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Professional Practice as Processes of Muddling Through: A Study of Learning and Sense Making in Social Work

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Short title: Learning and Sense Making in Social Work

Abstract

Using an ethnographic approach, the aim of this study was to explore how social workers learn and make sense of experiences in their daily practices. Five events that took place during an ordinary day of child investigation work are described and serve as the basis for the analysis. The findings imply that investigation work is largely a social rationalization process and that the interaction between different actors in work is a strategy to enhance the level of knowledge and contribute to learning among the professionals. Thus, learning is embedded in daily activities, for example, consulting colleagues, framing problems and building relationships. Furthermore, the findings suggest the possibility of assuming a contextualized view of reasoning, a so-called contextual rationality, which maintains that practitioners need to make judgments in a way that is sensitive to and relevant for their own contextualized settings. Contextual rationality is a reasonable strategy to deal with complex problems in daily practices that cannot be completely analysed or solved. Contextual rationality is thus not about accuracy, rather it engages individuals to find meaning and order in the complexity of modern organizations where norms, values and expectations provide frameworks for explanations. Besides offering an explanation for the basis of practice, the study identifies a variety of learning opportunities in everyday practice that could potentially be used in efforts to organize a more reflective practice to facilitate improved workplace learning.

Keywords Workplace learning, Sense making, Professional work, Contextual rationality, Evidence-based practice

Introduction

In recent decades, evidence-based approaches have been marking a new era of progress and offering great promise for a range of professional practices. The idea that research should be able to tell us 'what works' and thus contribute to improving practice stems from the assumption that research provides explicit knowledge that can be assessed objectively (Biesta 2007). The trust in research-based knowledge can be seen at least partially as a response to the increased complexity and unpredictability in many organizations attributed to increased globalization and changes in information and communication technology (Hood 1995). People within different areas of work engage with knowledge in ways that historically have been associated with scientific communities, suggesting that an epistemification is taking place in society (Jensen et al. 2012, p. 2). The acknowledgement of the importance of research can also be understood with reference to new forms of governance, such as New Public Management, which requires that activities in the public sector should be transparent and held financially accountable (Hasselblad et al. 2008). The widespread adoption of evidence-based principles has also been explained with reference to the emergence of a risk society, in which science promises security, rationality and reason, thus replacing traditional authorities of the past such as the church and the family (Svensson 2010). Furthermore, the growth of service user's rights to receive high quality, transparent and accountable services together with ethical considerations have had a significant influence on the mounting trust in research and evidence-based approaches. As far as possible, decisions should be based on evidence due to the potential harm that policy-makers and professionals might inflict when intervening in the lives of service users (Gambrill 1999).

Against the backdrop of the transformations in the entire framing of professional work, social work has come under close scrutiny in many countries (Otto et al. 2009; Tengvald 2008; Webb 2001). The conflicting viewpoints of what is considered to be valid knowledge for practice have led to a long-standing debate surrounding the development of evidence-based social work (Trevithick 2008; Pawson et al. 2003). Consequently, doubts have been raised about practitioners' existing knowledge base and emphasized the need for practitioners to engage in learning and renewal and extension of professional capacities to sustain employment and ensure efficiency in practice. But how do practitioners make sense of and learn from complex and morally ambiguous events in their work? And how do they know what is rational and practical to do? Despite many empirical studies that exist in the sense-making literature, the research has thus far paid scant attention to issues concerning daily practices of sense making and learning (Colville et al. 2014). The aim of the present study was to explore how

social workers in Sweden learn and make sense of experiences in their daily child investigation work.

An introduction to the literature on learning and sense making is presented. A theoretical framework is developed and then used to present an analytical reconstruction of the data. The concluding discussion addresses some theoretical and practical implications of the main findings.

Theoretical Framework

The changing character of professional work has been recognized as a ‘movement of rationalization’ (Hasselblad et al. 2008) and trust in an instrumental rationality has undergone a revival since the beginning of the 21st century (Hood 1995; McCracken & Marsh 2008). Although there is considerable interest in evidence-based practice and its merits to guide and structure work and learning (Gambrill 1999; Gibbs & Gambrill 2002; Tengvald 2008), criticism has been levelled against evidence-based practice as a particular deterministic version of rationality that constrains work and limits professional development (Sheppard 1995; Webb 2001). Attempts to practice a rational choice model for complex social problems are argued to be unsuitable (Lindblom 1959, 1979; March 1978). Complex situations are too complicated to reduce to programmatic formats because the human dimension of the situation is often, although not always, involved (Lipsky 1980).

Previous social work research has recognized that practitioners put high trust in experience and professional judgment when it comes to dealing with the complex situations encountered in daily practice (Healy 2009; Munro 2011; Sheppard & Ryan 2003). Establishing routines and habits through learning from experience is certainly one way to cope successfully with the daily flow of events while maintaining a sense of security and stability in life (Giddens 1984). However, a routinized level of action can be unsatisfactory to meet changing demands in social work (Munro 2011).

Individual behaviour is always performed within contextual constraints (March 1978). That is, a situation both enables and constrains possibilities for actions depending on individuals’ earlier experiences and power in a certain context (Elkjaer 2003). Rational action therefore depends on the situation in which the work is performed as well as on individual cognitive capacity (Forester 1984; Kahneman 2003; Stanovich & West 2000). However, an individual behaviour or reaction is not always deemed rational; there is plenty evidence of human cognitive limitations and emotional attachments counteracting rational behaviour (Kahneman 2003; Kahneman 2011; Stanovich & West 2000). This does not mean that the behaviour cannot still be rational and indeed reasonable from the individual’s point of view (Toulmin 2003). Sense making is believed to occur as a natural feature of most, if not all, social settings as a way for

individuals to justify their actions, either to themselves or others (March 1978; Weick 1993, 1995). Action is recognized as an important component in sense making, or more so, action is a precondition for sense making (Schön 1983; Weick 1995). The importance of action has also been identified in connection with learning. Research on workplace learning has recognized that learning and work are closely intertwined in daily practices and that most learning within the workplace is actually found in the challenge of the work itself (Billett 2002; Ellström 2001; Eraut 2000, 2007). Learning has been conceptualized as interplay between levels of knowledge and action, such as routinized actions based on tacit knowledge and reflective actions based on explicit knowledge (Ellström 2006). Thus, the concept of learning involves transformation of knowledge based on interactions between tacit and explicit knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995). Ellström's (2006, p. 45) definition of action illustrates a certain relationship between action, learning and sense making:

Action is intentional behaviour that is carried out on the basis of implicit or explicit knowledge, rules or standards in order to accomplish a task or reach a goal ... intentions, motives and goals may be discovered during or after the performance of an action through mechanisms of learning, or as reconstructions that are used in order to justify the action to oneself or others.

Although learning is explicitly interwoven in the definition, the expression 'to justify' implies that a retrospective rationalization can take place to legitimate an action, which is regarded as one of several aspects of sense making (Weick 1995). Rationalization is believed to engage the individual in a reasoning process (Toulmin 2003). Reasoning is often viewed as oriented forward, towards a goal, but as the definition suggests, in some circumstances reasoning can have a backwards orientation supporting and justifying a conclusion that is known (Walton 1990). The direction of reasoning depends on its use in the context of an argument (Walton 1990). Reasoning can be used for a variety of purposes, such as 'to deceive, to argue, to debate, to doubt, to persuade, to express, to explain, to apologize, to rationalize, etc. It seems that any form of conscious activity can be affected and structured by the reasoning process.' (Walton 1990, p. 402).

A basic assumption behind this study is that learning and sense making occur simultaneously in the everyday activities of work. As used here, learning is viewed as interplay between intra- and interindividual social processes of knowledge creation and use; sense making is understood to be an individual cognitive preoccupation to rationalize and justify experiences and actions.

Research setting

Child protection work in Swedish municipalities is predominantly divided into separate departments that investigate and supply clients' needs. Until the beginning of the 1990s, child investigation work in Sweden was considered a high-status profession. Today, children's services departments tend to be staffed by young women, who have limited workplace support, with many resigning within 2 to 3 years. The high turnover of personnel and resource constraints symbolize an organization that is in crisis and an educational system's inability to prepare students for the challenges of social work practice (Lindquist 2012). The legal framework governing social care services is a goal-oriented enabling act (Social Services Act), which allows professionals considerable freedom combined with extensive trust to act independently. Social work is primarily performed in consensus with the client and only in extreme cases does the legal basis call for coercion (Lindquist 2012; Rasmusson et al. 2010).

The study was carried out in two children's services departments in southern Sweden: one located in a metropolitan area (population 150,000) and the other in a smaller municipality (population 42,000). Forty social workers (38 women and two men, aged 23–63 years) conducted investigations in the two departments. They had worked in their present positions from 2 weeks to 29 years. A web-based documentation system called Children's Needs in Focus (the Swedish acronym is BBIC) for investigating, planning and evaluating work with individual children had been implemented. BBIC adheres to the British Integrated Children's System, which is viewed as a standardized approach to conducting an assessment of a child's additional needs and has had a significant influence on child investigation work in more than 15 countries. BBIC depicts a child investigation as a triangle showing three types of information that the social worker needs to gather in the investigation process: the child's needs, the parents' ability to provide these needs and other circumstances that might affect the child's development. An investigation is opened on the basis of either a report from someone outside the family or due to an application for support by the family itself. Thus, interventions after an investigation can be either compulsory or voluntary.

Methods

This study was based on a mixture of qualitative approaches influenced by ethnography allowing an exploration of naturally occurring processes in situ. My access to the field was possible through a previous study conducted with the political and managerial level in the two municipalities (Avby et al. 2013).

The present study began with focus group interviews to build trust and establish social relationships with the practitioners in the two departments (Alvesson & Sköldbberg 2009). Thereafter, in dialogue with the managers, four social workers were selected, contacted individually and asked to participate in the study. Including team partners, seven social workers were engaged in the study. This open strategy was chosen because it was deemed important that the whole workplace agreed on my presence in the practice. Fieldwork was carried out between August 2012 and May 2013. Methods included participant observations of formal meetings (staff meetings, client meetings and police interrogation) and other less formal meetings (collegial talks and everyday institutional tasks), focus group interviews and interviews with managers, reflective dialogue with social workers and individual case records. To address the aim of this study, one ordinary day of work was extracted from the data and formed the basis for analysis. The day belonged to two young women, featured here as Anna and Bea. Anna is 25 years old and has been on the job for 3 years. Bea is a few years older but has less work experience and is still in her first year. During Bea's first 3 months as a child investigator, Anna was her mentor and they have been working as a team since then. Both have a university degree in social work.

I participated in Anna and Bea's everyday tasks, asked questions, exchanged information, learned and produced knowledge from within the practice context rather than from externally observed engagements and understanding of the people (Agar 1996). Field notes were taken throughout the day and a reflective dialogue was conducted. The dialogue was carried out to examine observed actions in the spirit of joint exploration, similar to what has been referred to as InterView (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). The reflective dialogue created a setting for the researcher and social worker to engage in a dialogic process of learning to understand the underlying working mechanisms (Alvesson & Sköldbberg 2009), which otherwise have a very strong tacit dimension and are difficult to learn about (Eraut 2007). Involving Anna and Bea in the preliminary analysis and interpretation of the data was also a way of validating the data. The recorded dialogue and raw field notes were transcribed.

During the initial reading, the events that took place on the day extracted for analysis were listed. Events are part of a process and of interest as they help to build a narrative (Miles and Huberman 1994). The events may also characterize learning in action routines. Weick and Westley (1996, p. 449) suggest that by viewing 'learning as a moment in a process', attention can be drawn to learning as it looks in the normal work processes of daily practice.

During the second reading, eight different processes that took place on this day were identified:

- i. Implementation of new methodology

- ii. Case a (cases refer to ongoing child investigations)
- iii. Recruitment of new staff
- iv. Case b
- v. Workplace organization
- vi. Case c
- vii. Case d
- viii. Case e

Each event was then linked to its appropriate process. A complex flow of events connected to different ongoing parallel processes emerged, which supports the commonly reported complexity associated with professional work (Munro 2011). Five events were chosen for the purpose of this study (Figure 1).

HOUR	EVENT		
8	Starting the workday A i	Preparing to meet a client A and B ii	
9	Client meeting A and B ii		
10	Recruitment meeting A iii	Making a phone call A iv	
11	Acute workplace meeting A and B v	Making a phone call A vi	
12	Lunch A and B		
13	Working in the office A vi	Client meeting A and B vii	
14	Emergency report A and B viii	Consulting the manager A and B viii	Making phone calls B viii
15	Emergency call A and B viii		
16	Driving back to the office A and B viii	Reporting to the manager A and B viii	

A Anna
B Bea

Fig. 1 Event list linked to ongoing processes; the five chosen events are indicated

Ethical Issues

Ethical approval was obtained from the regional ethics committee in Linköping. The study was conducted in accordance with the American Psychological Association standards for ethical treatment of participants. Permission to carry out the study was given according to the legal regulations of the participating local authorities (Socialtjänstlag 2001, chapter 12, §6). The primary objective of the study concerned social workers' sense making and learning in investigation work and the study was only indirectly related to issues involving individual clients. Verbal consent was obtained from the social workers as well as from the clients involved in the cases, and assurances of confidentiality were given.

Findings

This section describes five empirical events that took place on an ordinary day in investigation work. Each event is analysed with regard to learning and sense making. An event is an experience, or as Weick and Westley (1996, p. 449) state 'a moment in a process' that exemplifies an everyday activity.

Event 1: Starting the Work Day

It is early Friday morning at the social services office. Anna's door is wide open. In the corridor people are moving about, calling on colleagues, searching for case files and other items needed for their work. A colleague appears at Anna's door seeking help to find a specific template. Just as Anna replies, another colleague comes rushing in with a scribble on a note requiring Anna's assistance with a parent-child meeting this afternoon. The morning rush continues as yet another colleague appears at the door:

Colleague: You're back! Was the training on child interviews useful?

Anna: Yes, I think so, though very different from how we work today. We are supposed to take the children from their familiar settings to the office, place them in a chair and treat them just like adults, without offering any toys.

Colleague: Yeah, I wonder how that will work.

Anna: Office-based interviews are supposed to create a more unbiased setting. And you know how we often encourage the children? We are not supposed to do that either, rather, if we address children in a formal way it can reduce the influence encouragements may have on neglected children.

Colleague: Aha.

Anna: The interviews have to be recorded. I'll hate hearing myself! And the transcription work will require so much time, really, we should have someone to help us with that, but it [the method] is based on evidence.

Event 1 exemplifies collegial consultation. The open doors in the office offer plenty of opportunities for the social workers to engage in activities that yield learning, such as casual consultation and use of colleagues' experiences. In the research on workplace learning, collegial consultation is recognized as a natural learning activity in everyday work, although it is not necessarily viewed as such (Billett 2002; Ellström 2001; Eraut 2007). In the conversations, technical matters such as helping a colleague to find the necessary paperwork or psychological issues such as supporting a parent–child meeting were handled on the basis of quite limited information. A deeper insight into how learning and sense making take form in the activity of consulting with colleagues can be found by means of an analysis of Anna's recollection and portrayal of the new methodological approach for interviewing children who are the subject of an investigation. The method was clearly appraised as a disturbance to customary practice and the portrayal implies the need to change existing routines and beliefs. In other words, the new knowledge (provided through training) challenged the boundaries of local practice and collegial cooperation (habits). It created a basis for doubt, which Pierce (1905, p. 168) claims is 'the privation of a habit' and as such offers a learning opportunity and basis for practice change. At this stage, we do not know if and how Anna will implement the new method in practice, but we do know that she volunteered to undertake the training.

Considering the above, it can be claimed that Anna upholds essential individual dispositions, such as motivation and knowledge to actually learn in work (Ellström 2001). However, subjective factors (e.g. knowledge) and affective individual factors (e.g. motivation) are not sufficient for practice change. Objective factors, such as Anna's degree of comprehension of opportunities for interacting with the new method and actual environmental options are also important (Billett 2008). New methods from training are not easily applied to practice without contextual modifications, suggesting a relationship between subjective/individual and objective/contextual factors.

Overall, Anna offered positive arguments in interactions with her colleague. She justified the methodology according to policy imperatives when she stated that 'it is based on evidence'. However, the recording worried her. Unfortunately, documentation processes are often disliked because they can take considerable time, but they can serve as opportunities for learning through reflecting, criticizing and analysing the information (Jensen et al. 2012; Lindquist 2012). Similar to articulation of experiences, writing can be a way to make the tacit dimensions of knowledge explicit and thus lead to learning (Van de

Luitgaarden 2009). In this case, a reasonable suggestion is that the dreaded transcription process might not be a problem as the arguments that Anna develops in the process of making sense of her training experience will overcome the required effort and will develop practice.

Event 2: Preparing to Meet a Client

Bea turns up at Anna's door just before a client meeting. With the case file at hand, Anna starts talking and touches on issues such as cultural differences, hidden identity of the biological parents, fostering problems and disturbing court cases. Bea seems somewhat unfamiliar with the case. Anna gives a general lecture on problematic outcomes related to concealed identity of the biological parents. Then follows an account of a malfunctioning family with a frightening and unfair father:

Just by looking at the names of the children tells you plenty. The father's statements clearly describe cultural differences in women's behavioural issues. He is constantly failing the child he is not the biological parent of and the mother has difficulties setting limits for the children, so, today they have supporting interventions.

Anna concludes by stating that the court case limits them with regard to the information they can share with the client: 'we do not want to disturb the court processes'. Then they rush out the door to meet the client and Bea says: 'It is reassuring to be part of a team so that nothing is overlooked, it is positive for my development, sometimes I just don't know what to say.'

Event 2 portrays the conveyance of professional knowledge. A complex characterization of people and relationships was outlined in Anna's talk. In the process of describing the case, Anna passed on her previous experience of managing complex cases with important values of professional jurisdiction. The conveyance of professional knowledge from a senior colleague is part of the process of learning the craft of social work (Gambrill 1999; Gibbs & Gambrill 2002), but collegial control of knowledge can also be a powerful way to permeate newcomers with personal beliefs and behaviours (Eraut 2007). So it seemed as norms and prejudice, such as Anna's statement on cultural differences, were transferred in the same process of conveying valuable knowledge. To minimize the risk of unexplored prejudice and insider views loaded with tacit professional assumptions, White (1997) argues that social workers need to be explicitly aware of their preferred professional formulations. In the talk, tacit knowledge, such as attitudes and beliefs, became articulated. This externalization of knowledge could have functioned as the basis for new knowledge and learning because it became possible to challenge it (Eraut 2000; Nonaka and Toyama 2007), but no such challenge was found in the event itself.

In the reflective dialogue, Bea deliberated on the security she feels when being part of a team and having Anna as a mentor.

In the beginning, it seemed as we were talking past each other, like from different angles, however, the meaning of things changed and appeared very different after a time on the job. Work has to be worn in. You need to make your own experiences to get the hang of it and to truly understand.

What does Bea mean when she refers to work having to be ‘worn in’ and ‘truly understand’? Is she referring to ‘truly’ understand Anna? A reasonable candidate assumption is that Bea’s statement refers to the adaption of cultural norms and codes, including the language used in practice. It is held that professional work involves an abstract knowledge system that is only understandable to the professionals within the system (Abbott 1988). Knowledge of contexts and organizations is often held to be acquired through a process of socialization through observation, introduction and participation (Elkjaer 2003; Eraut 2000). The routine activities in a workplace process and convey norms, local discourses and culture. Thus, Bea’s first confrontation with the knowledge system was confusing and will only be ‘truly’ understandable when work has been ‘worn in’ and she has learned how to interpret and express herself in the language of her peers. For now, it is all about observing and doing as others do, here, as the mentor does. Anna and Bea both regard the mentor as an important person associated with learning investigation work and Anna describes the mentor as ‘someone responsible for teaching the newcomer how to do the work’.

I usually suggest that newcomers seek advice from one colleague, someone they trust, thereby they will avoid conflicting viewpoints. As you get more confident in your role, through experience, it can be challenging to seek different colleagues’ opinions. I reckon that the more you find your professional identity, the easier it is to challenge the boundaries.

Anna refers to work being learned from simply working and confirms Bea’s understanding of how ‘work has to be worn in’. The notion that only when you have developed a professional identity is it possible to challenge the boundaries of what has been learned is important. Learning becomes practical and a matter of identity development and ‘knowledge becomes the active process of knowing’ (Elkjaer 2003, p. 44).

Event 3: Client Meeting

While Anna and Bea are waiting for the client, Anna says: ‘it would be good if she didn’t turn up. I really don’t want to miss the recruitment meeting later. Yet, I suppose we should talk to her’. Nevertheless, the client turns up and Anna opens the meeting by advertising: ‘we have until 10 o’clock, then we have

engagements elsewhere. How are you and the children coping?’ The client starts talking. Then Anna refers to the scheduled process and articulates the purpose of the meeting: ‘today, we want to learn more about x’s [the older child] needs’ while pointing at the BBIC triangle that Bea hands her. The client confirms and continues to talk. Occasionally, Anna interrupts to ask for clarification: ‘what happened then? Who did you meet? For how long? How are the children doing now?’ and seeks eye contact with Bea to confirm that she too understands the pictured situation. Bea is deeply engaged in writing and the client seems preoccupied with her problems and the urgent need to give a full account of these. Anna concludes the meeting and schedules an appointment with the children in careful consideration of a suitable time: ‘sometimes the reception area can be crowded with people, which can be frightening for the children’.

Event 3 illustrates the activity of building relationships. Anna managed the meeting with a firm hand and the way she involved the client in different ways to build trust, guide moral issues and motivate the client to accept future interventions is a prominent feature of social work (Munro 2011). In the client–worker interaction, Anna acknowledged the children’s feelings when she planned the appointment and encouraged the client to give her view of the situation. She seemed to arrange the talk in a chronological order and created a somewhat coherent narrative of the client’s experiences and situation. She summarized and translated the client’s talk by using concepts such as ‘escape’, ‘woman’s shelter’ and ‘menacing environment’. The use of concepts acknowledged in an occupation is recognized to provide a basis on which to make sense of the situation (Sheppard & Ryan 2003). The probing seemed to not only contribute to a better understanding of the client’s situation (Weick 1995) but also to support better problem framing, as argued by Schön (1983). Although a follow-up action (to meet the children) was arranged, Anna was dissatisfied with the meeting.

Anna: The meeting was a bit, maybe not unnecessary, but nothing new was learned.

Researcher: What was the purpose of the meeting?

Anna: It was an investigation meeting [hesitant] in which the parent is allowed to describe the children’s situation. I must admit that it [the meeting] was a little pressured as I wanted to make it to the recruitment meeting.

Nothing new was appraised to have been learned, but Anna and Bea agreed that the meeting confirmed their prior understanding of ‘the parent’s inability to provide basic rules for the children’. This was a plausible result because the preparations for the meeting were minimal with a primary focus on recapitulating earlier findings and less on what should be achieved (cf. Event 2). An alternative explanation can be found in White’s (1997) suggestion that social workers quickly draw inferences based on observed behaviour, such as the client’s inability to articulate basic rules for the children.

Researcher: Did the meeting provide you with the knowledge you required?

Anna: Absolutely not at all! However, we are experts at investigating everything, much more than what is accounted for. That's just how we are. It's about our inability to limit our investigations and BBIC is no help. We like to rummage into other peoples' lives.

Researcher: So, why did you refer to BBIC triangle that Bea handed you?

Anna: Well, we always present it as it is our investigative method. It's a way to engage the parents in the investigation, but nothing too strict to follow.

Besides the recurring effort to involve the client in the process, in which BBIC seemed partially useful, the standardized method was dismissed when it came to guiding the investigative process. In the talk, she also provided an understanding of what it is to be a social worker, enabling a rationalized argument to reduce the confusion associated with the 'unnecessary' meeting. What about Bea's experience of the meeting?

Bea: I wish there was more time to discuss alarming matters afterwards. To take some time and just reflect on the experience, but, then again, it probably just reflects the fact that I am still quite new on the job. I feel secure with the triangle at hand. It's probably more for me than for the client.

Anna: It's about getting acquainted with and learning the method. To practice, test and consult the literature. I take it as it comes, others might have a very clear structure with fixed questions to manage the dialogue, but I don't. It doesn't help me to sit down and reflect after a meeting, I'd rather reflect on the run.

Bea: But how do you know when you've got enough to decide upon? Working from a report is very vague. I could use more time to reflect, it would help me get things right. There's no reason I couldn't take the time and just add an half an hour after a meeting to write and reflect, but I don't. I think that I've just got into the habit of doing what I've always done.

Anna: There is always so much to do. Although I believe that we have control of our own time, I want to help this troubled family now, along with the rest of the families I am responsible for, so I just pack my calendar full of additional meetings.

Bea's earlier optimistic declaration of holding meetings together as a team is reflected on from a slightly different angle here. However, her somewhat unsatisfactory feelings about only participating in and observing the way Anna handled the meeting might not be a testimony to mistrust in the team; rather it is suggested that Bea is actually beginning to challenge the boundaries of Anna's experience and developing her own professional identity. In other words, Bea uses her experiences to challenge and reflect on Anna's actions and beliefs, which can be recognized as Bea becoming a more competent practitioner (Elkjaer 2003). Then again, she justified her unsatisfactory feelings by announcing her own inexperience. Thus, her doubt in identifying herself as a social worker created a rationalized argument to reduce the confusion that was associated with the experience (Weick 1995).

The statement points to another interesting issue on learning. Bea had seemingly quickly got ‘into the habit’ of doing things in a certain way. Habits or individual strategies are held to be forceful and can constrain learning (Frese and Zapf 1994; Peirce 1905). However, habits can be a way to cope with the daily flow of events (Giddens 1984); but once established, routinized actions are very difficult to change (Ellström 2006). The assumption that her rational for not taking time to reflect was influenced by the context of practice. Anna’s statement to ‘reflect on the run’ and the declared time pressure reveal a culture that does not favour reflection. Behaviours are contaminated by contextual affordances to guide and rationalize actions (Billett 2008). Thus, Bea gains experience and learns how to conduct client meetings as a result of observing Anna and the environmental outcomes of the behaviour observed. This way of learning can be understood to facilitate adaptive learning as Bea learns to handle tasks in a fairly routinized way on the basis of a rule or procedure that draws on experience from previous similar situations (Nilsen et al. 2012). Although experience is an important asset in professional work, learning from experience has its limitations and carries the risk of tacit knowledge becoming a cognitive prison that hinders the possibility of social workers using their knowledge base fully (Nordlander 2006).

Event 4: Making a Phone Call

Anna (on the phone to a service provider just before lunch):

I have a precarious case and I came to think of you. We opened an investigation early January, it’s one of those long-term investigations ... After giving birth, the mother and baby were placed together in a ward. She has a couple of different diagnoses ... I really need to read this through again, I cannot remember just how it all builds up, but she is narrow-minded and anxious as she doesn’t know if she is allowed to keep the baby, which of course is quite natural Today, with support 24-7, she’s doing well, she also has a well-developed social network and has contact with a psychologist. The investigation is about 95% finished, but it has yet to be decided; the father cannot be relied on, he’s very peculiar, a former addict; she needs help to face him and from our experience, it is very important to control her medication, so we will grant home service help ... anyway, I think it is important to support her quickly as soon as the decision is taken, I think you are the right person to handle the case. Thus, I’m trying to find a way to work this bureaucratic world in order to get you started before the case is closed I will talk to my manager.

Event 4 exemplifies problem framing. In the process of recollecting prior knowledge and experience related to the case, Anna portrayed a complex characterization of the client and her situation. Anna’s feelings of uncertainty about getting the case details right was excused and justified by reference to ‘one of those long-term investigations’, which made it difficult to keep all the facts in

order. The doubt also seemed to trigger Anna to test different arguments associated with the case (e.g. narrow-minded and anxious client, controlled medication, unreliable father and home service allowance). There was no explicit reference to theory; rather Anna invoked her status as an eyewitness ‘from our experience’ to produce a narrative about the case that could form the basis for her work and enable her to further process the case. Previous research has shown that the use of popular ideas and experiences excuses practitioners from the need to justify their actions on more verified knowledge, such as research (White 2009). It seemed as if Anna was trying to convince not only the service provider but also herself about the acuteness of quickly supporting the client to maximize the benefits of an intervention.

The event implies that practical reasoning took place to direct Anna towards a decision (here, to consult the manager) (Walton 1990), but simultaneously when recollecting prior knowledge and experience, a more cognitive backwards move took place to justify her belief of the need for immediate intervention. Rather than focusing on solving the client’s problems, the dialogue implied the need to engage the service provider to solve problems related to bureaucratic regulations. Ways to curb central authority or, as Lipsky (1980) states, to cope with organizational and individual deficiencies, such as ambiguous goals, limited resources and insufficient knowledge, can be a way to use reasoning. In this case, however, an alternative interpretation is that Anna used reasoning in a rather creative way through social interaction, with the aim of better framing the problem. In complex work settings where the possibility of problem solving is limited, a more accessible way for professionals to decide on an adequate path is to focus on problem framing (Schön 1983). In the framing process, a better understanding of the problem could be learned and decided on.

Event 5: Driving Back to the Office

Anna and Bea are in the car after an emergency call at the psychiatric clinic. They are confused and engage in a discussion about whether the parent or youngster could be trusted, or indeed if either could be trusted.

Anna: Anyway, we don’t need to be worried that x will commit suicide over the weekend.

Bea: It’s just really troubling to hear the mother’s and x’s different accounts. It’s difficult to know what’s true and if x means anything when threatening suicide. The last time x was threatening over the phone, I consulted x’s psychiatrist who reassured me that nothing would happen, but what if something does happen?

Anna: It’s so much easier to judge truthfulness if you have the client face to face. That’s why it was important that we reacted to the emergency call and did not just

make a phone call. It becomes easier when a relationship has been established. The mother seemed ignorant about x's story; we need to meet x alone.

Bea: I agree; a face-to-face meeting doesn't leave much room for excuses. But, x is really offensive and frank. Although I like it, it is very confronting and I couldn't find a sufficient answer when x questioned our presence.

Anna: For now, we've done what we can. You can be confident that the matter is being well handled by the medical staff. Leave it until Monday. The only thing you need to do is to notify the manager that she can call off emergent custody.

Event 5 illustrates a debriefing. The morally ambiguous situation they encountered at the psychiatric clinic needed attention. Bea was still worried and sought trust in Anna's reassuring statements. The attempt to establish the accuracy of the accounts was not resolved; however, in the debriefing discussion, a reasonable way to proceed with the case was suggested, i.e. to meet the youngster without parental influence. The event at the psychiatric clinic was tense and the debriefing seemed to help Anna and especially Bea to lessen some of the emotions that had been provoked. In the event, the importance of establishing a relationship with the client, as deliberated earlier, reoccurred (cf. Event 3). The importance of relationships in social work practice is well documented in previous research (Trevithick, 2008). Here, the importance of the relationship as a basis for social work provided Anna and Bea with a reason for reacting to the emergency call in the way that they did. Thus, besides lessening tensions, the debriefing helped them to make sense of and bring order to the experience (Weick 1995). Conclusively, the complexity that Anna and Bea faced in this event was hard to pin down into specific questions that could be answered. This suggests that social work can be more about plausibility and reasonableness to create justified arguments for actions and decisions (e.g. the need to establish a relationship) rather than accuracy and decision making.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore how social workers learn and make sense of experiences in daily practices. A variety of events that took place in an ordinary workday were described and analysed, portraying a sample of activities in investigation work that are suggested to offer learning opportunities (Figure 2).

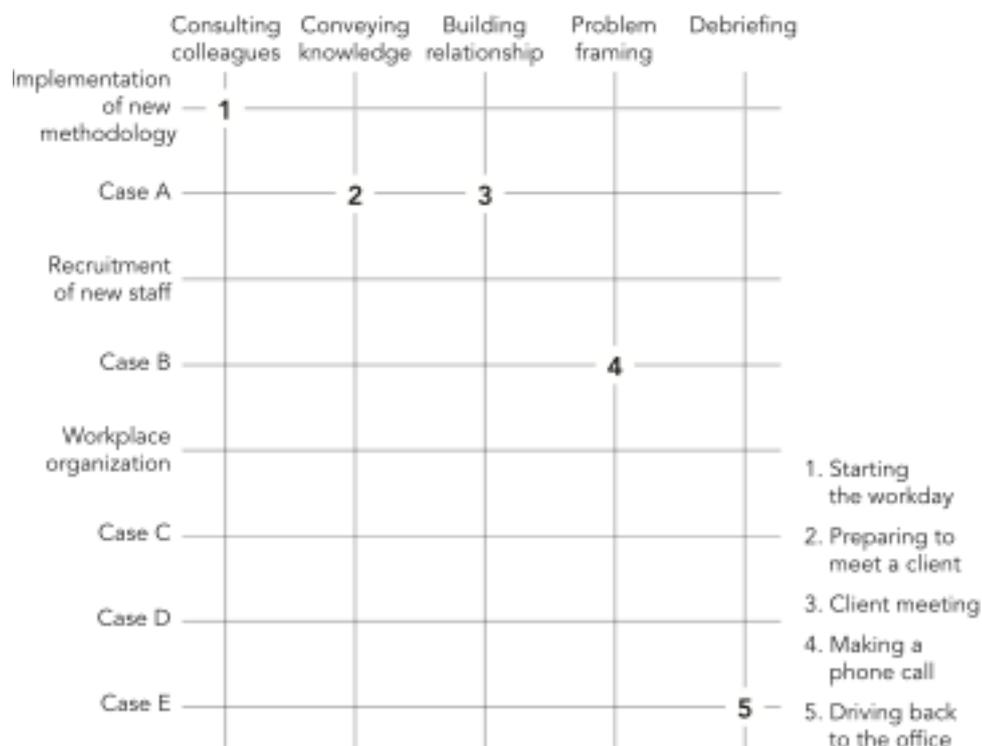


Fig. 2 Learning opportunities found in the connexion of activities and work processes

However, as shown in the results of this study, the activities were not organized as learning activities; they solely exemplify everyday practice. Although it was difficult to detect instances of learning, the findings nevertheless suggest a certain interplay between tacit and explicit knowledge in activities such as building relationships (when articulating and translating the client's account) and conveying knowledge (when articulating attitudes and beliefs), which has been recognized to enable learning. Movements in the other direction, explicit knowledge becoming tacit, may be characterized in Bea's account when referring to getting into the habit of doing things in a certain way.

There were few traces of instrumental rationality to guide the practitioners in the investigative process, such as trust in guidelines or methods underpinned by evidence. The BBIC triangle was used in a rather casual way, but nothing was strictly followed. The findings suggest that investigation work is largely a social rationalization process that engages the practitioners in a reasoning process. A blend of interpretations, factual statements, beliefs and emotions were involved in the events and reasoning was needed to make sense of the experiences to enable sensible decision making and initiate relevant actions. As suggested here, the decision or action became sensible and relevant to the practitioner when a rationale (or logic) was applied. For example, a decision,

such as consulting the manager with the aim of curbing central authority, may indeed be justified and rational for the practitioner (and perhaps the manager) within the system, but for an observer, such as a client, service provider or indeed researcher, the decision may seem quite unwise. Alternatively, not to sidestep the manager was perhaps a rational and relevant action if the aim was to circumvent the regulations. Although not clear-cut, I propose that the relevant nature of an action recognizes practical imperatives and the sensitive dimension of a decision is more tightly connected to the individual's understanding, such as the responsiveness to involve the client in the process. Thus, the rationality behind an individual behaviour has a contextual dependency.

I suggest the possibility of assuming a contextualized view of reasoning, a so-called contextual rationality (March 1978; Weick 1995), which maintains that practitioners need to make judgments in a way that is sensitive to and relevant for their own contextualized settings. Contextual rationality is about how practice is reasoned in interaction with people (colleagues, managers, parents, service providers and children) and artefacts (e.g. the BBIC system, case files) and, thus, how practice is constrained and enabled through contextual reasoning. Contextual rationality involves a human intention, but this intention might not be discovered until after an action has taken place. The findings in this study suggest that it was not the intention behind the activity that tended to be important; instead the activity itself was the focus, such as was observed when preparing and holding a client meeting. Work was to do not to think. The culture that was conveyed implied that action was an indication of power and capability, and tended to enhance the understanding that humans are not created to sit and reflect (Alvesson & Spicer 2012). Furthermore, the findings suggest that the imperative in investigation work was to decide what might be wrong, not what works. Perhaps investigation work can better be symbolized as detective work? The social worker uncovers conflicting stories from the parties involved and from this complex reality decides whether or not the parents are capable of caring for and protecting the children, based on the information and knowledge she is qualified to find. Contextual rationality engages individuals to find meaning and order in the complexity of modern organizations where norms, values and expectations provide frameworks for explanations. The interaction between different actors in work is suggested to be a method of increasing the level of knowledge and rationality to inform the practitioner of the next step to take or decision to make. With reference to Lindblom (1959, 1979), investigation work seems to be about 'muddling through' as a strategy for 'skillful incompleteness' (Lindblom 1979, p. 524). Contextual rationality thus becomes a reasonable strategy to deal with complex problems that cannot be completely analysed or solved.

The comprehensive material behind this study was familiar to the researcher. One day was chosen from the data. Clearly, some days may be more or less eventful for both practitioners and observers (here the researcher). The sampling of this particular day was based on two interrelated aspects: it looked like a normal day and it was deemed to be an information-rich day that could manifest learning and sense making intensely, but not extremely. Thus, the sampling may be understood as within-case sampling driven by the aim and knowledge interests of the study and not by a concern for representativeness (Miles and Huberman 1994, p. 29). Sampling of the events was a further necessary limitation, which can be described as following a certain influence to test the typicality of what was found during this day (Miles and Huberman 1994, p. 28). The sampling strategy helped to detect a local configuration of learning and sense making in some depth, but on the other hand there was a risk of losing out on other information-rich events and activities.

The ethnographic approach, in combination with the reflective dialogue, has provided insights into the much-discussed topic of putting knowledge into practice. The findings are consistent with earlier observations that learning is embedded in daily practices and that the knowledge used in practice is largely professional knowledge gained from previous experiences. Furthermore, the findings imply how giving and asking for reasons provide a strategy to enhance the trustworthiness of knowledge and foster learning among professionals in social work practice. Thus, building and maintaining relationships are critically important skills to achieve reasoning. The use of reflective dialogues suggest that challenging questions and opportunities to reflect on actions can support the articulation of lay accounts, which White (1997) upholds have been marginalized in studies of social work practice with the consequence that the professionals' unchallenged insider views loaded with tacit professional assumptions may go unexplored.

In all, the contribution of the study is two-fold: it offers an explanation of the basis of practice, which many practitioners have difficulty recognizing and articulating, and which unnoticed might create ambiguity in service delivery, and it identifies and portrays a variety of learning opportunities in everyday practice that could potentially be used in efforts to organize a more reflective practice to facilitate improved workplace learning. These contributions are unlikely to be limited to considerations of social work practice

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