



A person-centred enquiry into the teaching and learning experiences of reflection and reflective practice – Part one



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SUMMARY

Reflection and reflective practice has become a key issue for curriculum development within nurse education, particularly mental health nursing. The Nursing and Midwifery Council has linked the demonstration of reflective skills to clinical competence to gain entrance onto the professional register. However, despite a significant volume of literature on reflection there is a paucity of research evidence regarding how nurse educators teach mental health nursing students to reflect and become effective reflective practitioners and, little research exploring experiences of staff and students engaged in reflection for teaching and learning purposes.

A person-centred enquiry was undertaken to explore staff and student perceptions and understanding of reflection in the context of the undergraduate pre- and post-registration mental health nursing diploma programme, utilising a framework involving four focus groups and conducted in a university setting. The findings from the discussions that took place within the focus group setting produced a new model and an extended description of reflection together with non-prescriptive recommendations aimed at enhancing teaching practice.

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Introduction

This article concerns itself with detailing the process of, and presenting the findings for, a person-centred enquiry into the perceptions and understanding of reflective practice concepts related to the learning experiences of undergraduate pre-registration diploma mental health nursing students; post registration nursing students, and the teaching experiences of a mental health lecturing team.

Experiences of reflecting on practice and using this to inform future behaviour has been widely advocated by nurses and educationalists, (Kolb, 1984; Boud et al., 1985; Schön, 1987; Minghella and Benson, 1995; Taylor, 2000; Ghaye and Lillyman, 2000; Levett-Jones, 2006; Driscoll, 2007) and more recently within the Frances report (2013). Within many nurse education programmes it is an explicit requirement that students engage with this concept (Pierson, 1998; Mantzoukas and Jasper, 2004; Nicholl and Higgins, 2004) supported by the increasing use of critical incidents and reflective journals as part of the overall assessment strategy (Benner, 1984; Clarke and Croft, 1998; Johns and Freshwater, 2005).

The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) in fact stipulated that reflection is a competence that needs to be demonstrated in order to

gain entry onto the register as a Mental Health Nurse for all new pre-registration nursing programmes from September 2011. Arguably mental health nurses are unique in the field of nursing because of the intensity or the emotional labour required in dealing directly with severe human psychological distress. This does not negate or deny all nurses emotional labour, but recognises the unique focus of the mental health nurse. However, whilst there is an increasing emphasis on reflection and reflective practice there is little qualitative research on how training in this area is provided to student nurses by nurse educators and practitioners and if and how student nurses internalise this; considering the importance placed on mental health/psychiatric nurses internationally being able to offer mental health nursing students and service users both therapeutic and purposive use of self in supporting recovery. It was the increasing importance placed upon reflection and the impact this can have on mental health service users care, which prompted the research presented in this article.

Research Aims and Objectives

The overarching aim of this research was twofold, firstly to accurately understand the internal frame of reference for and unique perspective of pre and post registration mental health nursing students regarding reflection and reflective practice. In particular student perceptions of their learning environment and the ways in which they had been taught to reflect. Secondly, to explore and enquire into the internal frame of reference and unique perspective of mental health lecturers perceptions

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of learning and teaching of reflection and reflective practice at the university. The objectives of the research therefore were to produce:

- a) A profile of reflection from the perspectives of both students and lecturers.
- b) Recommendations for the most effective (an approach that will actively engage both lecturers and students in learning to and participating in, reflection and reflective practice) ways to enhance reflection and reflective practice learning and teaching experiences for both staff and students in the pre-registration mental health curriculum.

Methodology

The researcher approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework (theory, ontology) that specifies a set of questions (epistemology) that the researcher will then examine in specific ways (methodology, analysis) (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008). My own ontological position is to view the very nature and essence of things in the social world through individual beliefs, attitudes, psyche, interpretation and internalisation. These ontological assumptions are also closely associated with what Hammersley (1996) described as the ontological notion of 'Subtle Realism'. Accepting that the social world does exist independently of individual subjective understanding but that it is only accessible to us via the respondents' interpretations. The ontological position of subtle realism emphasises the importance of respondents' own interpretation of relevant research issues and that different vantage points will generate different types of understanding, whilst not ignoring the existence of an external reality, which can be captured (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). My epistemological position derives from the interpretive paradigm; in that knowledge and truth comes from exploration and understanding of the social world through the participants and their own perspectives (Scott and Usher, 1996). Recognising that my ontological and epistemological assumptions are located within the Humanistic paradigm the methodological framework determined as most suitable for the research was that of Carl Rogers' Person-centred Approach. It was felt that the person-centred approach as a methodological framework for research, demonstrated significant methodological homogeneity with my ontological and epistemological stance, my methods and my research questions.

Mearns and McLeod (1984, pg. 372–373) perceived the beliefs and assumptions of Rogers' philosophy as offering a set of ideas and values that could be as usefully applied to research as to therapy. They felt that the person-centred philosophy could not so much provide a set of methodological techniques or rules, but a general framework for understanding persons within which existing research practices could be located. Mearns and McLeod developed 5 basic features for the person-centred qualitative researcher Table 1.

Table 1
The five basic features of the person centred qualitative researcher.

1. The researcher treats individuals who take part in research projects as equals, as participants rather than subjects (the latter being the term that denotes the authority of the researcher); a person with his or her own perceptions and feelings and preferences.
2. The researcher maintains an interest in empathically understanding the participants' subjective experiences. Thus reflecting the phenomenological nature of the person-centred philosophy in emphasising that the goal of research is to explore as sensitively and accurately as possible the frame of reference of the other.
3. The researcher sees the research as a process and not an activity simply focused on an outcome.
4. The researcher maintains a congruent stance in relation to his/her participants. There is a sense of authenticity in self and others.
5. Accepts participants and their experiences in a non-judgemental manner. This is the value orientation of the researcher.

It is these 5 features and attitudinal qualities adopted by the person-centred researcher that provide the way of being for the researcher and the methodological framework for this research and by extension to the methods of data collection, and interpretation of findings (Table 2).

Mearns and McLeod (1984) are clear to point out that this framework for research is "not the new solution to all behavioural research, but that it is advantageous when full co-operation of research participants is necessary, and particularly when the researcher aims to probe deeply and personally into the conscious experience of participants" (Mearns and McLeod pg. 384, 1984). Mearns and McLeod (1984), acknowledge that the trust, openness and flexibility of a general person-centred approach is effective in enabling research participants to explore areas of feeling and vulnerability in a way that could have been impossible with more structured, measurement orientated methods.

By recognising the individual as a participant in the research process, it supports removal of the power imbalance that can occur between researcher and subject. If there is less of an imbalance, the participant may feel more inclined to offer their thoughts and ideas. The use of empathic questioning and responding techniques tells the participant that the researcher wants to truly listen, hear and understand what they have to say. If the researcher is genuine, real and open to reflexively understanding their part in the research process, it allows the participant to connect with the researcher on a human to human level. The offering of unconditional positive regard on behalf of the researcher towards the participant allows the participant to feel accepted without judgement and therefore the person may feel free to offer their own thoughts and beliefs without fear of condemnation.

This framework would therefore support the choosing of methods to collect and generate data that would demonstrate a commitment to recognising multiple realities and the individual's point of view, and would require an empathic attitude towards the whole process. This empathic attitude would mean conducting the enquiry in a manner that limited disruption to the participants. Methods of data collection that place importance on the participant's narrative and allow for the reporting of data in a manner that is thick with rich description are also required. The methods also need to be able to present the unique internal frame of reference of the participants, accurately, ultimately enabling the research process to embrace being person-centred.

Being Person-Centred

Before discussing specific methods used for data collection it is important to address what I mean by 'thinking and behaving in a person-centred way'. It will be relatively transparent to the reader, that the person-centred approach as a methodological framework for research, is not about prescribing a set of methodological techniques

Table 2
Methodological framework informing the research process.

Equality
Empathy
Process orientated
Genuineness/congruency
Unconditional positive regard

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