences of the method on a more general level.

Merja

Social worker Merja self-evaluated her work. She chose to look more closely at her work with the children who had been taken into custody, and her work with their family care worker and biological parents. Merja was pondering, what would be the best way to support the growth of children and the relationship with their biological parents as well as the family care worker at her work. She evaluated the strengths and risks in the situation and the chosen methods and arguments behind them. In addition to that she evaluated the nature of the client relationship and her own role in it. She also scrutinized her abilities and resources to work in the situation. She concluded that there was not enough time to attend to a matter carefully and that

she would need further training on family care.

In the peer evaluation meeting social workers had a common discussion based on Merja's self evaluation. The conclusion was that there was a need to step backwards: it was important to assess the appropriateness of the whole placement in foster care. The peer worker was also suggested. The discussion was vivid and multifaceted: different viewpoints were expressed. The workers were not under pressure in the meeting since there was a lot of time for discussion. Peers gave Merja positive feedback about the clear presentation, keeping child perspective in focus, and about Merja's ability to see various solutions in spite of a difficult situation. Some of the social worker's got irritated by the fact that Merja had had so little support for her work. All the workers expressed the level of their concern at level 4 (scale 1-4). Merja's own evaluation was 2-3.

After the peer evaluation discussion Merja was relieved, as she understood that her peers had found the situation challenging. She thought that the whole team had affirmed, that social work should not be done in great haste, and that the welfare of the child should always be a prime factor. Also, one should not try to tackle difficult cases alone. Instead, one should seek support. Merja was a little annoyed at the self evaluation, as she thought it to be somewhat time consuming. However, considering the outcome of the process, she was satisfied. The peers thought that the common work in the peer evaluation meeting gave a shared sense of support to slow down social work processes in order to do the work well.

In the formative evaluation Merja evaluated the case another time in the peer group. She went through the client process thoroughly, reflecting on it with the first self evaluation done in the beginning of the process. Merja thought that her own thinking had clarified in the process. Due to that, she had been able to work in a more client-oriented way with all parties involved – , more than before, when she had been worried about her own role in the process. She had not made use of all the suggestions that were made in the previous peer evaluation meeting. The most important outcome was, that by taking time for reflecting, she felt she was able to act more sensibly in the case. She could express herself more openly in her discussion with the family worker and also reflect her own role in it. That enhanced discussion about important matters. Also, the family care worker was more able to give voice to her own concerns, such as tiredness. Merja thought that she was now more able to undertake a good assessment of the situation. She felt that she was now professionally sure about herself. Concretely, she was sure that it was good to continue supporting the family care worker with family work.

Merja reconsidered her need for immediate training about family care, since the client process had clarified sufficiently. The situation did not burden her anymore, even though she acknowledged some challenging areas such as creating a good working relationship with the biological parents.

In the formative meeting the team discussed what was to be learned about the case and themselves as a group. They were pleased with the fact that Merja's case

had progressed methodically and that Merja had benefitted from their reflection. They thought that Merja's ability to work independently had strengthened. When Merja had gone through the suggestions made earlier and evaluated what had worked and what had not, this helped them also to understand more about social work. The team wrote down on the Prism-form as a mutual conclusion that it was important to try to have influence on the foster care system. Children with special needs have to be placed with the families who have the needed resources. The superior thought that this is an important subject to put forward in the service system.

Conclusions

The Mirror project offered a varied range of experiences and knowledge of the factors and methods supporting work communities in social welfare; ones which promote the proactive, continuous development of work practices and conditions, the organisation and improvement of work and innovation within work communities, and resolving the question of how to establish these as a regular part of social work. This pilot project improved the Mirror method in an inclusive way, thus supporting renewal in social work organisations.

The study illustrated that adaptation of such a method will have different non-linear consequences in different kinds of socio-material networks. Nonetheless, the objectives of the project were achieved commendably: the method proved both suitable for various social welfare sectors, and useful – provided that the critical elements were met by the teams. In the pilot teams, the method enhanced the methodical nature of the work. The Mirror method was anchored in eight out of ten pilot teams, and was also disseminated to other teams that adopted it autonomously. The method supported the documentation of social work, contributed to the evaluation of working methods' functioning and helped in drawing conclusions on one's own work and abilities. Furthermore, it enhanced the adoption of better working methods and assisted in coping at work.

Notes

- 1 Throughout the article 'case' refers to the worker's self evaluation of his/her own work with the client, not to the client him/herself.
- 2 If no answer was obtained for the follow-up survey, the researcher sent an e-mail or called the team's contact person.
- 3 The Mirror Hall form needs to be used. The team ensures that the Mirror Hall themes are discussed, that positive feedback is given systematically and that

advising discourse is avoided in the discussions (see Yliruka 2006, 43).

- 4 In her study, Minna-Kaisa Järvinen (2007) analysed the client and worker's expertise within the Probation Service. A client and a worker both have various angles on their co-operation relationship. The client's co-operation orientations – of obligation, crisis and change – describe the client's relationship with co-operation and change. In turn, the worker's working distances – close-, interim- and remote-distance work – describe the worker's distance to the client's change efforts. The combination of these client and worker angles form various states of co-operation, differing from each other in terms of co-operation, activity, change, the use of networks and dialogism. Järvinen qualifies these states of co-operation as obligatory, remote control, interim-distance, acute and active states.

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