

## Chapter #21

### PUTTING THE PAST IN ITS PLACE

#### Assessing students' perceptions of their early experiences and self-awareness as explored in a counselling programme

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#### ABSTRACT

Assessment in higher education is constantly driving new research, centered on forms of testing based on real-life situations and self-reflection. Within the field of counselling, self-reflection needs to start with the trainees' self-identity — essential part of which is influenced by their past experiences. Past experiences have a major impact on thinking and feeling patterns, which in turn affect the trainees' personal and professional development. We present a reflective learning and assessment procedure through a project completed in our postgraduate programme in Counselling Psychology. The project is part of a Personal & Professional Development module, with a theoretical part on personality development and a practical part with reflective activities. We aim to “put the past in place” by exploring past experiences that have shaped aspects of the trainees' personalities. Analysis of assessment indicates a number of main themes rooted in early experiences. Such patterns may affect the feeling and thinking patterns adopted by trainees; e.g. feeling guilty when not behaving upon others' expectations or developing “faulty” ideas about an “ideal parent”, as well as the possibility of transforming these patterns into more functional ones, within this learning experience.

*Keywords:* higher education, assessment, reflective practice.

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades, the relationship between learning and assessment has been re-evaluated. The growing demand for lifelong learning and reflective practice triggered the development of new types of assessment, many of which focus on the use of self-reflection. These alternative types of assessment are attracting considerable attention, both within the relevant theory as well as research; it is often argued that traditional testing techniques are not adequate anymore. Instead, assessment should not be separated from students' experiences but should be conducted within the context of the student being seen as responsible and active person who reflects, collaborates and contributes to maintaining a continuous dialogue with the teacher.

Within the Higher Education (HE) context, there has also been an increasing focus on developing more transparent learning, teaching and assessment (LTA) strategies. There is a growing emphasis on curricula designs, focusing on skills acquired via experiential learning. These developments have pictured a paradigm shift from a teaching - focused to a learning-focused approach; thus, students are now more aware of their need to reflect on their own learning. The development of reflective practice as an essential ingredient of professional development has led to the formation of particular models. Although a wide variety of models exist, we will review the most relevant ones for the purposes of this work. Our fundamental assumption rests on the notion that any high quality HE programme needs to synthesize two distinct elements: experiential learning and reflective practice (Bourner,

2003). In this chapter, we describe how our postgraduate students are encouraged to engage in experiential learning based on a “reflection, development and empowerment” model. We present the context within which students engage in experiential work exploring past experiences and the effect they have had on their character. We discuss the work they submit which provides evidence of how they became aware of their personality aspects that will be influential in their future profession, but also in their personal development.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

### **2.1. Assessment in higher education**

For several years, HE aimed at producing learners within a narrow specific domain. However, the increasing acquisition of new knowledge and also the use of new communication technologies have demanded personalized and problem-based learning, stressing the importance of authentic learning, i.e. learning in real-life settings (Birenbaum, 1996). Authentic learning requires honest self-reflection and self-reflection can be mediated by the students’ need to perform well in their studies. As a consequence, self-reflection not only needs to be assessed, but it also needs to be fostered through real-life situations (Hargreaves, 2004). Students’ progress is monitored far better and more accurately by assessing a variety of real-life tasks through their education. There are several benefits arising through this approach, such as development of cognitive competencies (e.g. critical thinking, improved oral and written expression), social competencies (e.g. leading discussions, persuading and co-operating), affective dispositions (e.g. perseverance, flexibility, coping with frustrating situations) (Dochy, Segers, & Sluijsmans, 1999).

It is still not very clear whether these changes can be attributed to the changes within HE solely or whether they are the result of the labour market exercising some pressure on education. However, it is certain that HE now aims at creating practitioners who can reflect on their own practice (Dochy et al., 1999). For the purposes of this work, we focus on students’ *reflective skills* and the way they are exercised through exploring the effect of their early experiences on their personal/professional development.

### **2.2. Reflection as a means for learning**

Without reflective thinking, practice itself is not adequate to develop students’ competence just as “being in a healthcare environment does not guarantee learning” (Levett-Jones, 2007, p. 113). As an additional claim, within the clinical context, reflective practice is not new as a term; in 1933, Dewey argued that clinical practice cannot lead to learning unless it is followed by reflective thinking. Reflective thinking is therefore an essential part of the clinical practice: it equips the trainee with meaningful learning, although at times might be painful (Levett-Jones, 2007). In this framework, reflective practice can both constitute a part of the process and a follow up stage to it.

Within the wider scope of the HE context, there has also been an increasing focus on developing more transparent LTA strategies. For instance, the UK Quality Assurance Agency suggests that assessment is often a weak dimension of education, lacking clarity and consistency of design and practice (Hargreaves, 2004). In addition, the HE Funding Council recommends development of LTA strategies through funded activities, specifically related to assessment. Such activities are supported also outside the UK too, through funded projects on innovative methods of LTA. The literature reveals a major debate on the definition, assessment and the implications of reflective practice. There is so much variation in what reflective practice means (e.g. action research, professional development,

teacher empowerment, etc), that usually students find it hard to develop reflective skills, particularly when they are let alone to decide what to include in their reflections.

Apart from the above research gap, there is also an associated concern in how reflective practice should be assessed (Hargreaves, 2004). These problems are interconnected with a crisis of confidence in the professions and the consequent skepticism about the professional effectiveness of practitioners. In addition, practitioners usually know more than they could say and they tend to use this knowledge in order to cope with the challenges of their practice. This skepticism pointed by Schon (1983) is what has triggered the relevant interest and the associated research in the reflective practice area. Despite the lack in providing particular solutions to assessing reflective practice reliably, related research has greatly influenced the development of various models in professional education (Hargreaves, 2004).

### **2.3. Models of reflective practice**

Within HE practices, there are three particular models that involve conceptualizations of reflection: the “*reflection-in-action*”, “*reflection-on-action*” and the “*reflection, development and empowerment*” model (Morrison, 1996). In the first model, the practitioners acquire knowledge immediately and spontaneously as the practical situation is unfolded to them. This model has been characterized as incomplete because it does not leave enough space for the practitioners to fully reflect on their practice due to its short term character. The “*reflection-on-action*” model has been characterized as more appropriate in giving the practitioner the opportunity to understand and interpret meanings, intentions and actions through the synthesis of theoretical knowledge with personal development, keeping them as a point of reference. Unlike the “*reflection-in-action*” model, the “*reflection-on-action*” approach takes place once the event has occurred and not simultaneously.

Although there are some advantages of the “*reflection-on-action*” model—regarding the cognitive gain that the practitioner acquires—the “*reflection, development and empowerment*” model features the essential space for changes. This model has been suggested as allowing the practitioners to use their potential for individual and social empowerment, by restructuring first their own perceptual styles and contribute also to changing the unhelpful perceptual styles of their fellow trainees. This can be achieved through critique and rational reconstruction with regards to future actions that will be taken for personal and professional development. It has been suggested that this model facilitates practitioners to reshape their distorted views of their lives and adopt healthier thinking, feeling and behavioural patterns. Some of the first proponents (e.g. Habermas, 1974; as cited in Morrison, 1996) of this model have used the Freudian approach to support their claims about its potential, not only in an educational setting but also within a therapeutic context. Apparently, a “*patient*” can engage in self-reflection with emancipatory power, as the model drives them to bring the repressed forces causing dysfunctional distortions, to a conscious level. This process makes the “*patient*” regain the control over their lives.

### **2.4. Self awareness and the impact of early experiences**

Although self-awareness should not relate to particular schools or paradigms (Pietersea, Leeb, Ritmeesterb & Collins, 2013), its significance is more explicit in Gestalt therapy. It refers to the individual's ability to be in touch with their own thoughts, feelings and behaviors (Day, 2004). Self-awareness originated from “*awareness*”, which for Fritz Perls is the state of the consciousness when the organism “*attends to whatever becomes foreground*” (Harman, 1974; p. 180). Perls believed that the client needs to become aware

of their self and the world, focusing on how and what they avoid in life (Harman, 1974). Becoming aware of one's self, results in self-awareness, which is about intentionally bringing to consciousness what is understood at an unconscious level. Self-awareness too can at times be painful, (Rawlinson, 1990), but it needs to be emphasized at least as much as knowledge and practice are emphasized (Pietersea, et al. 2013).

In becoming aware of one's self, exploration of early experiences is crucial. There have been several noteworthy arguments regarding the impact of the early experiences on people's lives. Such arguments around the notion that early experiences are influential, have been growing until nowadays: alternative models have been formed to either support the enduring impact that these experiences have on someone's life, or to reject their long lasting effect. We address the above issues in the way we assess students' perceptions of their self-awareness, through some of our counselling units delivered in the first semester of the programme. The sections below describe the practical activities run by the trainees and the assessment used on their perceptions.

### **3. METHOD AND DESIGN**

There is a well known dilemma in counselling regarding whether an efficient counsellor is born or trained. This dilemma has raised questions on the programme curricula, entry requirements, interview tactics and several other factors that are critical in designing and running a counselling programme. We have elsewhere addressed these questions in the way we have integrated LTA procedures in our counselling programme (Savvidou, Kefalas & Gassi, 2016). We presented the framework within which we ensure high quality standards in LTA and at the same time we offer our trainees the opportunity to practice their acquired counselling skills in our community counselling center. Here, we present some indicators of how students actually achieve some of the learning outcomes set in the programme.

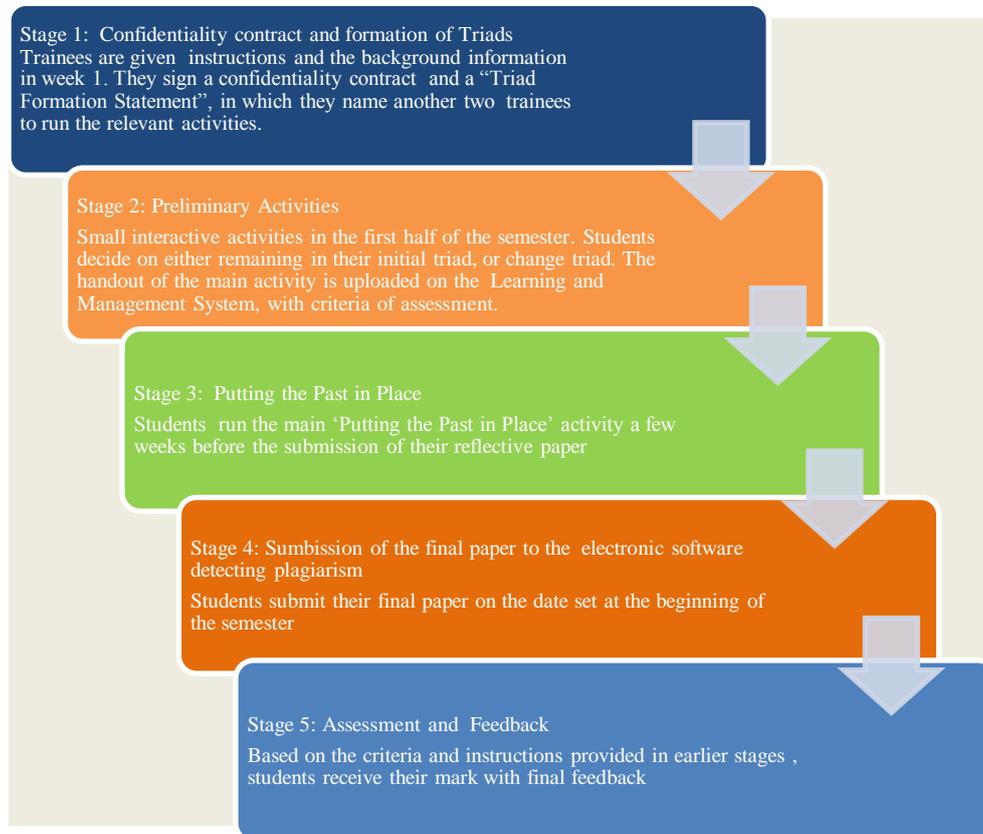
Within the context of our postgraduate programme in Counselling Psychology, students (trainees) are required to undertake a module which is entitled "Personal & Professional Development". This is offered at the beginning of their studies during the autumn semester. The module is assessed by a "Putting the Past in Place" reflective project (contributes 90% in the total mark) and willingness to participate in class activities (contributes 10%). This module introduces the main issues and theory regarding personality development and focuses on: (a) how our earlier experiences can make us develop the capacity to aid or hinder our further development and to provide the basis of how we perceive ourselves (Cross & Papadopoulos, 2001), and (b) examples of how aspects of personality can affect the practitioners' functionality in both their personal as well as professional level. The reflective project is divided in five stages as shown in Figure 1.

During the "Putting the Past in Place" project, students are divided into triads and they are prompted to think about the three experiences they are going to share. The experiences should be selected on the basis that: (a) students feel they were significant enough to have shaped strong or weak aspects of their character as individuals, and (b) students identify aspects of their professional development that are potentially going to be affected by those experiences. Normally they choose from the three developmental stages: childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Before submitting their final paper, trainees are asked to complete the following tasks:

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- identify the three experiences and the way they have affected their development;
- consider whether these had any effects on other members of their family or close environment;
- compare their perception of the event to the perceptions of their triad members and identify similarities and difference in coping; and
- describe the influence that these experiences had on their explanatory style.

*Figure 1.*  
*Five stages of the 'Putting the Past in Place' project.*



Assessment of the final paper is based on how well trainees understand their past experiences, in relation to their personal and professional development. Feedback is also provided both before and after students officially submit their paper. Preliminary feedback is based on observations during the activity that the students perform, and the kind of exchanges they have with their triad members. At points where these exchanges become oversensitive, the instructor asks trainees to indicate whether they would prefer to be left alone with their triad, in which case she returns later on for providing feedback on selected parts of the activity. Disclosing the whole content of exchanges among triad members to the instructor or the paper is not a prerequisite. However, it is made explicit to trainees that the text in the paper should identify how comparisons of thinking and feeling patterns were made with fellow trainees. Within this stage, trainees are asked to focus on those

interpretations they give to their past experiences that trigger negative thoughts, feelings and behaviours and explore alternative views that would activate more positive patterns. The goal of the other triad members is to take part in exploring such alternative ways of interpreting the event/situation, which would be more functional for a person's personal and professional development by making use/references to own similar experiences and interpretations/explanations. Summative feedback further elaborates on how well exchanges between triad members were used in the final paper.

Out of fifteen trainees who were all attending the same class, five gave us their consent to analyse their reflective papers and present our findings in the present chapter. The length of each paper was approximately 2,500 words. Selection was based on the trainees' covering a wider age range (23-46) and variability of academic origins within the programme (psychology or non-psychology degree background), as well as the quantity and quality of their self-awareness indicators, as displayed in their writings and verified through the internal double marking process and the external examiner. As a methodology, the grounded theory approach was used to analyse the data collected from this activity. The aim was to gain a better understanding of students' reflection on their past experiences and to also explore the themes that arise regarding their self-awareness and its influence on current and future personal and professional aspects. The approach was used in a way that different perspectives (personal and professional) arising from reflection on thoughts, feelings and behaviours could be presented. It also facilitated the discovery of feelings and behaviours rooted in those past experiences and their effect on the trainees' perceptual and explanatory style. Data including oversensitive information were automatically excluded from this analysis.

#### 4. OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

There have been previous studies focusing on the assessment of students' professional development (Hensley, Smith & Thompson, 2003) and some others centred around reflective learning (Henderson & Johnson, 2002) through clinical practice. However, assessment of both personal and professional development issues and reflective learning has not been explicitly researched within the theoretical part of a counselling programme. Such investigation consists the novelty of our work. We aim to provide some indications of what themes emerge within such context, before trainees start exercising their practice. This allows us to identify fitness to practice issues in the initial stages of training and deal with them more efficiently (e.g. suggest the trainee undertakes personal therapy). Table 1 below summarises how core concepts and sub-themes emerged from the data.

*Table 1.  
Personal and Professional Development core and sub-themes.*

<i>Core Category Themes</i>	<i>Developing Self-Awareness</i>			
<i>Personal Development</i>	Self-disclosure difficulties	Explaining current self, based on past experiences	Identifying dysfunctional traits	
<i>Professional Development</i>	Parental patterns affecting work related patterns	Sharing with colleagues facilitates emotion regulation	Sharing with colleagues changes perception of self positively	Considering a career change after this course

#### 4.1. Personal development

*Self-disclosure difficulties*—The willingness to disclose personal issues was not described as apparent through the different stages of this learning experience. But the development of trust was explained as the result of the exchange of thoughts and feelings on each trainee's past events and the acknowledgment of different perspectives from which it could be seen.

*Explaining current self*— Several aspects of the trainees' current self were explained as the result of the past experiences they shared. Some examples are: being the first born child in the family was seen as the reason why they **developed a sense of responsibility** over younger siblings, despite the **burden** felt primarily from the relevant situation. Having been raised in a female dominated family, which was primarily the result of a painful situation such as a significant loss, created **gender related self-confidence**. Having parents using the child as a way to get revenge for their own relationship problems, created **feelings of "being small and helpless"**. Being "forced" to make life choices that were in a way an expansion of parents unmet desires or having one or both parents making the person develop a feeling of being **unable to have control over their life** or created a tendency of **feeling guilty** when meeting own desires.

*Identifying dysfunctional traits* — A major concept attributed to past experiences was the tendency to feel guilty every time one's needs were put first, which participants identified as a "weak" aspect realised through this experience, which needs also to be worked on in the future. Although this guilt was not always attributed to positive situations, it appeared as an explicitly dysfunctional pattern acquired through past events. Lack of trust in intimate relationships and uneasiness to open up were pointed as the result of having parents whose relationship was not functional and therefore "taught" them dysfunctional patterns.

#### 4.2. Professional development

*Parental patterns affecting work related patterns*—A repeatedly brought up realisation was that different parental behaviours causing stress in childhood triggered liking or disliking patterns at work related contexts. A dominating mother, for instance, created the tendency to like better female figures at work and a distrustful father triggered suspicious patterns for male employers. A judgmental father was perceived as the cause of lacking self-confidence as an employee, although this was later transformed into the ability to receive criticism better than others. Workaholic fathers were seen as having caused a "faulty" idea of what an ideal father is like.

*Sharing with colleagues facilitates emotion regulation*—All participants described some relief arising through the exchange of thoughts and feelings with the other triad members. This was seen as an indication that in order to adopt a healthier explanatory style, negative thoughts and feelings need to be challenged through sharing them with other colleagues and not with anyone outside the particular context who would not necessarily be able to present a more positive explanation of the event or situation. It was also referred to as a mechanism for developing a more positive view of oneself, not only at personal, but also at a professional level.

*Considering a career change after this course* — The psychological effect of having been involved in the whole procedure exchanging interpretations and feelings about the past experiences, triggered the need to consider a career change or career focus. This is apparent in cases where the programme was seen as an additional qualification which would enrich the trainee's background and not necessarily as a tool for developing skills

that would be exercised in the counselling profession path i.e. trainees from professions others than psychology who had decided to undertake this programme in order to use embedded counselling within their professions.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

Fostering development of self-awareness in counselling trainees admittedly is a challenging task. This task may have several dimensions which cannot be all developed or assessed within the context of a module in a HE postgraduate programme. In applied fields such as counselling, traditional ways of learning can make the students aware of some relevant issues. However, they are not adequate for helping them develop the level of self-awareness that is necessary for a complete picture of strengths and weaknesses on a personal and professional level. Although practice in general is encouraged in applied fields within an academic programme, assessment of its quality cannot guarantee that the trainee actually developed the profession related skills. Reflection usually is not incorporated in the assessment part of a learning experience, particularly when it is about the psychological effect of past experiences on the future counsellor's practice.

Assessing reflection is challenging too. Although trainees are expected to self-reflect, the lack of accepted definition and other research related issues, make this task even more complex. Despite its validity, the reflective practice remains a concept that is still difficult to define and consequently difficult to assess. We use the reflective practice to assess trainees' perceptions of their self-awareness in relation to aspects of their personality and to help them realise and deal with the psychological effect of these past experiences from a positive perspective. For instance, a trainee knowing what is the effect of having been raised with particular parental patterns, will be more likely to empathise better with a client having developed under similar circumstances. Using assessment procedures to identify such skills, indicates more accurately how well-prepared the trainee is for the practical part of the course (e.g. clinical placement) and how reflective practice can be used on an ongoing basis to identify the needs for future personal and professional development.

The data used for this work come from a selected sample of a particular cohort of students who developed very positive group dynamics within their programme of study and that may pose some limitations. This sample is not representative of how adequate our approach would be with larger samples of students. However, it is a good approximation of how exercise of basic skills in reflective practice can be facilitated within similar courses. It is also a good example of how such material can be assessed in order to explore and estimate students' readiness for their future practice in counselling. The same applies to any other profession in which self-awareness is also very critical.

## **6. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

The assessment we presented in this chapter aims at facilitating and measuring students' self-awareness of their personality, as well as determining how it has been shaped by past experiences. It is completed within the framework of a taught unit, undertaken by counselling students as they enter the programme, but it does not point to a continuous development and assessment of self-awareness during the whole course.

Future research could focus on how development of self-awareness is exercised and spread throughout a two years programme, from the beginning of the taught part through the completion of the trainee's practice with their real clients. It could link the effect of past experiences with how this effect can be reflected on the way trainees deal with particular

clients or particular problems, as well as how they accept feedback in supervision i.e. whether particular patterns are displayed in the way they accept feedback due to past experiences etc.

Additionally, for a more complete picture of how self-awareness is emphasized through the programme and how accurately it is measured, more data from other contexts too can be used in future analyses. For example, in the “Current Paradigms in Counselling and Psychotherapy” and “Applied Counselling Psychology” modules, students submit reflective papers referring to their personality aspects that make them suitable for using particular counselling models than others. This too could be used to measure self-awareness, particularly if during the later stages of their training was correlated with some evaluation of their counselling skills as performed by their clients. On a long term basis, it would be worth monitoring particular aspects of trainees' self-awareness by the time they start the programme and compare it with how it was developed by the time they graduate, using both self-reports and reflective practice, as well as relevant assessment reports from supervisors and clients. Finally, future work could draw conclusions on a wider sample of trainees coming from several cohorts with different group dynamics between them.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

We emphasize the importance of developing professionals that are able to reflect on their work continuously and exercise their reflective skills for a stable personal and professional development in the future. Within this context we demonstrated that reflective practice can help a trainee identify strong and weak aspects of their personality that would have a great impact on their future work. We help students make better use of the explanations they give on their past experiences, exchanging their views with their colleagues' views and adopting a healthier explanatory style for themselves and consequently for others. Through this approach our students can point to the dysfunctional thinking and feeling patterns that affect the way they interact with others as persons and as professionals, and can point to any “weaknesses” in these thinking or feeling patterns that do not help them have a functional perceptual style.

We believe that reflecting on past experiences within a group activity is a more balanced way of exercising and assessing self-awareness skills in the particular discipline. The assessment of reflective practice can be used in other disciplines too and can help educators prepare efficient practitioners with an accurate estimation of their capabilities. It can also foster further development of critical thinking skills, particularly in fields where the critical analysis may be a key factor for students' progress.

Finally, we suggest that if students' perception of their own capabilities seems to be in accordance with the relevant assessment outcomes, this indicates the efficiency of the particular programme — which is essential in programmes involving a practical component promising to equip trainees with the necessary professional skills. The material used in this chapter can be the basis upon which future work will demonstrate whether similar outcomes can be produced from larger and/or diverse samples of such reflective learning activities with deeper analyses of functional and dysfunctional patterns identified through such activities.

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