

# Are the Promises of Reflective Social Work Practice More Assumed than Actual?

## A Simulation-based Research Study Exploring the Limits of Critical Reflection

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# Reflecting on Reflection in Clinical Social Work: Unsettling a Key Social Work Strategy

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## Abstract

This study calls into question some of assumptions within social work education and practice regarding the transformational potential of reflection-on-practice. Participants ( $n=34$ ) in this simulation-based study each engaged in two clinically focused simulations, each followed by an interview which included observing segments of their video-recorded simulations. The objectives of this study are to make some sense of the misalignments between participants' post-simulation reflections of their practice behaviours, and the practice behaviours observed by the research team, and later by participants themselves. Findings illustrate that: (i) how clients and the session are understood in the moment can be different than how they are understood post-client engagement; (ii) reflections of practice behaviours can be tied to how individuals want to be, which are not necessarily aligned with how they are in the moment; and (iii) reflections are intertwined with awareness of oneself. These results identify some of the limitations of individualised reflective activities, and demonstrate the powerful potential of collective reflection on recordings of simulations to challenge memory distortions, retrospective biases and to promote greater accountability to ourselves as social workers, and to those we work with.

Available here →



# Purpose

To make sense of the misalignments between reflections of practice, and practice behaviors, and to understand the limitations of reflection as a tool to disrupt power and secure social justice in social work practice



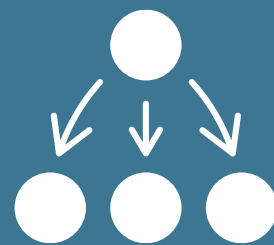
# CONSTRUCTIVIST AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST PARADIGMS



People construct their understandings of the world through experiences and reflections of experiences (Adom et al., 2016)



Constructivism focuses on doubts of human perception (Kraus, 2019), while social constructivist paradigms emphasize knowledge generation via relationships and social context, and as dependent on social understandings and interactions (Omodan & Tsotetsi, 2020).



The aim of this work is to think of reflective practice as subjective, multiple, varied, and as constructed through relationships.

# STUDY DETAILS

- Exploring uncertainty in clinical practice
- Two simulated clients
  - Maya
  - Dave
- Participants completed a 30-minute simulation with each simulated client, and then engaged in a reflective dialogue about their experiences of uncertainty
- 34 participants



# Demographic Information

## MSW Students (n = 12)

Avg. age: 29 years

Race:

- BIPOC: 2 (17%)
- White: 10 (83%)

Identifying Gender:

- Female: 12 (100%)

## Recent Graduates (n = 10)

Avg. age: 29.5 years

Race:

- BIPOC: 4 (40%)
- White: 6 (60%)

Identifying Gender:

- Female: 8 (80%)
- Non-binary: 2 (20%)

## Experienced (n = 12)

Avg. age: 52 years

Race:

- BIPOC: 3 (25%)
- White: 9 (75%)

Identifying Gender:

- Female: 7 (58%)
- Male: 4 (33%)
- Trans masculine non-binary: 1 (8%)

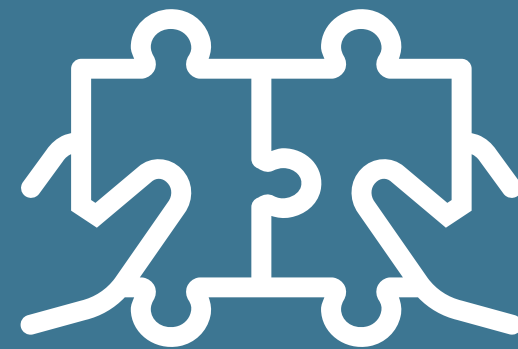
# Methods



## Identify misalignments

Only misalignments that were discussed or observed during the reflective dialogues were included.

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Reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) informed by constructivist and social constructivist paradigms (Kraus, 2019; Omodan & Tsotetsi, 2020).

# Findings



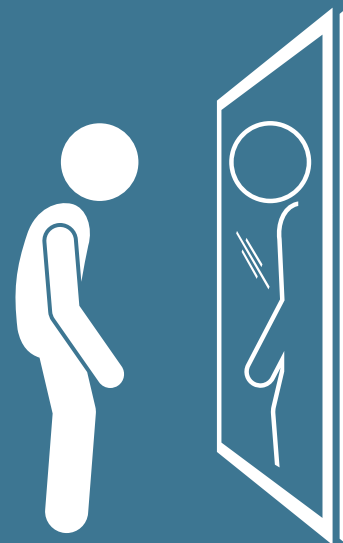
1. How clients and the session are understood in the moment can be different than how we remember them post engagement.

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2. Reflections of practice behaviors are often tied to how we want to be, which are not necessarily aligned with how we are in the moment.

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3. Reflections are tied to awareness and perceptions of self.



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- **FINDING 1:**
- How clients and the session are understood in the moment can be different than how we understand them post observation
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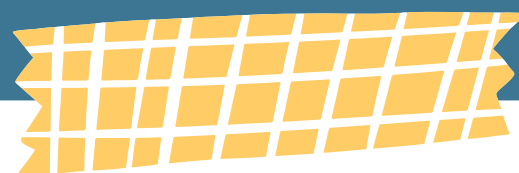
**1** **There is cloudiness in the moment**  
• Fears, uncertainty, emotions

**2** **Moments and people are too complex to fully know at any one time**



**Interviewer:** Because when we were talking you had said that you had gone through options with her about the job. But I wouldn't say that's what I saw.

**Recent Graduate 8:** No, so I thought I did... maybe it does cloud my processing a little bit. And it's possible too that like my perception of the situation given my uncertainties is different than what actually happened. Which I think might be the case here.

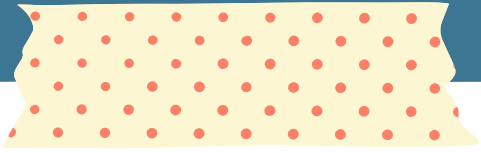


- **Student 2:** My uncertainty was how much to keep probing about this... That uncertainty was how much do I need to know.
- **Interviewer:** How much you need to know for what?
- **Student 2:** That's a good question... I would say my focus was more so on getting him back for a second session. So my uncertainty was kind of like do I need to know more about things that happened a few years ago, because he's kind of said I used to use alcohol; now I'm using it again. So, you know, do I need to know more about that? Or do I need to know more about just what's going on now?
- **Interviewer:** Is there a pressure not to over ask because you want to encourage him to come back. Is that what I'm hearing?
- **Student 2:** Yeah.
- **Student 2 After Observing Self:** *Watching it back, he was pretty open. I bet if I kept asking pretty, like, direct questions, he would have kept telling me.*
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- **FINDING 2:**
- Reflections of practice behaviors are often tied to how we want to be, which are not necessarily aligned with how we are in the moment.
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**Our reflections can be rooted within what we value and hope of ourselves, which can be misaligned from our actions**

- Can be very difficult to be confronted with this misalignment



**Student 3 Prior to Observing Self:** When in doubt, I just try to keep it open and I try to prove that I am listening by using key phrases that the client has said but also asking questions to explore a little bit deeper...just to get a little bit more information as to what their perspective is on the situation and get a little bit more clarity.

**Student 3 After Observing Self:** "I can't believe I used the word "statistically" when talking about thought feeling links"

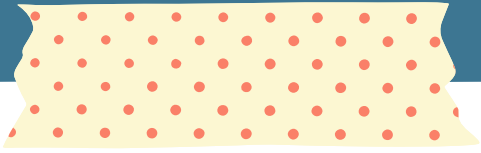
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- **FINDING 3:**
- **Reflections are tied to**
- **awareness and perceptions of**
- **self**
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### 1 Perceptions of self vary

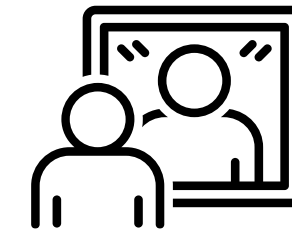
- Requires being able to confront the self

### 2 Requires self-awareness

- Can we ever be fully self-aware in a moment? Do we want to believe we can be?

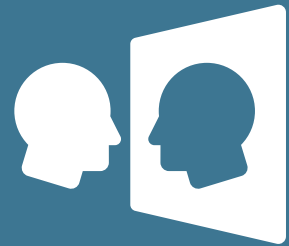


**Recent Graduate 4:** Oh my God. I thought I did well, I felt good.” But watching myself, I’m like, “Sh\*t.”



**Experienced Practitioner 6:** I didn't even know I was doing that?

# Discussion



Critical reflection relies on the idea that we can accurately perceive and remember ourselves, others, and ourselves in relation to others. This work questions the accuracy and objectivity of our perceptions and memories of clinical encounters.



Reflective practice obscures the self as the multi-faceted, fluid, and temporal being that it is.



Reflection is in tension with contemporary notions of self-affirmation and self-love



There is a disconnect between peoples' cognitive and emotional encounters with reflection. Reflection threatens the self, and the self as "an interpersonal being" (Baumeister, 2011)



Reflection is instrumental, but we need to be wary not to put too much faith in it.

# Implications for Social Work Education and Professional Development



**Move away from individual reflection  
towards a community of practice**

Video observation with collective reflection  
as providing new insights into the self

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**Create more opportunities to confront  
the self**

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**Political project around playing with  
conceptions of comfort and what it  
means to be comfortable with our  
multi-faceted self**



# Thank You!

[www.carleton.ca/socialwork/simlab](http://www.carleton.ca/socialwork/simlab)

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