

**Capturing the Space-in-between:
Understanding the Relevance of Professional “Use of Self” for
Social Work Education and Practice through
Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

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Statement of the Research Problem

The purpose of this research was to explore the intersection of pedagogy and practice in social work education by using theoretical and methodological principles of hermeneutic phenomenology. The study sought to gain in-depth understanding of the phenomenon “professional use of self” (use of self) as revealed by the teaching-learning processes and experiences of educators and students.

Generally accepted as a universal core conception in social work, the term ‘use of self’ lacks clarity, especially with regard to how this aspect of practice is developed in students and taught in the classroom and the field (Dewane, 2006; Liechty, 2005, Ward, 2008). Interpersonal practice narratives suggest that social workers use their own personality and self-understanding as part of what they do (Payne, 2007), but contemporary research on how it is developed and utilized in the curriculum of social work programs has been given little attention (Chapman, Oppenheim, Shibusawa & Jackson, 2003).

Research Questions

Specifically, the research explored the following question: What are the relational and interactional pedagogical components involved in the teaching-learning processes and experiences in understanding the concept “use of self” for social work practice and education? The research intended to better understand the processes by which use of self is developed, fostered, modeled and applied within the context of the teaching-learning experiences between educators and students.

Research Background and Hypotheses

Despite the ambiguous nature of the phenomenon of use of self, experienced practitioners have an intuitive sense of what it is, what it looks like, and its useful relevance for practice. While Liechty (2005) underscored the absence of a specific agreed upon meaning of the term, the most significant theme addressed in the literature describes use of self as the intuitive integration and congruence between the clinician's professional and personal selves that are present in therapeutic relationship (Baldwin & Satir, 1989; Edwards & Bess, 1998; Dewane, 2006; Satir, as cited in Lum, 2002).

Lum (2002) identified that use of self has been recognized by many clinicians as being the single most important factor in developing a therapeutic relationship. Similarly, Ringel (2003) argued that developing skills related to use of self and educational emphases that highlight the person of the practitioner are crucial for professional practice knowledge. An extensive review of the literature suggests five interrelated components that appear to be essential features of the phenomenon:

- “Personhood” of the practitioner
- Disciplined-based knowledge, skills, techniques, and competencies
- Authentic self as an instrument of practice
- Transactional relational dynamics
- Intuitive processing, immediacy, and artistry

Limited empirical knowledge has resulted in a de-emphasis of use of self as a component of the educational processes and pedagogical practices in social work which has increasingly focused on outcomes (Butler, Ford & Tregaskis, 2007; Deal, 1997; Dewane, 2006; Liechty, 2005; Ringel, 2003). Failure to see how use of self is a necessary component of developing professional practice competency highlights a disturbing trend within social work education. Polkinghorne (2004) contended that an increasing emphasis on the “technification” of human service professions has diminished the uniqueness of the relational and human components involved in the reflective-understanding-thinking process of the practitioner.

Some social work scholar-educators have identified teaching as an extension of social work practice, arguing for the importance of recognizing the relational parallels between professional and educational processes to aid practice understanding in the discipline (Barretti, 2007; Edwards & Richards, 2002; Ganzer & Ornstein, 1999; Mishna & Rasmussen, 2001; Ruckdeschel & Shaw, 2002). Gitterman (2004) argued that interactive and collaborative teaching-learning processes are integral components for social work education, and as such, educators have an obligation to model practices congruent with the discipline's professional values. He suggested that the relationship between what we teach and how we teach is a pervasive concern for social work education. More recently, Ganzer (2007) argued that use of self “has a profound and

meaningful influence on social work practice” and theorized that understanding the relational components of use of self offers contemporary implications for teaching and supervision (p. 122).

Research on Use of Self

Empirical research on use of self has been limited. Few studies have addressed use of self as a component or phenomenon within social work education and practice. No studies to date have regarded how use of self is understood, experienced, and developed through the teaching-learning processes and interrelational transactions within a social work program.

Recent studies have explored the definition of the concept and understanding of the phenomenon from specific sub-set of participants. These studies include: in-depth interviews with six practitioners which explored their perceptions of how their use of self is utilized in the therapeutic encounter (Reupert, 2007); educator definitions of use of self through focus group interviews of BSW faculty (Liechty, 2005); and an examination of the developmental learning processes of one MSW student cohort in understanding use of self (Deal, 1997).

Liechty’s (2005) exploratory study helped to articulate a definition for use of self. Her research provided greater clarity and better understanding of use of self for social work educational practices. Liechty (2005) contended that further research “must develop...understanding of [the] complex meanings [of use of self] and our ability to articulate them so that use of self and its role in the social worker-client relationship can be articulated, understood, and enacted consistently throughout the social work educational process and the social work profession” (p. 126). She suggested that additional research should also focus on “intentional exploration of how use of self is taught and nurtured” (Liechty, 2005, p. 128).

Methodology

Data were generated through field methodology involving observations, focus group conversations, and individual interviews with educators and students in one MSW program at a Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accredited school of social work.

My inquiries explored the meanings that participants placed on their pedagogical experiences within the teaching-learning-practice encounter, particularly as related to the phenomenon of use of self, and how those meanings intersect with the processes of learning to become a practitioner. In so doing, I regarded how use of self is understood, experienced and developed by participants “as a holistic interaction of processes and environment” (Barretti, 2007, p. 230).

Study Design

The design of the study draws from many traditions within qualitative inquiry, including phenomenology, hermeneutics, autoethnography, case study, and narrative approaches (Patton, 2002; Schwandt, 2000; Stake, 2000; van Manen, 1990). Overlapping multi-method and simultaneously occurring sources of data (Padgett, 1998) contributed to providing rich descriptive understanding of the teaching-learning interactions in the program. Triangulation aided in strengthening the overall design and enhanced the quality, depth and complexity of the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Padgett, 1998; Stake, 2000).

The study was designed so that participants could be involved in the research in a variety of ways and at various participatory levels, depending on participant interest and availability. A number of participants volunteered to be involved in overlapping data collection. For these individuals, participation consisted of an individual interview and at least one other method, including focus group participation and/or observation.

Participants

The participants utilized in this study were drawn from multiple cohorts of graduate students and social work educators within a MSW program. A total of forty participants were involved in the research.

Twenty-five graduate students and fifteen educators participated. The 25 students were representative of the program's student population, across a variety of demographics, including gender, age, race/ethnicity, and specialization. Educators included tenure-track faculty, clinical and field faculty, adjunct faculty, and agency-based field practicum instructors.

Sampling strategies included opportunistic, snowball, and typical case sampling (Patton, 2002). Maximum variation sampling was also used to purposefully select participants who would be able to illuminate different aspects of the inquiry. This strategy is used within a single program to select individuals for whom a number of different experiences exist to "more thoroughly describe the variation in the group and to understand variations in experiences while also investigating core elements and shared outcomes" (Patton, 2002, p. 172).

Data Collection

Data were collected in a naturalistic manner over a period of six months, providing prolonged engagement (Padgett, 1998) of the teaching-learning interactions. The focus group conversations and individual interviews explored the use of self as a component of the teaching-learning processes and relational dynamics of the educational experience. Eighteen participants (16 students and two educators) were involved in five

focus group conversations. Individual interviews occurred with 27 participants (14 students and 13 educators).

My inquiries focused on how use of self was understood in the interactions between educators and students and the processes by which meanings were “created, negotiated, sustained and modified within a specific context of human action” (Schwandt, 1998, p. 225). In all of my conversations, the interview format was unstructured, but I expected topics to overlap and have a similar tone and content. Padgett (1998) described qualitative interviewing as “goal-directed conversation” (p. 59). My aim was to engage participants in ways that facilitated depth by using methods that allowed the process of understanding to unfold.

Observations of the educational context, classroom teaching, and field supervision helped to solidify themes that were generated by the conversations. Finally, document review of field notes and reflective memos (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995), typologizing (Lofland & Lofland, 1995), follow up correspondence with participants, and the methodological use of writing as inquiry (Richardson, 2000; van Manen, 1990; Wolcott, 1995), reinforced my explorations of the phenomenon.

Data Analysis

Data management and analysis in qualitative inquiry requires organization, creativity, improvisation, and in-depth conceptual understanding (Padgett, 1998). The multi-methodological, exploratory, and dialogical nature of my inquiry required that data collection and analysis were interconnected components of the research process. Freeman (2001) recognized that “interpretation begins before and in the very event of communicating with participants and is not a separate event from understanding, meaning and representation” (p. 648). One advantage to the ongoing and overlapping process of data collection and analysis is that I was able to continually refine my inquiries and interpretations as they emerged throughout the study.

Methodological emphasis was placed on interpretation and contextualization of the meanings and processes of participants regarding their relational interactions and educational experiences. Typologizing was used as a method of cross-classifying common categorizations within the data as a way to render understanding as “systematically coherent” analysis (Lofland & Lofland, 1995, p. 126). Inductive and deductive approaches helped to identify emergent themes and patterns and aided in understanding the data as a process and product (Tedlock, 2000).

Dialogical methods, including hermeneutic phenomenological reflection (van Manen, 1990), emphasized the interplay between my use of self and the inquiry, interpretation, and analysis (Eisner, 1991; Freeman, 2001; Padgett, 1998; Schwandt, 1999; 2005). A distinguishing feature of hermeneutic phenomenology involves a focus on the dialogical nature of understanding to illuminate perspective, as well as the

negotiation of meaning, through co-created processes of what is understood (Schwandt, 2000; van Manen, 1999). Understanding was revealed through the emergent process of interpreted reflection – over time, through critical reflective processes, that involve early conceptualizations and a later depth – by living and embodying the research, as much in the analysis as in the data collection.

The methodological use of writing and reflective and creative analytic practices (Richardson, 2000) further contributed to my interpretations and subsequent holistic understanding of the phenomenon. My insights show how “the textual practice of writing” is a fundamental and integrated component of interpretive phenomenological research and theorizing (van Manen, 1990, p. ix).

Results

The findings provide greater conceptual understanding of the relevance and impact of use of self as a phenomenon for social work education. Use of self is both explicit and implicit in the educational environment, pedagogies, and practices of social work educators and students, and plays an integral role in practitioner identity and actions.

Through illustrative examples, the data reveals how the pedagogical processes intersected with the application, development, and understanding of the phenomenon as an essential feature for social work education and practice. Schwandt (1996) argued for the importance of inquiry and discourse that enables the training of human judgment which is enhanced through the study of particular cases. Thus, the findings are suggested through the dialogical meaning created in the space of the inquiry itself.

The phenomenon is discussed in three parts: the nature of use of self; the characteristics of the teaching-learning-practice encounter that foster the development of use of self; and my parallel processes of understanding the inquiry as an embodiment of the phenomenological concept.

Nature of the phenomenon

Through co-created processes, my participants and I explored meanings and awareness of use of self and how it is actualized and applied in practice. Insight and understanding emerged through our dialogical conversations and by the emotional resonance that was evoked within the inquiry. What emerged was a conceptualization of use of self as the integrated embodiment of knowledge and action – captured metaphorically as the nuanced “space in-between” – in which the practitioner purposefully and intentionally brings elements into the transaction to illuminate new understanding.

Characteristics of teaching-learning that foster use of self

Two themes emerged from the data that provided understanding about the teaching-learning encounter where use of self is an embodied component of practitioner actions. While these themes are discussed as two separate characterizations, the interrelationship of what the educator does, *how* she does it, and what she *brings* to the interchange to facilitate this process, through *who she is*, links these integrative conceptions. In other words, the experiences within the encounter are elicited by the particular actions of the practitioner. The relational and interactional processes experienced within the encounter create conditions where the phenomenon becomes an embodied and actualized component of the pedagogical experience. The table below highlights the characteristics of the encounter and core practitioner actions where use of self shows itself.

Teaching-Learning-Practice Encounter	Practitioner Actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative • Spontaneous • Safe atmosphere • Empowering • Cathartic • Transformative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genuineness and Congruence • Relational connectedness • Views role as a mentor • Models skills and values of practice • Creates supportive climate • Transparency within the encounter

Parallel Understanding

Surprisingly, the phenomenon also revealed itself as feature of the research process. This happenstance was as significant in understanding use of self, as were data from the participants. The same relational and interactional features that were described by participants were experienced as an embodied and paralleled process of the research encounter. My own use of self, as researcher-practitioner, was illustrative of the pedagogical processes and intertwined within the experiences between and among myself and the participants.

Utility for Social Work Practice

The person of the practitioner – or one’s use of self – is an integral component of the learning and growing process in social work education. The study provides evidence that humanistic and relational practices (Goldstein, 2001) impact the development of practitioner identity and professional socialization. Understanding how one’s use of self intersects social work pedagogy and practice is as much about the process of the experience that unfolds and evolves through the relationships and encounters in the learning environment, as it is about the integration and accumulation of knowledge and skills. “Learning an art, which is knowledge applied to doing something in which the

whole person participates, cannot be carried on solely as an intellectual process, no matter how clearly and attractively subject matter is presented” (Reynolds, 1942, p. 69).

The research attempts to build knowledge for social work by proposing an overarching framework that emphasizes one’s use of self as an essential feature for practice. My premise extends the notion of practice to broadly include all kinds of professional practice, as a similar and parallel conception, emphasizing “practice” as a transformative, relational and transacted process. Competent practice is more than the knowledge, techniques, and skills of the profession – it is *how* the practitioner uses these components within the encounter, through an accumulated and integrated process of understanding of *who she is*, that allows for the interactive relational dynamic between the practitioner and her students (or clients) to unfold, which enables learning and growth. Thus, the familiar knowing-doing paradigm (Dewey 1938/1988; Schon, 1982; Goldstein, 2001) integrates a third element of one’s ‘being’, whereby educational emphasis includes the critical-reflective-integration of practitioner knowledge, action **and** self, as an essential feature.

The social work profession is at a crossroads – faced with contradictions and conflicts about who we are and what we want to be. Counfounding these perspectives is “disagreement and uncertainty about the nature of social work” itself (Payne, 2007, p. 1) and our dichotomized educational and practice tensions relative for developing competency. This research offers theoretical and practical implications for social work education and practice that help to reframe how the profession understands these pedagogical and practice tensions. Professional use of self is an essential aspect of that practical understanding.

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