How Critical are we? Revitalising Critical Reflection in Supervision

Matt Rankine, The University of Auckland

Matt Rankine, The University of Auckland

Address for Correspondence:
m.rankine@auckland.ac.nz

ABSTRACT

Reflective practice and *critical reflection* are problematic terms adopted by social work educators and practitioners. Social workers strive to understand power relationships, navigate oppressive structures and support disadvantaged groups in society in order to effectively improve practice. Supervision provides the professional space for critical reflection of the wider social work environment. This article reports on a qualitative study (Rankine, 2017a) examining critical reflection of practice in supervision within the current context of community-based child welfare services in Aotearoa New Zealand. Data were analysed from interviews with two participant groups: key informants and supervisory dyads. Analysis of the key informant data identified reflective practice as having different stages and critical reflection in supervision as a separate process that illuminated the impact of environmental factors on social work. Within practice, supervisory dyads utilised the supervision session for reflection on a superficial level but rarely used critical reflection to explore the wider contextual issues impacting on practice. Greater examination of the wider socio-political, socio-cultural and structural factors that influence practice and engagement with service users is urgently required. Critical reflection within supervision provides a space for social workers to develop professional practice and strengthen social justice strategies within their work.

Keywords: *Supervision; Critical reflection; Reflective practice; Social work; Social justice*

INTRODUCTION

The current era of neoliberalism and managerialism has led to a devolution of state responsibility for welfare and a preoccupation with risk and accountability within social services (Gray & Webb, 2013). The technocratic imposition of managerial perspectives that underpin neoliberalism have shaped service provision, how social workers' practise and how service users' needs are subsequently met. Services are governed by restrictive processes such as service criteria, funding, auditing and surveillance, at times alienating traditional social work values from the professional work undertaken with disadvantaged groups (Beddoe, 2010). Traditional values of social work connect critical thinking to critically informed practice. In order to promote self-awareness, social justice, anti-oppressive practice and structural analysis, reflective practice and critical reflection need to be central to professional social work.

Reflective practice provides the opportunity for professionals to learn from experiences through examination, assessment and questioning (Carroll, 2011). Davys and Beddoe (2010) state that, "at the heart of all practice is the ability to assess, reflect, adapt and respond" (p. 21). For social workers, reflective practice assists with analysing relationships, peoples' needs and dominant agendas. Supervision has long been established as the professional place for meeting organisational commitments, developing professionalism and exploring support options available to practitioners and their work with communities and service users (Hawkins & Shohet, 2012; Weld, 2012). Supervision, as a space for critical examination, promotes reflective practice for practitioners (Davys & Beddoe, 2010).

Critical reflection has been defined as a deeper analysis of power and structures within society that influence individuals and their relationships with others (Brookfield, 2009). For social work and supervision, critical reflection is important as a process for deconstructing assumptions that are held individually, socially and politically and the opportunity to reconstruct knowledge for further action from an anti-oppressive perspective (Fook & Gardner, 2007). The process of critical reflection allows for a wider understanding of the social and cultural context of practice and actively promotes principles of social justice, and human rights.

Reflective practice and critical reflection have been terms used interchangeably in social work literature and in practice, by authors, social work educators and practitioners and consequently are open to interpretation. For example, when do we reflect or critically reflect? Are reflective practice and critical reflection seamless or separate entities? Moreover, within the current managerial climate, how is supervision (as a space for reflective practice and critical reflection) being utilised?

Within this qualitative study, discussions alongside the practice realities of reflective practice and critical reflection in supervision are analysed from key informant and supervisor–supervisee dyad interviews. Specifically, all participants have experience working within community-based child welfare social work in Aotearoa New Zealand. This particular area of social work practice within Aotearoa New Zealand has been susceptible to managerial changes from neoliberal state agendas which have severely altered service delivery. A detailed account of how supervision is currently being utilised by social workers emerges from the interview data, providing a vivid description of reflective practice and critical reflection within the context of current social work practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reflective practice and critical reflection

Both reflective practice and critical reflection are valuable for practising social workers. Reflective practice provides a professional process for developing self-awareness and considering alternative plans for action. Critical reflection assists practitioners to examine power relationships, challenge assumptions and critique existing social structures. This practice is essential for developing pro-active and social justice strategies with disadvantaged groups in society. Both terms will now be explored more fully.

Reflection is crucial to learning and making meaning from experiences (Carroll, 2011). It is the starting point for the process of reflective practice and derives from a disorienting or emotional event that challenges an individual's existing assumptions and causes re-thinking of values and beliefs (White, Fook, & Gardner, 2006). Literature relating to reflection has gathered momentum in the last 100 years and covers the fields of education, professional and organisational learning in many different professions, including social work (Fook & Gardner, 2007). Reflection relates to self-inquiry and transformative changes that are seen as essential to being a professional (Johns, 2009).

Reflective practice is embedded in the learning and development of social workers and in shaping their professional skills. Models and concepts relating to reflective practice have been developed in which the practitioner can review their practice through asking challenging questions and moving forward with planned action (Taylor, 2013). Schön's concept of *the reflective practitioner* and its application to professional practice learning (Schön, 1983), and Kolb's *experiential learning model* (Kolb, 1984) have provided important contributions to understanding ongoing learning and development. Reflective practice has also been described as having progressive layers in criticality and transformation that are essential to adult learning and education (White et al., 2006). The different stages of critical awareness in reflective practice (where an individual changes their understanding in relation to experiences) and alternative actions are explored, have been described by several influential authors. Argyris and Schön (1974) introduced single and double loop learning to differentiate levels of reflection. Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985), Brookfield (1995) and Mezirow (1981) have identified stages of criticality in adult learning from challenging individual thoughts, exploring alternative strategies to transformative learning and new approaches to living.

The usefulness of reflective practice, however, has been disputed in social work due to its superficial examination and shallow application to the complexities of practice (White et al., 2006). Thus, reflection and reflective practice, according to Taylor (2013), do not consider historical, social, cultural and political factors that discriminate between people and are merely attuned to an individual's needs. Social workers may have statutory duties, be agents of the state, or have organisational responsibilities but they still need to acknowledge power, social justice and oppression (Brookfield, 2009). Critical reflection and critically reflective practice have been fundamental drivers for this to occur within professional social work. Critical reflection is the process for exploring the wider context of practice (Fook & Gardner, 2007); and critically reflective practice is the examination of the political environment impacting on social work (Taylor, 2013). In comparison to reflective practice, critical

reflection and critically reflective practice analyse power dynamics, unsettling wider assumptions on practice and provide strategies for action (Brookfield, 1995).

Critical reflection, according to Fook and Gardner (2007), requires the individual to deconstruct their values, attitudes, social, political, professional and theoretical influences in order to reconstruct meaning with changes in awareness and action. Exercising critical reflection provides social workers with resources to develop fresh perspectives when working with service users and explore contemporary issues relating to social justice, oppression, power relations and domination in society (Gray & Webb, 2013). Critical reflection has also been advanced in research as a co-constructed approach between participants and researchers to highlight meaning from experiences and promote transformative practice (Fook, 2011; Rankine, 2017a). In doing this, critical reflection provides an approach that complements critical realism as an epistemological stance to research where political action in practice sits alongside the social construction of knowledge (Baines, 2017).

Beddoe and Egan (2009) affirm that critical reflection supports social workers within research and changing practice through the identification of theories; evaluation of existing discourses within practice; promotion of new theories within practice; and altering existing power relationships. This process is crucial for social workers to continually develop critically informed and anti-oppressive practice. Social workers are then more active within organisations, can express professional values, and create alternative approaches when working with others (Fook & Gardner, 2007). The concept of critically reflective practice argues that the broader sociological context of political and institutional settings requires ongoing review (Taylor, 2013). Critically reflective practice examines everyday practice, discourses and the language used with service users. This level of critical exploration by the social worker allows alternative voices to be heard and creativity when working with others. Moving forward, for social workers to be *critical*, the wider systemic and contextual levels influencing practice require constant consideration (Gray & Webb, 2013). In addition, social workers need a professional space, sufficient distance and time to critically reflect on practice. Such a professional space for reflective practice and critical reflection is within supervision.

Supervision

Traditionally, supervision has been identified as providing a balance, assisting practitioners to meet organisational and professional objectives associated with their work (Davys & Beddoe, 2010; Hawkins & Shohet, 2012). Equally, for social workers, supervision allows the opportunity to reflect on practice, improve performance and it supports decision making with service users (Carpenter, Webb, Bostock, & Coomber, 2012; Mor Barak, Travis, Pyun, & Xie, 2009). Being reflective in supervision provides a structure to the supervision session and emphasises the value of the learning that takes place between the supervisor and supervisee. Experiential learning, as described by Kolb (1984), has been a process linked specifically to supervision. The reflective learning model for supervision (Davys & Beddoe, 2010) describes how the supervisor and supervisee navigate different stages of the reflective learning cycle in order to promote new learning and decision making. Supervision has also been described as a layered process in order for transformational thinking and changes in behaviour to occur (Carroll, 2011). The four-layered practice model of reflective supervision supports a holistic examination of practice that highlights the importance of the supervisor and supervisee's

critical exploration of the use of self, the organisation where the social worker works, their relationships with others and the wider environment of practice (Rankine, 2017b). A critical supervision and practice process developed by Noble, Gray, and Johnston (2016) also has a strategic contextual focus to supervision, critically exploring the issue from broader perspectives.

The current threat to supervision is the intrusion of managerial practices that favour case-load surveillance and oversight of social workers in order to meet the procedural requirements of the service provided to service users. Such organisational agendas stifle reflective practice and critical reflection in supervision. In addition, the role of supervisor has been influenced by managerialism and, as such, this environment compromises the professional nature of supervising social workers, the diversity of the work and the importance of critical reflection (Beddoe, 2015; O'Donoghue, 2015). Reflective practice and deeper analysis of practice thus becomes undermined within supervision under such conditions and Gibbs (2009) argues that a new generation of social workers is now emerging with a lack of awareness of critical reflection within their work.

In the current managerial climate, the notion of critical reflection may appear aspirational but has continued to be in the foreground of growing literature regarding supervision and the valuable space this provides for developing professional and anti-oppressive practice. The assumptions, contradictions and dominant discourses inherent in practice require ongoing exploration in supervision (Noble et al., 2016). The supervisor has a pivotal role in facilitating this process and ensuring that critical conversations related to social justice occur in social work organisations (Hair, 2015).

Adopting social constructionism (that accepts that knowledge is created by individuals in their interaction with others) provides an appreciation of multiple perspectives (for example, age, gender and ethnicity) and promoting anti-oppressive practice (Hair & O'Donoghue, 2009; Hernández & McDowell, 2010). The wider contextual influences on supervision practice require deeper consideration (Noble et al., 2016) and have led to the emergence of alternative approaches to supervision, such as strengths-based approaches (Engelbrecht, 2010), Kaupapa (principles or ideas) Māori supervision (Eruera, 2012) and cross-cultural supervision (Tsui, O'Donoghue, & Ng, 2014). Recognising the causal impact of social structures and the influence of socio-cultural and socio-political factors during supervision facilitates the development of anti-oppressive and culturally sensitive practice (Baines, 2017; Hair & O'Donoghue, 2009). Critical reflection in social work, and indeed in supervision, requires ongoing development and understanding in practice and research so it remains relevant to the demands of a managerial environment (Beddoe, 2015; Ruch, West, Ross, Fook, & Collington, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study is influenced by a critical realist epistemology which highlights the connection in society between the causal impact of structures and the individual (Bhaskar, 1978). Critical realism provides diverse participant perspectives to be captured alongside the development of social justice strategies to counter oppressive practices (Baines, 2017). As the underpinning knowledge base in this study, critical realism supports the co-construction of knowledge between participants in practice and critical reflection in research.

This study has been developed from research findings with key informants and supervisory dyads related to reflective supervision in community-based child welfare social work in Aotearoa New Zealand (Rankine, 2017a) and was approved by the Human Ethics committee at the University of Auckland. Data from participants were collected via semi-structured interviews. These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality of participants in the study. The findings from both participant groups have been developed from thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) of the key informants' and supervisory dyads' feedback. NVivo™ software (QSR International Pty Ltd. Version 10, 2012) was used to electronically store and code the data.

Nine key informants participated in the study and were recruited in response to an invitation distributed by a national professional body. Each participant was a social work educator working at a tertiary institution in Aotearoa New Zealand with both considerable and current experience of providing supervision to social workers working within community child welfare. All participants brought knowledge from their own experiences within community- based child welfare, qualifications in social work and professional membership of the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) and/or were members of the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW). The key informants provided the following demographic profiles: eight identified as being Pākehā (European)/New Zealanders; one as New Zealand Māori; between the ages of 30 and 70; seven were female, two were male. The key informant interviews focused on their views related to supervision, reflective practice and the complex demands faced by social workers working in community-based child welfare. Within this article, the key informants' definitions of reflective practice, critical reflection and understanding of the current context of community-based child welfare are analysed further.

Eight supervisory dyads (already in pre-existing supervisory relationships) volunteered to participate in the study via response to an advertisement distributed by regional managers within community-based child welfare services across Auckland. Participants had a range of social work experience and qualifications – from recently qualified to practitioners with over 30 years' experience in a number of practice settings and different roles. The supervisory dyads comprised of internal (three) and external (five) supervisory relationships. Eleven participants identified as Pākehā/New Zealanders; three as Māori; one as Māori/Pasifika; one as Chinese; were between 20 and 70 years of age; 15 were female, one was male.

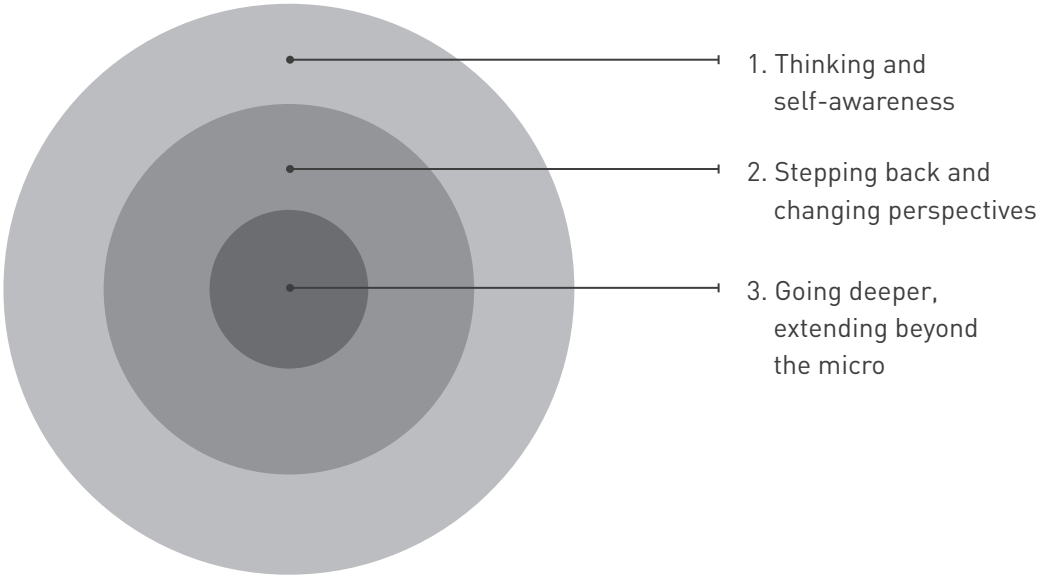
Data from each supervisory dyad were gathered from two separate sessions: the *supervision session,* between the supervisor and supervisee, and a *follow-up session* together with the author. The supervision session was recorded, transcribed and the author completed an initial content analysis. This information was grouped into relevant themes to assist the author facilitate the follow-up session. Each participant had the transcript returned to them for their perusal before the follow-up meeting. The follow-up session was scheduled several weeks after the supervision session to provide the opportunity for each dyad to critically consider their supervision time together. The findings from the dyads that are analysed here have been taken from the follow-up session and constitute the realities for supervisors and supervisees to critically reflect on practice.

RESULTS

The informants define reflective practice and critical reflection

The key informants were asked by the author for their definitions of reflective practice and critical reflection. Reflective practice was described as a layered process with three levels of criticality in depth and thinking. For each layer, key terms were identified from analysis of the key informant data (see Figure 1). Initially, reflective practice requires self-awareness and an individual to position their thinking; then a process of stepping back to consider alternative perspectives; and finally, going deeper and considering wider issues impacting on practice. Some key informants saw critical reflection as being part of a deeper level of reflective practice whilst others identified differences between reflective practice and critical reflection.

Figure 1. The layers of reflective practice



The first layer (1. Thinking and self-awareness) associated with reflective practice from the key informant data was the development of thinking and self-awareness. Mary described this level of thinking as "after something happens ... how you felt at the time and able to discuss it. Hopefully that makes you more self-aware the next time you find yourself in that situation." The self-awareness leads to an exploration of beliefs and a skill-base that Laura acknowledged as "the ability to look and reflect on the work, actions, relationships and work with the client. Being able to integrate what you are doing and what's happening." The development of thinking and self-awareness illustrates characteristics of individual reflection.

The learning and development that takes place through reflective practice encompasses what we think, say and do in adult life (Brookfield, 2009). Learning is essential to professional growth and to work with service users. Therefore, reflective practice is ongoing and develops practitioners' skills. According to Bridget: "the more you learn and take from everything, the deeper the platform you stand on as a practitioner that grows around your experience, knowledge and skills. It's a learning spiral not linear."

Layer two of reflective practice (2. Stepping back and changing perspectives) provides practitioners the opportunity to stand back from *doing* the practice, allowing distance from the

issue and the chance to consider alternative possibilities in their personal and professional development. Bridget defined reflective practice: "by sitting back, exploration can begin with the good things, the things that aren't so good, the mistakes, you get to pull it apart and putting the jigsaw puzzle back together so it fits." Whereas Bryan also identified reflective practice as "stepping back to say 'Well I've had this experience, this is how I understand it, let's look at it and what does it mean for how I work around this into the future.'"

Reflective practice was explained by some key informants as having a change orientation, so practice is transformed in some way rather than being a repetitive cycle of the same *doing*. This description has similarities with the cyclic models of reflection (Kolb, 1984) and has provided social workers the opportunity to look back on practice, to change proximity by allowing a new perspective to emerge and then move forward with planned action (Taylor, 2013). Mary identified "the introspection and talking about how you felt about something, [this] will lead to some sort of change in your behaviour in the future." Alana concurred that reflective practice involved exploring alternative positions: "when working with the client you look at it from their perspective, you dissect it, investigate it and how you might look at it differently. You need to make some change in that."

The key informants described a third layer of reflective practice (3. Going deeper, extending beyond the micro) as extending into a wider and deeper understanding of macro issues. Critical reflection was viewed by some of the key informants as being embedded at a deeper level of reflective practice and was the terminology they chose to describe this deeper level. Alana asserted that "critical reflection takes it up a level [and] is about learning but you're cutting to the chase and really peeling it back." Whereas, for Elizabeth, this deeper level gave further perspective: "critical reflection is … looking [more] at … the reasons behind the action and the outcome."

Critical reflection was identified by some key informants as taking a deeper perspective and part of reflective practice. However, this deeper level was not clearly articulated. Critical reflection and critically reflective practice (as mentioned earlier) takes into consideration power dynamics, discourses, environmental and structural aspects influencing practice (Brookfield, 2009; Fook & Gardner, 2007). These terms are distinct from definitions of reflection and reflective practice in that wider influences affect actions and allow social workers to challenge inequality and oppressive practice. Several key informants made the distinction that critical reflection involved the practitioner thinking more deeply about macro issues concerning service users and how this impacted on a social worker's practice:

> Critically reflective practice examines the sources of the assumptions you are making about the situation you find yourself in. It's about being able to articulate the moral and value laden aspects of your work [and] identify the structural constraints on both yourself and your client's lives ... It's moving beyond that micro level … to thinking more broadly in social work. (Mary)

> It's looking at the bigger picture in terms of self, client and agency … and what does it mean for you as a practitioner. Government policy, the "working poor," the poverty, those kind of issues where decisions are made around policy that impact on clients. (Bridget)

Key informants were also asked their views on critical reflection occurring in supervision within the current context of community-based child welfare. For some, supervision was identified as the space to illuminate cultural factors, power issues and the associated implications for social work practice with service users. Mary described particular cultural issues that related to oppression and were relevant to critical reflection in supervision:

> … being able to identify [in supervision] the structural constraints on both yourself and your client's lives in terms of race, class, gender, ability, and sexuality … the broader structural things like 99 per cent of my clients are solo mothers so what does that tell us about gender, poverty etc. (Mary)

Social work within Aotearoa New Zealand has a commitment to the bi-cultural practice and ethics stated in the *ANZASW Code of Ethics* (ANZASW, 2008) and SWRB competencies (SWRB, 2016). Bridget identified that supervision in community-based child welfare social work needs to critically examine the socio-cultural and socio-political factors that impact on Māori and disadvantaged groups:

> [B]ringing in what's happening for Māori and different views about a way forward. It's that whole systems theory going out … how it relates to relationships, child protection, the Children's Action plan and how things might be "fixed" in our society. (Bridget)

Within the current context of community child welfare, many key informants identified the intrusion of managerial practices into social work and the supervision space, stifling critical reflection:

> If you've got a bureaucratic, managerial, outcomes focused efficiency and compliance monitoring culture happening … going through your client list for the week … then that would reduce the opportunity for taking the time to really reflect on practice and what might be informing it. (Laura)

> When you ask the question are people getting enough [time for critical reflection in supervision], I would say no. I think people who are working in child welfare organisations … aren't getting that to improve practice and make it safer, I would s ay that it isn't enough. (Caveman)

The managerial environment that dominates community-based child welfare work highlights an over-emphasis on case management and administration within supervision. Such changes have led to an erosion of critical reflection in supervision regarding structural and cultural factors impacting on professional social work. Rose summarised the current situation within community-based child welfare:

> If workers were truly [critically] reflective, we would start challenging the system … They [government] strip it all away … If anyone thought about it for two minutes, they would realise you can't possibly operate well in that system … for many people I suspect the supervision is around "how do you survive in this system and work more efficiently?" (Rose)

Supervisory dyads' review sessions

The eight supervisory dyads participated in a follow-up session facilitated by the author. The purpose of this meeting was to review the previously recorded supervision session and identify reflective practice and critical reflection. Commentary from the supervisory dyads emphasised the preoccupation in supervision to ensuring organisational standards and expectations were met within community-based child welfare services. This was at the cost of core social work values related to building positive relationships, professional development, anti-oppressive practice and critical examination of wider structural and cultural factors. The information was similar to the concerns voiced by the key informants related to current practices in supervision and the community child welfare environment.

Within the supervisee's everyday practice, the state's dominant neoliberal agenda to contract out and increase accountabilities of community-based child welfare services was consistently highlighted. Regular pressures noted by the dyads were the accountabilities each practitioner had towards meeting specific performance criteria. This, is turn, was crucial for the community-based organisation to receive ongoing state funding. Grace remarked that, as a consequence, supervision had no space for critical reflection: "in the organisation it's about the cases and how the cases are moving or going to move." Jessica also stated that "some people don't come with [understanding of critical reflection] … They've only had case management – it often takes them a while to explore what else they could do." The influence of organisational expectations on supervision time was acknowledged by Jane: "you've got your social work ethics which underpin professional practice, but you've also got your accountability to this organisation."

The impact of risk associated with child welfare and the accountabilities to the organisation have dominated discussions in supervision through the pre-occupation of case management and compliance. In reviewing the transcript, Jock summarised, "we covered the issue [and] not identified anything major, you've not got concerns about the children, the home, so… we're shutting [the case]." Alice made the following distinction that "what we talk about in supervision there's so many tasks that we do here as social workers and a lot of stuff that doesn't sit best in the social work role. It takes time away from things that actually do sit in the social work role."

The community-based child welfare environment has led to a sense of busyness, lack of time and urgency for social workers to meet targets associated with service delivery. Feelings of despondency, deficit-based thinking and distance from government decision making on practice had become a common theme within the supervisory dyads' supervision sessions. Jane remarked that "we've got external pressures coming from government [and social workers] are not actually looking at practice, they're not looking at theory, they're not looking at anything other than that whole emotional cycle that they are caught up in." This organisational pressure had led to practitioners like Tracey being uncertain of how to use supervision:

> It's frustrating because you can talk about [the pressures] all you want but nothing changes … that's my perspective … If I have time I try and think about what I want to take to supervision but … I don't know what [else] to talk about. (Tracey)

The fiscal tightening of state funding and resources has created an ongoing challenging environment for community-based child welfare social workers. These constraints have increased redundancies within teams and uncertainty in roles. Resonating within the space for supervision are these concerns and the struggle for social workers to remain optimistic. For Debbie, constant changes in staff and service delivery and staff changes were huge features of their supervision:

> It is a theme that runs through a lot of supervision work at the moment because of the broader context of which we are operating in and the fact that … the goalposts have been changed … it is part of a bigger picture and the result is that negative deficit talk about resourcing and not enough staff … and downsizing. (Debbie)

Analysis of the supervisory dyads' findings identified the sense of powerlessness that consumed supervision and the lack of critical exploration by practitioners:

> For me … supervision is enabling the supervisee to do their work, to advocate for the supervisee but also to get the supervisee to have the feeling that they have the power to do things themselves. Quite often I find ... that supervisees want the answer from me. *"Tell me"*… then I just continue to enable them to be powerless. How can I give you the feeling that you actually do have power in that organisation? (Yvonne)

Evidence of critical reflection within the dyads' supervision was missing in the overall feedback discussions. The use of critical reflection in a supervisory framework facilitates a wider exploration of issues raised in practice: the ability to develop strategies to address oppression, promote optimism and reduce stilted ways of working. The supervisor plays a vital role to ensure wider dynamics and systemic links are critically considered in the practice discussion with the supervisee. Within the dyads' conversation, only two of the supervisors made connections to the socio-political and socio-cultural environment. Jessica, an experienced external supervisor, provided the link for her supervisee between a case and the wider organisational and professional social work factors that required critical discussion. This example echoed the layered reflective process identified by the key informants above:

> So when you're asking that question … "Am I doing the right thing?" … you've got your practice that you know but if you suddenly feel that you don't know then where do you go next? So you go to things like your organisational policy and if that doesn't give you the answers then you go to your wider social work ethics, the law of the land. So it's about stepping back. (Jessica)

The significance of diversity and cultural narratives is also central to critical reflection and allows for the recognition of improved ways of professional working. Cultural identity and providing an alternative discourse within supervision and practice were important to one Māori dyad; an aspect that did not strongly feature within the supervisory dyads' data overall.

> I started actively drawing on some Māori models of supervision, about trying to connect really deeply with whānau [family] because we've talked about whānau and leadership before … we're both Māori and that's important to us. That has to start being active and integrated into our supervision. (Ohaki)

DISCUSSION

Reflective practice and critical reflection are terms that social workers struggle to articulate in education and practice. This was highlighted from analysing the key informant definitions in the study. Reflective practice was described as a layered process in thinking towards changes in action. The definition appears consistent with authors such as Boud et al. (1985) and Brookfield (1995). For some key informants, the exploration of wider macro issues in reflective practice was construed as critical reflection. Critical reflection and reflective practice were experienced by these participants as an indivisible whole – however, the distinction of when reflective practice became critical was difficult to delineate in the analysis. Such a definition was ambiguous and it was unclear as to what these wider issues of practice may be. This description has synergies with ecological systems, commonly used in social work, relating to a holistic framework for interpreting an individual's interaction with the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). However, such theories can be challenged due to their lack of critical understanding of conflict, power, oppression and how individuals have agency to overcome environmental demands such as institutional oppression caused by neoliberalism (Besthorn, 2013).

Other key informants saw critical reflection as a deeper analysis of power, structures and the wider socio-cultural and socio-political environment. This definition of critical reflection was interpreted as separate from reflective practice and inclusive of previous definitions of critical reflection (Fook & Gardner, 2007) and of critically reflective practice (Taylor, 2013). For these key participants, examples of critical reflection were demonstrated clearly through the connection and interrelationship between practice, policy, structures and their impact on service users.

Within the current technocratic realities of managerialism operating in community-based child welfare social work, some key informants and supervisory dyads identified the need for critical reflection within supervision. This aided social workers to identify cultural considerations, the presence of power, oppression and the impact of dominant discourses on practice. These findings have similarities to the discussions found in current literature (Hair, 2015; Hair & O'Donoghue, 2009; Noble et al., 2016). However, the results from the supervisory dyads confirmed the lack of critically reflective supervision taking place within current practice. In order to maintain professional values related to human rights and social justice, social workers need to engage with critical conversations in supervision that ultimately advance practice with children, families and communities. International professional mandates for social workers provide the fulcrum for reflective practice and critical reflection to be part of everyday routine. Within Aotearoa New Zealand, the SWRB *Code of Conduct* (SWRB, 2016) and ANZASW *Code of Ethics* (ANZASW, 2008) reiterate the professional standards for social workers, as well as supervision being an essential element for developing competence.

The managerial landscape dominating community-based child welfare was also recognised by participants as undermining the value of reflective practice and critical reflection in supervision. The analysis of the key informants' views identified the tension in finding space for critical reflection against competing demands in supervision and social work. This tension was replicated in the supervisory dyads' data where a concerning lack of connection was

strongly evident relating core social work values and the consideration of wider structural and cultural factors in supervision. Conversations relating to redundancies, deficit thinking, managing risk and time pressures in community child welfare were key themes identified from the data. This level of preoccupation within the context of supervision compromises the capability to develop reflective practice and critical reflection – disastrous for the future of professional social work.

Without critical reflection in supervision, there is a lack of understanding by social workers of the connection between an individual and the wider structural factors impacting on practice (O'Donoghue, 2015). Within a managerial environment, the supervisor is the expert and the supervision session is seen as a mechanism for accountability towards meeting organisational objectives. The social work supervisee becomes passive in such a relationship and conversations relating to the wider social and political context are ignored (Hair & O'Donoghue, 2009). Supervision has to focus beyond managing risk and scrutiny of social workers' practice (Beddoe, 2010).

Supervision needs to promote reflective practice *and* critical reflection on the part of social workers. Both are required for the professional development of *big-picture* social workers (Noble et al., 2016) and the future of the profession operating in an oppressive and complex environment. Such a process would allow the participants in this study to explore their relationship to this issue, critically examine the wider context and address their specific practice issues. The supervisor is vital in facilitating this task in supervision through frameworks that promote critical reflection in practice (Noble et al., 2016; Rankine, 2017b). In doing so, the supervisee is able to articulate a deeper sense of self and understanding of social, cultural and political systems that privilege certain social groups whilst disadvantaging others. Social work educators hold a valuable position in the development of reflective practice and teaching critical reflection in social work programmes as well as supporting trainee supervisors in postgraduate training related to supervision. Equally, managers need to support social workers to attend supervision programmes as part of their professional development in understanding the significance of critical conversations in supervision.

Supervision in social work is also located within broader political, socio-cultural and structural contexts. These contexts influence the supervisory relationship, the conversations within it and its boundaries (Hernández & McDowell, 2010). The existence of dominant discourses maintains a traditional approach to supervision that represents Western ideologies and smothers discussions relating to identity, culture and the facilitation of critical practices within supervision (Hair & O'Donoghue, 2009). Overall, the participants in the study represented a dominant Western, Pākehā discourse within Aotearoa New Zealand. The exception in the data was one Māori dyad that highlighted the richness this brought to critical discussions within supervision. The lack of cultural diversity reflects the apparent invisibility of marginalised groups, such as Māori, within the current approaches to critical thinking in social work supervision. Despite a professional commitment to bi-culturalism in social work (ANZASW, 2008), the findings still illuminate dominant managerial structures overriding professional values and ethics. The contextual importance (both nationally and internationally) of critical reflection in research and practice needs further

promotion – in doing so, alternative approaches to supervision that are culturally specific can be identified and developed. Reflective practice and critical reflection promote multiplicity and complexity. Supervision is not a discourse where "one size fits all."

LIMITATIONS

There are limitations to both the transferability of findings and generalisability to other supervisory experiences. The participants have described varied experiences and understandings of reflective practice, critical reflection and supervision in community-based child welfare that may not represent other social work agencies or contexts. In addition, the study is small and specific to Aotearoa New Zealand. Divergent views related to culture (such as gender and ethnicity) and participant experience of (and identifying) critical reflection and reflective practice were not intricately captured. It was also not clearly identified in the study whether some participants were more critically reflective than others or whether there were particular times or contexts when this was more likely. However, what has been highlighted in the study is the discrepancy between social work educators, supervisors and supervisees regarding what reflective practice and critical reflection means to social work in theory and practice. In addition, social workers in the study exhibited a lack of critical examination in supervision of wider environmental factors influencing practice. Further research into existing practice is needed to promote critical reflection in social work and examination of the cultural and environmental contexts of practice.

CONCLUSION

Core social values and the importance of reflective practice and critical reflection are in danger of being replaced with managerial systems in social work. Reflective practice and critical reflection are interpreted differently by practitioners and the practice realities for community-based child welfare social workers have no room for such terms. Supervision can provide the essential space to develop a practitioner's self-awareness and examine the wider environmental factors influencing practice. However, to do so, social work educators, supervisors, managers and supervisees hold particular responsibilities to ensure reflective practice and critical reflection is at the forefront of everyday practice discussions. Alternative approaches to supervision and the ongoing examination of critical reflection in research and practice are essential for maintaining professional social work standards.

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