

Abstract

Laura Yliruka. Self-evaluation as a reflective structure. Workability, adaptation and development of the Mirror Method. The Heikki Waris Institute Research Series 1:2015.

Recent years have seen a rise in methodological development, discussion and even institutional approaches to knowledge creation, evaluation and innovative practices in social work that support change. Several studies in social work and organisation research have identified the need for dynamic, yet sustainable structures of knowledge production, and have given rise to institutional solutions to the development and teaching of social work, including centres and institutes of expertise in the social services sector. Centres of expertise play a key role in distributing the results of research in social work, but are also important for providing social workers with facilities that improve and strengthen their expertise. However, little research has been conducted on the practices of knowledge production and self- or peer-evaluation that are integral to the process of client work in social work.

This doctoral dissertation focuses on practices that support working and learning and that target knowledge creation in social work as a means to enhance the flexible, open and critical expertise of social workers and to promote their efforts to assist their clients – practices known here as reflective structures. This dissertation explores the topic by studying the introduction, feasibility and development of the reflective Kuvastin (“Mirror”) method of self- and peer-evaluation. The method was developed in cooperation with social workers in various action research studies between 2003 and 2008. The idea of evaluation as part of the process of social work is based on Ian Shaw’s (1999) concept of reflective evaluation.

This doctoral dissertation 1) explores and expands the role of individual reflection and self-evaluation, and connects it to the organisation of reflection and evaluation as well as to the creation of reflective structures as part of practice-based innovation activities and knowledge management, 2) presents a research-based method of reflective self- and peer-evaluation of social work which members of an organisation can use together to examine and develop their work as well as to create practice-oriented organisational innovations, and 3) analyses the feasibility of the model, particularly the conditions required in a public sector organisation.

The dissertation is based on five previously published empirical articles and investigates the Kuvastin method by incorporating both a case study and an action research study. The dissertation has both adopted this method and used a theoretical approach to study how and under which conditions self-evaluation can create approaches and meeting spaces that generate, analyse and enrich reflection to support not only ethically sensitive

social work with clients, but also innovation activities, in addition to promoting reforms in social work.

This dissertation uses qualitative analysis to identify themes and types in the empirical data, and utilises the methodological tools of actor–network theory. The summarising report presents the key results of the articles and examines them based on previous research literature related to the premise of the dissertation. The dissertation is based on discussions about knowledge in social work, the tension between contextual knowledge and evidence-based social work, and on the operating environment, which emphasises new public management, accountability and productivity. Moreover, the dissertation draws on the critical and ethical tradition of social work, and focuses on issues of self-directed professional agency, learning, workplace wellbeing and meaningful work, which are all related to discussions about knowledge management. The conclusions of the summarising report use the above foundation to examine ways of understanding, developing and studying reflective structures (i.e., structures of knowledge and expertise), as well as opportunities for their construction, establishment, use and dissemination in addition to potential operational solutions.

The dissertation highlights how processes of reflection, the construction of operational knowledge and the development of tools for personal reflection can at best strengthen employees' expertise, workplace wellbeing and sense of meaningful work, thereby promoting the potential of social work to respond to clients' needs. The study also shows that the achievement of good results in implementing and maintaining the Kuvastin method requires certain elements, such as transformational leadership, a shared concept of knowledge, dialogic interaction and shared trialogical work.

Kuvastin is a reflective method of self- and peer-evaluation that provides organisations with a different approach to knowledge production. It enables members of an organisation to create their individual, yet collective, paths of reflection through which they can interpret their work and understand work-related phenomena, conflicts, relationships and emotions within the context of their organisation and society at large. This type of knowledge creation is suited not only to supporting basic social work and promoting expertise and workplace wellbeing, but also to guiding and managing practice-oriented innovation in a way that may even reform the service system. The method helps superiors, together with the employees, create a permanent learning community, a reflective structure in which employees jointly explore their and their peers' experiences, challenge their beliefs and develop new artefacts that support their learning and working as well as the supervision of their work. Thus, this dissertation promotes a new approach to learning, enhancing workplace wellbeing and creating knowledge in social work communities. These activities are important not only for the services provided to clients, but also for the viability of the public sector.

Keywords: evaluation of social work, reflective structures, critical reflection, self-evaluation, peer evaluation, expertise, new public management, productivity, evidence-based social work, operational knowledge, competence management, innovations, tacit knowledge