Looking back, looking forward: using a duoethnographic study to explore the role of personal positioning in social work education in the UK and Slovenia

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Biography

Dr. Joanna Fox is a social work academic with lived experience of mental distress. Her experiences of recovery from mental ill-health are central to her teaching and practice of social work. Joanna is committed to participatory forms of research which involve people who use services and their carers at all stages of the research process. Joanna has expertise in the recovery approach, working with mental health carers, and educational approaches that emphasise the perspective of experts-by-experience and their carers.

Dr. Petra Videmšek is assistant professor. Her main research interests are social inclusion in mental health and disability, promoting the involvement of service users in research and education, advocacy for people with mental health and learning disabilities who experience sexual abuse, and developing supervision in social work. She is the author of the first Slovene easy reading handbook (1999) about *Good and Bad Touches* for people with disabilities. Petra leads the training program Qualification for Supervisors in social care at the University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Work.

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Abstract

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This article highlights the importance of learning about reflective processes in social work education, because acts of reflection enable us to learn from past experiences in order to improve our future practice. We show how duoethnography, as a reflective method, enables us, as two social work academics from the UK and Slovenia, to investigate our personal positioning and its influence on our practice. This duoethnographic study allows the authors to challenge their place in the status quo, and consider their social and political position in society. Alongside the use of duoethnography as a reflective method, the analysis of critical incidents, is used herewith to develop our personal and professional knowledge base. We consider how our own educational experience taught us to value the perspectives of experts-by-experience in all aspects of our practice, investigating disclosure of our own self and identity in this process; furthermore we consider the importance of incorporating the perspectives of experts-by-experience in the wider professional development of social workers.   Consequently, we recommend that social workers reflect on their experience throughout their professional development; and suggest the potential of duoethnography as a potentially significant method in the development of theory and practice in social work.

Keywords: reflective practice, critical reflection, autoethnography, professional development, social work education,

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Introduction

Personal experience is often at the centre of why people become social workers (Beckett, Maynard and Jordan, 2017) and can play an essential role in informing their personal values which inadvertently guide and impact on their professional practice (Banks, 2012). However, social worker practitioners and academics are often reluctant to disclose experiences of mental ill-health or personal vulnerability and find it difficult to reflect on their own personal positioning and their experiences (Hardy, 2017); moreover the codes of conduct emphasise the importance of preserving boundaries between personal and professional life (British Association of Social Work) (BASW), 2014) in order to manage appropriate professional behaviour.

The authors of this article have both known each other for over 15 years and have collaborated in the past (Videmšek and Fox, 2009; Videmšek and Fox, 2017; Fox and Videmšek, 2019) and have thus recognised that we share similar values and perspectives in our approach to developing social work education. However we have not previously explored our personal commitments to becoming social workers and what compels us both to value knowledge that comes from 'expertise-by-experience' (Videmšek 2009, 2017, Fox, 2016); 'expertise-by-experience' is wisdom derived from the lived experience of service users and their carers (Beresford, 2002). Our professional curiosity (Burton and Revell, 2018), a concept used internationally in social work which underlines the importance of inquiry, motivated us to reflect on the origin of our common values because we knew our social work training was the product of different traditions from the countries of the UK and Slovenia with different political histories. Thus, in this article,

we describe a duoethnographic study we undertook in order to explore the impact of our own personal experience on inspiring us to become social workers.

This article considers both the necessity of using reflection in social work education, and explores how to implement best practice by learning from past experiences. It reinforces the importance of teaching social work students to reflect and develop their understanding of the ethical standpoint of social work (BASW, 2018), and to consider the place of disclosure of personal experience in their professional capacity. We shared our personal stories through duoethnography and explored the following questions:

- Why did we become social workers?
- What were the turning points in our training that led us to become who we are and what we believe?
- What motivated us to involve service users in social work education?

These questions enable us to investigate both the role of reflection in social work and the place of disclosing personal experience in professional practice.

Background

Reflective practice is a key social work skill (BASW, 2014, 2018; Pravilnik o standardih in normativih socialnovarstvenih storitev, **[** Rules on the standards and norms for social services] 2017) because social workers often work in conflicting situations with many difficult and diverse

ethical dilemmas (Banks, 2012; Beckett *et al*, 2017), hence they need to reflect on their work in order to practise effectively. BASW (2014) identifies the difficulties that many social workers face in executing their authority and proposes these principles to underpin UK guidance:

> 'Social workers should make judgements based on balanced and considered reasoning, maintaining awareness of the impact of their own values, prejudices and conflicts of interest on their practice and on other people'.

Additionally in Slovenia, the importance of reflection is recognised as the standards of practice state that social workers should receive reflective supervision as they engage with service users (Rules on the standards and norms for social services, 2017).

Reflective practice in social work emanates from the pioneering work of Dewey (1933). Dewey (1933) argued that people begin to reflect when there is a problem to be solved and that reflection is the continual re-evaluation of personal beliefs, assumptions, and ideas in the light of experience; this then leads to alternative reinventions of those experiences. In recent years, diverse models of reflection have been developed in social work, (Graham 2017, Kolb, 1984; Mantell and Scragg 2019, Schön 1983) which have led to the development of tools for problem solving which link the realities of practice with creative strategies of thinking based on reflexivity (Graham 2017). The acknowledgement of the place of critical reflection in social work (Fook and Gardner, 2007) is key to understanding the development of theory and practice; thus in our article we describe the potential contribution to social work that methodologies such as autoethnography have, which balance the technical-rational with the art of reflection (Fook, 2014) and allows us to both reflect on the relationship between our personal and professional

identities, alongside the place of disclosure (or not) of personal experience in our occupational capacity.

Howe (2009, p. 171) notes that 'Reflective practice demands that you learn from experience. It requires you to be self-critical. It expects you to analyse what you *think*, *feel*, and *do*, and then learn from the analysis.' Perhaps the best-known proponent of reflection in social work is Schön (1983) who formulated the concepts of *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action,* requiring both reflection during and after practice. Schön's (1983) great contribution was to bring 'reflection' into the very centre of understanding professional activities challenging the dominant perspective that professional practice is merely a technical-rational activity that involves the application of rules to solve problems. Based on the work of Dewey and Schön, Kolb (1984) developed a four-stage model of reflection, which is often used in social work practice. Kolb's model is a progressive process that moves through a number of stages from experience, to abstract thinking and review of the action to implementing learning in practice. Unlike Schön's (1983) model, which is linear in nature, Kolb's framework is founded in action; it shows the dynamic cycle of *movement* between reflection and action and the application of new learning to practice. Thus, duoethnography (Norris and Sawyer, 2012), the methodology employed in this study, evidences the active and progressive reflection shown in Kolb's (1984) cycle of learning; moreover we have adopted it to inform the later analysis of our duoethnography in this article.

[Figure 1 here]

As highlighted in the introduction, central to our relationship to social work, is the value we place on the lived experience of service users and carers (Fox, 2016; Videmšek and Fox, 2017) their 'expertise-by-experience'. In the UK, it is a requirement that the perspectives of experts-by-experience are involved in all aspects of social work education (Levin, 2004) and it is of increasing interest in Slovenia (Zaviršek and Videmšek 2009). This is because the inclusion of lived experience in social work enables both social workers and students to understand the impact of their practice on people's lives (Fox, 2016; Levin, 2004). This has developed into an approach known as co-production in the UK (Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), 2015), or co-creation in Slovenia[1] (Čačinovič Vogrinčič 2010) in which social workers collaborate with service users to *co–create* solutions to their support; this is underpinned by frameworks such as the ethics of participation (Hoffman, 1994) and strength perspectives (Saleebey, 1997). Accordingly, understanding this context is fundamental as we use duoethnography to generate social work theory and practice.

Methodology

The aims of the research were to explore the importance of reflection in social work education and seek to translate this learning into the generation of best practice, exploring the relationship between the place of the disclosure of personal experience and its impact on professional

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[1] In Slovenia the term co-creation is used and not co-production, which is used in the UK. Co-creation is a social work concept which allows the social worker and expert-by-experience to partner in the process of co-creation to achieve effective outcomes (Čačinovič Vogrinčič 2010). We choose to use the word co-creation in this article, rather than co-production, because the former emphasizes to us, more than the latter does, how service users and practitioners work together to create a new outcome.

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practice. We developed narratives of our personal experience by using duoethnography (Norris and Sawyer, 2012). Duoethnography builds on the epistemology of critical social theory that emphasises the importance of knowledge in changing and improving situations (Denzin, 2017). In duoethnography (Norris and Sawyer, 2012) two or more researchers engage in dialogic collaborative writing in order to provide multiple understandings of a social phenomenon. We chose to use duoethnography, which is an innovation to the relatively recently developed method of autoethnography (Ellis, 2004), because it gives precedence to the role of identity and personal positioning in research (Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis, 2015, 2015; Fook, 2014) inviting moral and ethical debate through the process of reflexivity (Adams *et al*, 2015; Denzin, 2017). Adams *et al* (2015) note that autoethnographers must consider carefully both the *epistemic* (claims to knowledge) and the *aesthetic* (practices of imaginative, creative, and artistic craft) characteristics of autoethnographic texts; encouraging us to build on our past experiences of writing creatively together (Fox and Videmšek, 2019).

Duoethnography enabled us to produce texts in which 'voices and ideas blend in unique ways. Texts merge, and through that merging, they change' (Norris and Sawyer, 2012, p.11). Through this duoethnographic reflection, we each drew on a critical incident in our professional development as social workers, a process (Fook and Gardner, 2007; Fook and Gardner, 2013) which utilises identification, deconstruction, impact and reconstructive revision; this is a common tool used to enable social workers to reflect on their local context in order to improve practice (Fook and Gardner, 2007). Our duoethnography was an iterative process that lasted for six months with different stages: we independently wrote our reflections and shared content suggested by initial conversations about the format of the article, then conducted skype meetings

to consider what was emerging from our narratives allowing us to focus again more specifically on particular topics.

We used thematic data analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to inductively develop key themes during the research process utilising concept map tools to organise our ideas. Concept mapping, developed by Novak and Gowin (1984), is unique because it makes concepts, and propositions composed of concepts, the central elements in the construction of meaning. The method, which both authors have used in the past, helped us to understand and pictorially represent our thought patterns in an organised and structured way (Novak and Gowin, 1984; Videmšek and Fox, 2009; Videmšek, 2017). We chose this approach as the pictorial structure allowed us to visualise our learning and draw out the themes we identified, whereas processes which are more text-based, were less helpful for us because our duoethnographic analysis changed quickly as we shared our reflections with each other. This format has been used uniquely in social work education by Anghel, Fox and Warnes (2010) to assess students' understanding of working in partnership with service users; and has been used similarly in this research to set out and analyse information. As we considered the data, we structured our analysis around three questions:

- Why did we become social workers?
- What were the turning points in our training that led us to become who we are and what we believe?
- What motivated us to involve service users in social work education?

Ethical challenges

We did not require ethical approval for this research in either Slovenia or the UK. We could both withdraw our data at any time during the research and had control over the included material. We agreed boundaries at the start of the research; this included: maintaining confidentiality, supporting each other by providing a safe space where we could write, and agreeing a commitment to listening to each other's viewpoints. This enabled us to build up a relationship of trust and support as we underwent this duoethnographic study.

However, despite our experiences of duoethnography, as highlighted above, many social workers are reluctant to disclose personal experiences because they believe it will undermine the authority and power endowed in the profession (Hardy, 2017); yet duoethnography, nonetheless, compels the writer to open up their experiences to scrutiny. This raises the question: How can personal disclosure be managed by social workers whilst maintaining professional boundaries? This thorny issue is considered later in the discussion as we reflect on our learning from the study; but raises many questions for social workers as they seek to maintain their authority and retain their sense of objectivity (Hardy, 2017). Accordingly we disclosed personal experiences to each other and sought support from the other in order to manage the topics we shared; this process ensured the material included in the article was appropriate to the professionalism demanded of social workers in the UK (BASW, 2018). Moreover in the wider context of the research environment, the location of personal positioning is an issue pertinent to the discussion of the place of self in both positivist and interpretivist research paradigms (Flick, 2015); a subject we acknowledge as important, but are unable to address further in this article.

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Findings from our duoethnographic reflection

In this section we firstly introduce the main themes that derive from our duoethnographic reflections as we synthesised the text inductively, and alongside this, we consider the issues that arose from analysis of the critical incidents we identified. As social workers we share a common identity and seek to involve experts-by-experience in aspects of education, but do not share common experiences of mental distress. Our duoethnography was a process of shared discussion and meaning-making; this shared process allowed us to understand how reflexivity was important to our personal and professional development as social workers. Although JF has significant experiences of mental distress which impact on her practice in social work education (Fox, 2016), these issues are explored in research undertaken elsewhere (Fox, 2012; 2015; 2016); this article thus focuses on elements arising from our experiences as two authors engaging in collaborative dialogue and shared mean-making through duoethnography (Norris and Sawyer, 2012).

Four themes emerged from our duoethnographic process: our personal experience of direct and indirect disempowerment that motivated us to become social workers; our shared sense of identity with service users; our experience of receiving empowering practice supervision; and our focus on co-creation of social work with service users and their carers. In the next section, as each of these elements is explored in turn, we utilize the pronoun 'we' rather than 'I', because the themes that emerged were jointly constructed by both of us through the duoethnographic study. Duoethnography is a collaborative research method where texts merge through a process of writing (Norris and Sawyer, 2012) which in turn enables the themes to emerge inductively

through collaborative reflexivity (Denzin, 2017); this close collaboration made it hard for us to identify which themes first emerged from whom as they were developed in later reflections. .

Experiencing direct and indirect disempowerment

Our motivation to pursue a career in social work is linked to our own personal stories, as we experienced both *direct and indirect disempowerment*. JF's experiences of disempowerment were directly located in her own personal circumstances of being disadvantaged as a person with mental health issues. JF's mental distress led her to experiencing exclusion and alienation; as she reflected, an example of this was an inability to perform in her first social work placement that failed to take her mental health needs into account:

> I worked in an open plan office, without a seat that I could call my own, or a place to belong in the office. There was little understanding of my needs. The placement location was in a local Community Mental Health Team[2] – but there seemed to be little time to respond to or understand the needs of an anxious and nervous student. Moreover, the struggles with paranoia in a busy office, where I felt out of place, were difficult and my sense of wellbeing decreased throughout the placement.

Similar experiences of *indirect disempowerment* were met by PV. As a young girl, PV watched her grandfather being admitted to an institution for treatment when he was diagnosed with

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[2] A community mental health team is a statutory service in the UK which provides support to people with mental health issues who are living in the community. It usually consists of a multi-disciplinary team of professionals.

Parkinson's disease. She remembered how he had been over-medicated and institutionalised during a short one-week stay. She states:

> From being a healthy, funny man, in one week he became a sick, old man, not only with shaking hands but also with a bowed back, looking at the floor without recognising us. I didn't understand what was going on. What had happened to this man? The man, who adored me, didn't even know my name. He stared at my mum, dad, my sister and myself.

As we explored these texts both separately and in our skype conversations, we began to see that we had both experienced *direct and indirect disempowerment* through these processes. This underlines how important it is to see service users as people first and to recognise their strengths.

Sharing a devalued identity with people who use services and their carers

Both narratives clearly identified that the positionality of our own *identity* was a key part of what motivated us to become social workers. We shared an experience of possessing *devalued identities*; this is an element that is often similarly identified by people who use services. JF reflected that her journey to becoming a social work academic embraced a stigmatising relationship with her mental health that corresponded with the process of empowerment as she recovered from mental distress and engaged in her social work training:

> Being involved in social work is the process of being set free from a stigmatising relationship with mental ill-health to becoming a relationship founded on recovery, on strengths and on what I could achieve, rather than what I failed to achieve.

This process of empowerment was reflected in her identity as later she began to learn to co-create social work with service users.

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PV, in turn, reflected on how she was bewildered as a young girl when she went to visit her grandfather at the psychiatric hospital:

> I still remember that look, I still see the sadness in my grandad's eyes although I was only 10 years old.

The grandfather immediately took on the experience of having a devalued identity on his admission to an institution; this experience stayed with PV throughout her life. PV explained that when she studied social work and returned to the psychiatric hospital where her grandfather had been admitted:

> All these feelings come out when I studied social work and returned to this psychiatric hospital[3]. I always imagined my grandad waving at me….of course he didn't, but at that time I realised that his look was the look of "save me, I am in prison". This was the moment that I started to believe that each person has his own story, and that we need to let them speak.

Thus we both experienced direct and indirect experiences of exclusion which led us *to identify with the devalued identities captured by many people who use services*. This identification had a key role in the later development of our professional practice, as emerged through our discussion. Moreover, the global definition of social work (International Federation of Social Work. (IFSW), 2014) highlights that social workers need to strive for social justice and the

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[3] At this point in time, in 1994, on PV's return to this hospital as a social work student, institutions still provided a prominent role in providing care for people with mental ill health and learning disabilities in Slovenia.

fulfillment of human rights; therefore an analysis of our reflection shows that this is the starting point for further innovation in our practice. As such, personal experience of inequality alongside recognition of its impact, evidences that it is important for social workers to advocate for the rights of service users; and it is the role of mentors to enable us to hear the voices of experts-by-experience.

Acknowledging the importance of professional mentorship

Professional mentorship and supervision are distinct elements of social work training and were important elements in our personal and professional development. We were both mentored by Professor David Brandon of Anglia Ruskin University (ARU)[4]; something we only came to appreciate through writing this article. David's unique experiences are captured in Brandon (2001), which relates his autobiography of suffering abuse as a child and being homeless at points in his life, with related periods of mental distress; all giving him a unique insight into the disempowerment and disadvantage of service users. JF reflects on the experiences of being supported by David (now deceased):

> Through this process of engagement and support, I learnt to understand that I could be 'mad and proud'. I didn't have to hide my mental ill-health but could use it as a tool to improve the lives of other people.

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[4] University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social work developed a partnership with Anglia Ruskin University (Anglia Polytechnic University) to enable the second author to spend a study semester at APU through the TEMPUS program (1994- 1995).

David encouraged us as social work students to acknowledge our own distress and vulnerability in order to enable us to connect with the people we supported.

From PV's perspective, she recounted how she was awarded a scholarship to study abroad and worked with David in Cambridge. She had similar experiences of his mentorship as she considers:

> He taught me that each human being has abilities; and that disabilities are caused by a society that is unable to accommodate to the needs of people who have impairments.

David introduced a Socratic method of teaching (Vlastos, 1983), using questions about our experiences to support our personal and professional development, impacting on the development of our values and ethics in social work. PV remembered that she asked a question when David was explaining the next steps about her placement

> David, can you please be more precise and tell me which kind of disabilities this group of people have? He stared at me and asked: How disabled are you? Why is this important to you?

PV reflected:

> This was my first realisation that I discriminated against people. That I did not see people as equal partners and that I made judgments about disabilities and was prejudiced. I posed this question only because I was scared to work with people who experience

mental ill-health. This was for me the best way to learn. It was not the easiest way and it impacted me when he asked this question back to me. But it made me realise the power imbalance!

This demonstrates the importance of supervision which challenges our stereotypical thinking and encourages us to think creatively and critically about our experiences. This experience is identified by both Howkins and Shohet (2006) and Thompson and Thompson (2008) who underline the need for the practitioner needs to "unlearn" what they have learned in order to recognise their own prejudices; reflection can be the tool to enable this. Accordingly, this experience evidences the need for social work educators to be aware of their place as role models for the students they teach.

Co-creating empowering practice with people disabled and disadvantaged by society

This leads to the final part of our learning that we identified in our duoethnography. We were both taught independently to co-create care plans with people with disabilities to learn how to assess people's needs by focusing on their strengths not their deficits, based on the Four Magnets (Brandon and Atherton, 1996). Brandon and Atherton (1996) detail a holistic care planning assessment that incorporates a collaborative discussion with a service user of the Control, Skills, Pain and Contact a person has in their lives. An investigation of these elements can be utilized to build a picture of the strengths in a person's life and the subsequent goals they may choose to develop.   The critical incident that JF identified as a central tenet in developing her social work skills, reflects this process:

This holistic assessment to building a life plan in this service user's life enabled me to engage with people with learning difficulties as whole people – not just as people in a service who should be offered service led assessments. Such a process connected with personalised care and person-centred planning. It built on strengths, hopes and dreams – not just on what the services could offer.

JF remembered how in co-creating a care plan with a service user, she had questioned the service user's wish to go on holiday abroad as part of her objectives, a decision which David challenged:

I had so much wanted to limit her goals to what were realistic in my viewpoint. What David made clear to me was that this was her care plan, not a service-led plan. This needed to be co-created. This was her dreams, not what mine were for her.

This again echoes the importance of the need to 'unlearn' what has been learned before (Thompson and Thompson, 2008) in order to achieve innovation in practice and to listen to the direct voices of service users in order to ensure that we do not impose our views upon their dreams.

PV meanwhile recounted on her return to Slovenia following the scholarship that she had started to volunteer with people with disabilities, underpinning her practice with *co-creation*:

Firstly, I designed care plans with them and soon I become an advocate for many of them. I started to advocate for individual things such as having the bell on the door,

becoming employed as 'dog washer' to collective things such as right for sexual life. This was my first opportunity to start to discover the 'user perspective'.

She considered how she had supported people with learning disabilities in Slovenia, building on her UK experience, to learn about sexual relationships 'because it was so mysterious to them', as they 'lacked the right to access this information'. She delivered a two-day workshop for people with learning disabilities (1996- 1999) and developed the first easy-read book in Slovenia (Videmšek 1999). She reflects on how this was a challenge to daily practice when 'at the time many people still believed that people with special needs are asexual, that discussion about sexuality will encourage them to have illicit sexual relationships'. This encounter was central to her experiences of learning to co-create social work with service users.

In the findings we have connected how we experienced *disempowerment*, how we shared an *identity* with people who use services through revealing our vulnerabilities, and moved to processes of *co-creation*. JF's reflections sum up this learning:

> This unique strengths approach was directed at all the service users we worked with [in the practice agency at ARU] and all the marginalised citizens we supported. This began to change my attitudes to people we worked with who were users of services – rather more, people like myself who might have stigmatised and distressed identities, with whom we can empathise, without hiding these common experiences.

In summary, our duoethnography underlined our experiences as people with direct and indirect encounters of disempowerment, and through our story-telling we considered both mutually and separately the influences on our practice which now enable us to co-create social work with service users. From this process we learned how important it is to reflect on past experiences and emotions, as these contribute so significantly to the development of values-based practice (Fulford, 2008), enabling us to understand the complexity of the ethical situations we encounter as social workers (Banks, 2012). Duoethonography enables us to discuss our past experiences and reminds us of the core values that influence our practice. In the next section we highlight a model based on our stories from our duoethnography. This leads to discussion of the role of personal positioning for social workers in professional practice, and, more widely, in the development of social work education.

Discussion

A model representing a cycle of reflection from our duoethnography

The experiences we highlighted in our duoethnographic reflection and through our critical incidents led us to propose a four-stage cyclical model in Figure 2, which represents the journey we identified in our writing. As detailed in the introduction, we concur that reflection is a key aspect of social work practice (BASW, 2014, 2018); and therefore this article suggests the potential for duoethnography to contribute to the generation of social work theory and best practice. It also highlights the debate between the usefulness of disclosing personal experience and the importance of maintaining professional boundaries for social workers, considered later in this discussion.

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We drew on Kolb's (1984) model of reflection as a framework to represent our collaborative dialogue through our duoethnography (Norris and Sawyer, 2012). In our findings we reflected on our stories of direct and indirect disempowerment, identified in the first stage of Figure 2. This conforms to Kolb's (1984) definition of a *concrete experience*; in this stage we experienced something new, which we needed to reflect on and learn about. As we experienced our sense of disempowerment, we were confused and unable to decode this feeling. The next stage of Kolb's model, which we utilised, is a process of *reflective observation* on this *experience,* in which we needed to comprehend this encounter. In our narrative we explored how a sense of increasing personal empowerment through professional mentorship enabled us to *reflect on* and, in turn, to recognise the strengths and abilities of the people we worked with. Figure 2 shows how this section of the cycle was explored, leading to *abstract conceptualization* (Kolb, 1984). This part of the process requires us to inquire of ourselves what we could have done better or differently; and how we could improve our practice. This process of inquiry underpins our acknowledgement of the importance of mentorship in our professional development as we learned to incorporate this knowledge into our practice. This exploration transformed our understanding of our own devalued identities, leading us to facilitate the empowerment of the people we supported. The final stage of Kolb's model is *active experimentation* which requires implementation of the learning. This circular process of understanding disempowerment in ourselves and in service users, led us to recognise the importance of empowering interventions which simultaneously enabled both ourselves and the service users we supported, as identified in stage 4. The new learning was incorporated into the iterative reflective cycle.

The framework represented in Figure 2 represents the cycle of reflection we undertook and shows how we made sense of our processes of disempowerment and moved towards more inclusive and co–created social work.

[Figure 2 here]

Our experiences suggest the importance of using reflection to develop practice; and more widely, the findings suggest the importance of utilising personal positioning in social work and evidence how personal values and experiences impact inexorably on personal and professional development, as highlighted throughout this text. We expand on this discussion in the final section of the article proposing the place of duoethnography in social work practice and education.

The contribution of duoethnography to social work

As social workers, we are aware of the need to maintain a focus on professionalism, as detailed in the UK professional standards (BASW, 2018) which necessitates the separation of professional and personal experiences in the practice environment (Hardy, 2017). The place of disclosure of personal experience is implicit throughout this article, and enables us to consider its impact on our professional development. However, as demonstrated in our duoethnographic study, understanding the experiences that influenced our personal positioning in our wider social context played an important role for us in developing empathy with service users. This learning thus suggests the potential use of duoethnograhy as a reflective method in social work because it

moves 'the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political' (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). This duoethnographic account enables other practitioners to understand our journey and how this influenced our change in practice, underling the importance of personal positioning in social work.

Although the importance of the social worker's self in practice is less developed, acknowledgement of the place of experiential knowledge (knowledge derived from lived experiences) is now more recognised in social work education (Fox, 2016), as discussed in the background, and valued as a resource in mental health services in the UK; as is evidenced in the development of peer mentor roles (Repper and Carter, 2011) in which service users are employed to use their own experiences of recovery to support other people who have mental distress. However, despite recognition of the legitimacy of personal knowledge derived from expert-by-experience, the place of the social worker's personal self in social work education is less recognised, therefore we contend that it is important because social workers' personal values and experiences have an immense impact on their practice (Beckett *et al,* 2017) as demonstrated in this article.

Howe (2009 p.13) suggests that every day social work practice is 'suffused with emotional context'. However, the impact of emotions on practice has often been ignored, perhaps because it is believed that they interfere with the task in hand (Clarke, Broussine, and Watts, 2015); moreover Graham (2017) notes that social workers are expected to manage their emotional responses as part of their professional competence. Personal feelings are incorporated as part of

the self into reflective practice (Fook, 2014). Both duoethnography (Fook, 2014), and the incorporation of critical incident analysis in this process (Fook and Gardner, 2007), are potentially very effective methods in both integrating the self into social work and in developing social work theory and practice; as underpins the aims of this article. Duoethnography seeks to deconstruct the 'I' (Denzin, 2017) through a deep reflection on past experiences; and critical incident analysis seeks to encourage students to reflect and may 'ultimately lead to a capacity to change the ways that people act in relation to their social contexts' (Fook and Gardner, 2007, p. 14). Processes of duoethnography and the employment of critical incident analysis support social workers to change their practice in their local context as they learn to reflect on the significance of their actions, and its impact on the lives of service users.

As social work educators, both authors will seek to acknowledge the place of experience in social work education by opening dialogue with students about how they manage disclosure of personal vulnerability; however they are cognisant of the need to reinforce to students the importance of professionalism in their practice (BASW, 2018) as they consider their roles and authority as social work students. As researchers, the place of reflexivity is essential in any study and underpins the need to acknowledge the place of the self and how it may influence all aspects of the research process in qualitative approaches (Flick, 2015). Duoethnography develops this framework more overtly by placing the personal at the very centre of the reflection.

Indeed critical reflection on the role of the self in social work is key; Morley (2013) utilised critical reflection undertaken with advocates who supported women to report sexual assault to the police. She used her own reflections as part of the research process noting that this 'was important in contributing to a respectful, non-judgmental, open and trusting culture in which to critically reflect' (ibid, p. 174). Despite this, McLoughlin and McGilloway (2013) note how difficult health practitioners find it to reflect on their *own* critical incidents because, although they are accustomed to reflecting on case studies in their own education, they do not reflect on their own practice; this process creates a sense of vulnerability and discomfort. In response to this, Fook and Gardner (2007) emphasise the importance of professionals in reflecting on examples from their own experience, as this is a process which causes unsettling of assumptions which leads to a process of learning.

A potential use of duoethnography that derives from our reflection, is its prospective contribution to social work education. It is clear that duoethnography when it incorporates reflection on critical incidents is a potentially highly effective method in teaching social work; and, as such, this article sets out the deep connection between personal positioning in social work and its links to professional practice. It is important that educators do not ignore the need to support students to understand *how to maintain appropriate personal and professional boundaries* with service users in practice *whilst using their personal experiences of self positively* in their practice to manage personal positioning effectively and appropriately.

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Limitations

Duoethnography employs a process of collaborative writing between two researchers (Adams *et al*, 2015) that builds on their lived experience through connecting the personal with the collective (Ellis, 2004); as such its generalisability and reliability are limited (Flick, 2015). However, the methodology is built on critical social theory (Denzin, 2017) which seeks to effect change through the research process; accordingly it is political, and seeks to develop social justice (Adams *et al,* 2015; Denzin, 2017). These elements would suggest that duoethnography is potentially a very effective methodology in social work; this is because values of social justice that challenge oppression, which underpin duoethography (Adams *et al*, 2015), are fundamental to social work implementation (IFSW, 2014). One final limitation we met as we undertook our duoethnography, is that it is unclear when to complete the data collection process; as we wrote more, diverse experiences were uncovered and discussed. In order to manage this process, it would be important to decide in advance the length of time the process would continue for and how many stories would be written.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted the importance of developing reflection in social work education and research, because it enables us to explore how to implement best practice by learning from our past and current experiences. It considers the centrality of enabling social workers to reflect on and address the influence of their personal experiences on their social work practice throughout their professional development (BASW, 2018); as we set out to explore with the initial three questions in our duoethnography. The narratives highlight our personal encounters of using

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health and social care services or caring for such users, and our unique educational experiences, which led to the development of our professional practice and reiterate the importance of respect for the voice of lived experience as we co-create social work.

Indeed, although a focus on expertise-by-experience in social work legitimates the value of personal experience, despite this, the place of the personal rather than the professional self *for the social worker* in social work education is less recognised. In this article we acknowledge the importance of personal positioning in social work not only for users of social care but also extend this to social workers themselves, building an evidence base for the recognition of personal experiences in social work practice. We have proposed a model which articulates our own experiences of how our devalued identities led us to empathise with people who use services, and led us to place importance on the primacy of expertise-by-experience in social work education. We made connections between the central tenets of auto/duoethnography and critical incident analysis and their potential links as effective methods to support professional development.

As is clearly identified in the framework we have presented, effective professional mentorship was key to our professional development, and, accordingly, is central to the professional development of the students we teach. Our duoethnographic study highlights the importance of having strong leaders in social work education to inspire future practitioners through professional mentorship; moreover BASW (2018) acknowledges critical reflection as a key skill in social work. This framework perhaps highlights the essential need for social work educators at all

levels to seek to develop innovative educative practice as they deliver training to the next generation of social workers, building on the potential for reflective practice that acknowledges the necessity to highlight and acknowledge the role of personal experience to support effective social work. This article is written in the hope that it will encourage social workers to recognise the positionality of their values and remove the stigma that often prevents them from reflecting on the worth of their personal experience, and leads to their ability to develop empowering practice.

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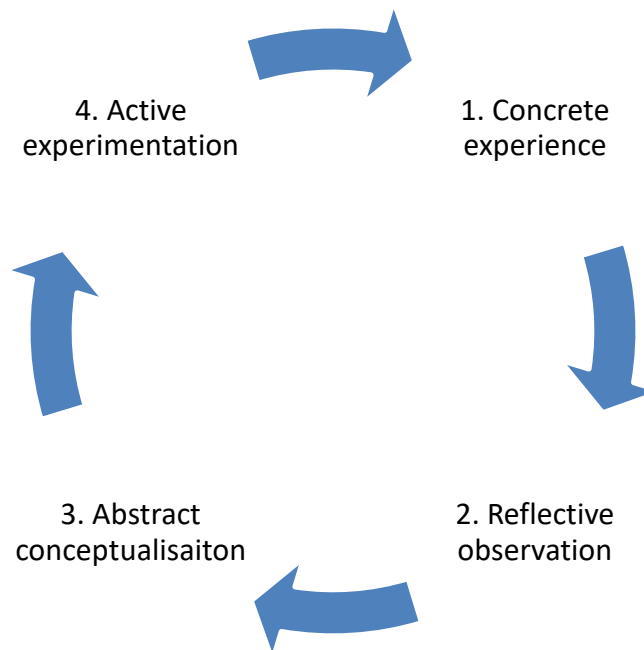Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Figures

Figure 1: Kolb's (1984) model of reflective practice.

Figure 2. Cycle of reflection from our duoethnography