

MIRROR METHOD AS AN APPROACH FOR CRITICAL EVALUATION IN SOCIAL WORK

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Abstract

The paper examines critical evaluation and Mirror method as an approach for critical evaluation in social work. Using Mirror method as an example it is studied, how the requirements of critical evaluation are present in the Mirror process. Based on the results it is seen that Mirror can offer social work practice research approach, which is in line with ideology, mission and purposes of critical evaluation. It is highlighted that particularly dialogical process, empowering effect, understanding towards clients' situation as a whole, procedure of collective knowledge creation process and integrating into daily social work are Mirror's strengths as an approach for critical evaluation. Further research and development work is needed to examine Mirror method's potential in facilitating critical thinking, enabling changes towards equality and challenging oppression and rising marginalized and silenced groups in the centre of the evaluation process.

Keywords: Critical Evaluation, Social Work, Mirror Method

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1 Introduction

In this paper it is examined Mirror method as an approach for critical evaluation in social work. Firstly, the need and judgments of critical evaluation in Finnish social work is reviewed. Secondly, theories and methods of critical evaluation in social work are defined. Thirdly, using Mirror method as an example it is studied how requirements of critical evaluation are present in the evaluation process. Fourthly, based on the case example it is discussed challenges and possibilities of Mirror as an approach for critical evaluation in social work. It is also regarded how to integrate critical evaluation into daily social work. Mirror method raises questions concerning social work practice research (Julkunen 2011; Saurama & Julkunen 2009). It is a dialogical process with social workers. Social workers are simultaneously researching and developing their working methods. The evaluation process is attached to the practice and its development. Knowledge is used in knowledge creation processes.

By critical evaluation we mean critically-oriented evaluation approaches, such as empowering evaluation (Adams 2003), empowerment evaluation (Dullea & Mullender 1999), emancipatory qualitative evaluation (Whitmore 2001), transformative evaluation (Mertens 2009), transformative participatory evaluation (Brisolara 1998; Cousins & Whitmore 1998), feminist evaluation (Humphries 1999) and evaluation directed by social constructivism (Parton & O'Byrne 2000). These evaluations are directed by critical social theories. According to critical social theories people's understandings are formed in certain social, political and economic contexts. Used in critical evaluation, critical social theories can reveal how dimensions of oppression generate and maintain certain practices and understandings. The core issue of critical evaluation is to catch the voices of people who have been pushed to the margins (Mertens 2009, 298). Critical evaluation can produce transformation and political emancipation. Even though critical orientation is extensively accepted in social work, the approach is not widely applied to social work research and evaluation (see e.g. Strier 2007).

Evaluation research can be classified in several ways. Classifications can be done based on the form (e.g. summative - formative) or the purpose (e.g. evaluation for accountability - evaluation for development - evaluation for knowledge) of the evaluation. These classifications are not very essential what comes to critical evaluation. From the perspective of critical evaluation more important is to study the epistemological, ontological and methodological framework of evaluation (Kazi 1999, 2000; Shaw 1999). Kazi and Shaw regard critical evaluation as a stance among other kinds of evaluations. According to Kazi (2000, 762-763) "interpretivist approaches" include critical theory (e.g. Everitt & Hardiker 1996); feminist evaluation (e.g. Humphries 1999); and social constructionism (e.g. Parton & O'Byrne 2000). The others are evidence-based practice and reflective inquiry (Shaw 1999, 16) or empirical practice, pragmatism and scientific realism (Kazi 1999, 59) or, as he later put it, empirical practice, pragmatism or methodological pluralism and the post-positivist approach (Kazi 2000, 756-757).

Some theorists want to distinguish critical evaluation from constructivist evaluation. They argue that critical evaluation and constructivist evaluation have different theoretical backgrounds (Everitt & Hardiker 1996, 98) and different epistemological and ontological frameworks (Kazi 2000, 762-763). However, some social constructivist approaches include "subtle realism" and concepts from critical theories (see e.g. Stufflebeam 2008; Parton & O'Byrne 2000) and this is why we see them applicable to critical evaluation. In this article, it is focused to Mirror method as an approach for critical evaluation. We are interested in Mirror method and how it can offer social work practice research approach, which is in line with ideology, mission and purposes of critical evaluation.

Justifications for evaluation arise often from other sources than social work itself. Demands for efficiency and accountability are coming from managerial and economical sources. They rarely are connected to social work ethics or values. Rationale for the critical evaluation of social work arises from social work itself but also ongoing challenges in the society (see also Mertens 2009, 3). This kind of reasons are related to the ethical justifications for social work and values connected to them, the

need to produce knowledge in social work, as well as the need to develop social work towards critical framework (Kivipelto 2006).

In Finland, evaluators, researchers, developers, social workers or other authorities mainly carry out evaluations though there is also increasingly reverse examples, too (see e.g. Högnabba 2008). Especially elsewhere, there is growing evidence of successful use of participatory research approaches, including some with emancipatory potential (Postle et al. 2008, 255). According to critical orientation, evaluation process should involve those who are labeled as the marginalized, disenfranchised, and least powerful - those that traditionally have been ignored (Whitmore et al. 2006, 352; Mertens 1999, 12).

There is also a need to broaden the concept of effectiveness¹ evaluation in social work in times, when new public management, accountability and administrative requirements are driving social work towards directions that are strange to it and which can be even unethical (Satka 2011).

2 Critical evaluation theories and methods

According to Everitt and Hardiker (1996) critical evaluation is cautious about "the temptation" to treat any claims as truth and to regard the scientific method as having replaced the essential process of judgment making about "the good". Therefore critical evaluation needs considerable and total commitment to the ethics, values and politics that only critical theories involve. Modern critical theories, e.g. anti-theories (anti-oppressive, -racist etc), empowering approaches, feminist theories can give quite exact indicators for critical evaluation. Postmodern critical theories e.g. postmodern feminism, Foucault's theory, postmodern critical theories lead to evaluate how social work promotes fair and equal speech and interaction situations and discourses. (See also Mertens 2009, 14-15, 63-66.) According to Briskman et al (2009, 5) most critical theorists are concerned with emancipator education that enables people to see the links between their experiences and the material conditions and dominant ideologies in society.

In critical evaluation, theory can both inform the work, as well as enable designing inclusive evaluations directed toward building a stronger bridge between evaluation findings and the transformation of society. Critical evaluation should be based on recognizing the power inequities that are inherent in our society and determining their impact on the program or activity examined. (Mertens 1999, 2, 7). It could be useful to know, whose interests are served by what is being done. While revealing power structures one might ask whose interests are not served by what is being done. Critical evaluation is trying to grasp different effects of the truths being claimed.

Critical evaluation does not have a specific set of methods or practices of its own (Mertens 2009, 59; Whitmore et al. 2006, 350). The purpose, objective and theoretical background are guiding methods and procedures. Evaluation process should be transparent and accepted by all participants. During the critical evaluation it is specified, what kind of knowledge we need, how and to what purposes the information is going to be produced. Justifications of evaluation are analyzed and specified with participants. Appropriate theories and methods are selected. Data is collected and documented. The results are compiled, analyzed and dealt with participants. Conclusions are made and practices are developed accordingly.

Critical evaluation methods are usually cooperative, participatory and dialogical, especially when using postmodern theories (Whitmore et al. 2006, 349-352; see also Fook 2003, 127). Also traditional research methods are used, especially when theoretical background comes from modern theories

¹ By *effects* (or outcomes) is meant the actual consequences of social work (working method, instrument or means). *Efficacy* is then getting things done, i.e. meeting targets. *Effectiveness* means the capability to produce an effect by doing "right" things, i.e. setting the right targets to achieve an overall goal. (Drucker 2006; Mark et al 2000, 54.)

(questionnaire, interview). We also regard the importance to integrate the evaluation into daily social work.

3 Need for critical evaluation in Finnish social work

Finnish social welfare is based on the Nordic welfare state model. Extensive public responsibility and tax funding are its cornerstones. The central government plays a strong guiding role in setting the basic principles of social welfare and in monitoring their implementation. The actual provision of social welfare is carried out at the local level, in municipalities. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health prepares the legislation governing the organization and financing of social and health care, and also monitors its implementation. (Social welfare in Finland 2006, 4-5.)

Social work education is provided in six universities (Helsinki, Jyväskylä, Itä-Suomi, Lapland, Tampere, Turku). It is possible to complete bachelor's, master's, professional licentiate and doctoral degrees in social work. Qualified social worker status is regulated by the Act on Qualification Requirements for Social Welfare Professionals 272/2005. (Lähteinen 2006; Laki sosiaalihuollon -- 2005.)

Those graduated from the social work master's degree programme at the university level are qualified to work as social workers. In Finland, also universities of applied sciences are producing master's degree in social welfare services but graduated are not qualified as social workers (Laki sosiaalihuollon -- 2005). Social workers are employed in client-centered work, administration and development in social and health care, and some take up positions in social work education (SOSNET). A social worker can usually be reached at the municipal social office or, depending on the size of the municipality, a regional social welfare office. Social assistance is last-resort financial assistance under social welfare, employed in situations where the income and assets of an individual or family are insufficient to cover the essential expenses of everyday life. In social case work, social workers give clients advice and guidance, discuss clients' problems with them, and within the official networks, organize other support measures to promote and maintain the safety and coping of the individual and the family. In addition to case work with individuals, social work is increasingly being conducted at the community level. The purpose of community work is to prevent the emergence of social problems in communities. It also improves the participation and involves people in the development of their communities. Community work helps individuals and groups contribute to the welfare of their communities. In addition, social work education prepares graduates for doing research on, managing and developing welfare services. (Social welfare in Finland 2006, 9-10.)

Social scientific, research-based education should guide students to critical thinking. The information contents conveyed by education are based on reflection and critical analysis of existing professional practices, administrative policies and ways of thinking. (SOSNET.) Critical thinking should also include awareness of one's own values, ideologies and history. It thus contains understanding of how these structures influence understanding and meaning construction. Critical thinking is learning through dialogue and practice experience and feedback, creativity and ethical reasoning. (Gibbons & Gray 2004, 36.) Even though social work education in universities is characterized by criticality some students feel it quite traditional (Tapola-Haapala 2011, 82). In addition, the professional social work in Finland is not very critical or transformative oriented (Kivipelto 2004). Social work is directed by law, norms and juridical elements (Nummela 2011, 147, 149). Even though it is admitted that clients' problems are raised from social and structural sources social work is targeting mainly the individual level and client problems (Juhila 2008, 61). For example, social workers in Finland support various attributions for poverty, but compared to other Nordic countries Finnish social workers lean more towards individual attributions (Blomberg et al 2010). This is common elsewhere, too (Mendes 2009, 18). The reason might also be that raising issues of power and discrimination and oppression is not a comfortable process. People may be unwilling to entertain the notion that the program or activity is structured in such a way as to perpetuate the status quo. (Mertens 1999, 8.) Individual and psychological knowledge might feel closer in practical situations than knowledge rising from social

sciences (Tapola-Haapala 2011, 174-175). Some social workers feel they cannot reach the goals that are professionally important to them because of the external conditions of the work (Tapola-Haapala 2011).

Social work orientations are essential what comes to the justifications of its' evaluation. If evaluation should promote better practices justifications should arise from social work ethics, values and its' political purposes. This is also the starting point in Mirror method, which we are dealing next.

4 Case example: the Mirror method

The Mirror method originated from a desire to harness tacit knowledge for developing self-evaluation methods in social work (Yliruka 2000). The original developmental context for the method was a municipal social office, where social workers worked with adult clients and had about 100 clients per social worker. Social work was conceptualised mainly through living-allowance. Social workers worked "behind closed doors": there was large professional autonomy, but little professional discussion within organization. Weekly case meetings were focused on questions about living allowance and administrative issues. Social workers were interested in doing social work in a more holistic way - and at the same time as the social department reorganized the living allowance work - the time and possibility to develop social work was found. There was a professional interest in developing an evaluation method that could be used in work settings. The central aim was to develop a continuous evaluation method and "learning through living". Since its first developmental phase, Mirror method has been adopted to several different sectors in social work, such as child protection, social work in schools and in the Probation Service.

The theoretical basis of Mirror includes the ideas of Ian Shaw (1999) on reflective evaluation, which emphasise two interlinked statements: 1) knowledge arises from action and exists for action, and 2) knowledge is tested in real-life situations.

The motivation for this development derived from the urge to improve social work from the professional perspective and to identify how best to generate practice-based social work evidence in order to respond to the effectiveness requirements set for it (e.g. Macdonald 1998). In the method's research and development process, theoretical support was sought from debates on expertise (e.g. Hakkarainen 2000, Hakkarainen et al. 2003, Hakkarainen et al. 2004; Saaristo 2000; Nowotny 2000; Fook 2002; Parton & O'Byrne 2000; Bereiter & Scardamalia 1993; Tynjälä et al. 1997) and from theories on knowledge formation and learning communities (e.g. Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995; Wenger 1998; Hakkarainen et al. 2003).

The Mirror method (Yliruka 2006; Mannerström et al 2005) involves the use of forms designed to support the documentation of one's own work and self evaluation, common peer evaluation meetings, follow-up of the work's progress and the concluding assumptions of effectiveness. Themes included in the forms are open, rather than based on indicators. The objective of such open themes is to activate the social worker to analyze and conceptualize social work. The themes encourage social worker to see him/herself as an actor who is able to ask her/himself each time what is the best way to deal with the task.

The Mirror method is used for analyzing and evaluating client work situations involving factors, which are burdening or worrying the employee (figure 1).

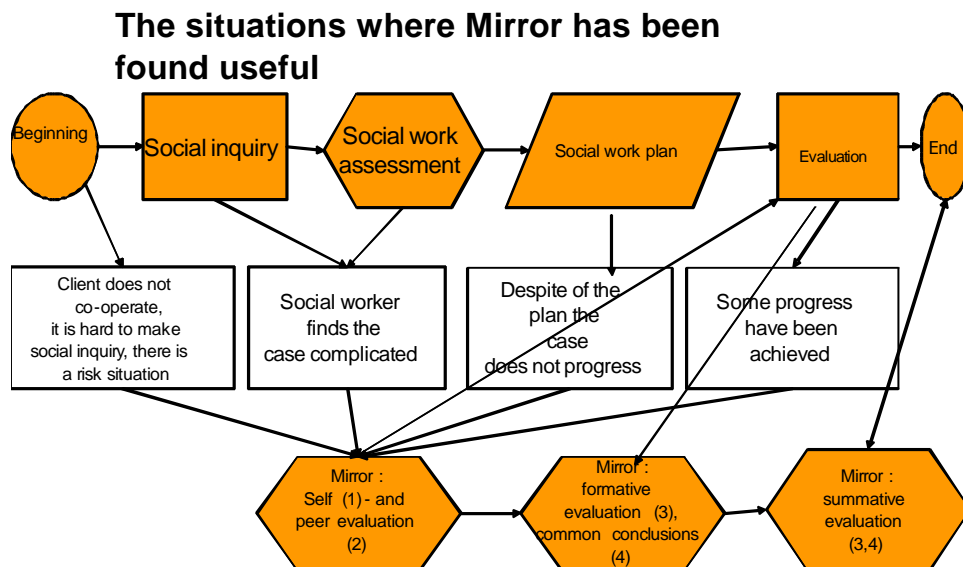


Figure 1. The Mirror process supports the social work process.

The reflective self and peer evaluation process of Mirror consists of four steps: 1) self evaluation of the social worker's own work and preparation for the peer evaluation meeting, 2) peer evaluation discussion within the social work team and the assessment of further work, 3) follow-up in formative or summative evaluation meetings, 4) drawing conclusions: team's conclusions on the boundary conditions for social work and on specific themes requiring monitoring or improvement.

In Step 1, a social worker begins the Mirror process by selecting the client case *he/she wishes to analyze through self-evaluation and for which he/she desires peer group support*. Throughout the article 'case' refers to the employee's self-evaluation of his/her own work with the client, not to the client him/herself. *The essential object of scrutiny is the social worker's own way of conducting client work*. Then, the social worker reviews the information related to the case and prepares a free format description of the client's situation to serve as material for the peer evaluation. Other material can also be used, such as notes, plans and other client work documents. At this stage, the Mirror Hall form guides self-evaluation.

The name of the form, Mirror Hall, refers to reviewing one's own work from various angles in a certain context. Mirror seeks to inspire the social worker to express his/her own operational theory and articulate tacit knowledge as far as possible (Polanyi 1983; Yliruka 2000) and in holistic manner: the relationship between goals and means and the factors that effect one's work – both personal and professional (cognitive, technical, emotional and moral elements) and contextual, structural factors, edge conditions. The idea is to reveal thinking and assumptions, which are usually not written to the official records.

When using the Mirror Hall self evaluation form, the social worker reviews any opportunities and obstacles for change in the client's life situation, established internal and external factors, resources and risks, social work targets, working method choices, assumed impacts on working methods, the employee's experience on interaction with the client, his/her expertise-orientation in the client relationship, his/her role as a social worker in the client relationship, assumptions on how the situation may be influenced by factors related to self (gender, values, attitudes), previous experiences or the current situation of the client relationship under review or structural factors facilitating or hindering client work (such as the service system, established social work practices, legislation and resources).

The social worker also evaluates the influence of context on the client relationship and professional concern for the client's situation on a scale from 1 to 4. Finally, the opportunities to utilise one's own professional competences in the client case are evaluated.

Step 2 involves a peer evaluation meeting in which the social worker explains the themes he/she has entered into the self-evaluation form, while the other listens without interrupting. The evaluating peers are encouraged to participate in an internal dialogue (Bakhtin 1991) using the Internal Mirror form. While listening, the peers jot down questions, thoughts and feelings, work-related suggestions and tips on related reading, such as research knowledge or insightful literature. The form is designed to steer the peers towards providing positive genuine feedback for the employee whose work is being evaluated. In the peer evaluation discussion, each peer has a turn to speak. The themes included in the Mirror Hall form are considered and subjected to an evaluative debate. The self-evaluating social worker collects all work-related suggestions for further processing.

Step 3 comprises common formative evaluation meetings for monitoring, how the case has progressed since the first peer evaluation: Which social work process-related suggestions were or were not implemented? Have there been any changes in the employee's interpretation of the client situation or working possibilities? Additionally, the social worker assesses what he/she has learned during the process, using the Rear View Mirror form as a support tool.

Step 4 is the conclusive part. The team will draw their common conclusions on the boundary conditions for conducting social work and on specific themes requiring follow-up or improvement. The team will also make effectiveness assumptions. The Prism form is the support tool for this step.

Can Mirror promote critical thinking? Do social workers' perspectives of meaning change? Is the validity of previously learned presuppositions questioned? Does evaluation generate emancipatory insights (Mezirow 1995, 28–30, 375). Critical reflection is difficult to achieve, if operating practices do not include systematic work practices, documentation and evidence gathered in various ways concerning the functionality of professional social work.

In the Mirror model, critical thinking is generated by peer group work, documenting one's own work and monitoring the progress of client processes. Monitoring is based on gathering evidence. Utilizing evidence in the evaluation process prevents self-defensive, rhetoric evaluation. Social workers make conclusions what seems important in good social work process.

If scrutinizing Mirror against the criteria of critical evaluation it can be said that it is

- 1) Dialogical approach: the model supports dialogical processes among social workers.
- 2) It has empowering effect: social workers have found that the process gives them voice to talk about social work and to work more effectively. However, the process is quite sensitive. The peer evaluation discussions require a social worker to be prepared to share his/her knowledge and ideas and to set her/himself up for criticism. That is why the empowering effect depends on the atmosphere of trust -at the same time the Mirror peer evaluation process may also facilitate the creation of supporting atmosphere. A literature review of international research concerning working conditions in social welfare (Meltti & Kara 2009) indicates that clients requiring intense work efforts may negatively influence employees' job satisfaction. On the other hand, enabling a change in a client's life has been found to be a strong individual driver of job satisfaction and motivation.

In the Mirror process the empowerment of a social worker is many times interconnected with transformation processes, clarification or change of the objective of social work and peer support (Yliruka 2009, 181).

- 3) The model is integrated into daily social work. This means that model can be integrated in the regular social work team meetings, which are very common in social welfare organizations (Karvinen-Niinikoski et al 2005, 60). It also means that evaluation is not seen as a self-contained phase of practice – as a way of fracturing the social work process - but as a task of every phase.

4) The critical potential of social work lies within the understanding of the social context and its meaning as part of the individual experience (both social worker and client). The Mirror handbook (Yliruka 2006) emphasizes importance of the idea of person-in-situation in social work. This means that social work is not focused on the personal characteristics of an individual, client, rather it is important to understand the clients' situation as a whole: in what kind of social situation she/he is living in. Mirror is based also on the idea of the holistic perspective. It means that you should always take into consideration of different aspects of client's life. This prevents individualizing of problems or on the other hand it prevents thinking that all the problems are due to structural problems.

5) The development process of the method has been open innovation process (Chesbrough 2003). Instead of attempting to create a ready-made and binding method, the Mirror pilot project set out to produce a method which could be adapted according to the operating environment's requirements and which would be open for development and to various actors' ideas (Yliruka et al 2009).

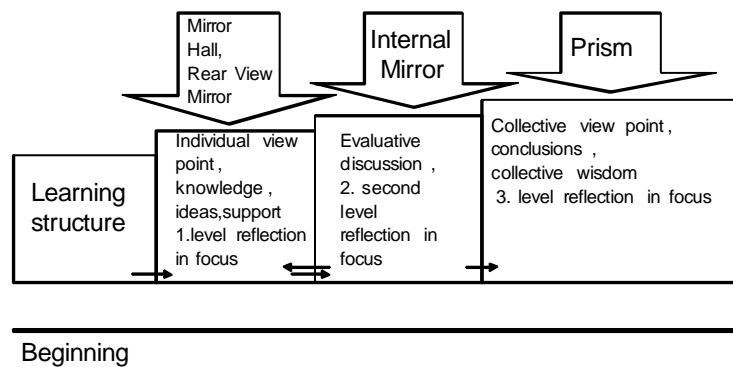


Figure 2. Mirror combines individual and collective knowledge creation.

6) The process combines individual support and knowledge to collective knowledge creation (figure 2). It enhances reflection in three levels (Engeström 2004, 97-98) where the third level of reflection focuses on the questions of the common goal of the work: what is this work we are doing? What do we try to achieve? What causes problems and how can we organize our work in wise way? This way it deals with the broad concept of effectiveness. The focus of knowledge creation in Mirror process can also be social reporting as the ongoing Mirror-project has set their goals (Lastensuojelun sosiaalinen raportointi -- 2011).

5 Conclusions

In critical evaluation, information should be collected from and with service users and people living in the region, not only from professionals or official statistics. The Mirror model enables social workers

to determine what they really need to evaluate, and then to plan and implement an evaluation around their conclusions. It is also possible to reflect social justice and human rights questions if they arise from the dialogical process. Therefore, it allows catching the voice of those who have been pushed to the societal margins, too. It should be studied more in concrete situations, how Mirror method could work as a catalyst for consciousness rising, equality, empowerment and social justice. The process would be time-consuming, if we are going to research its' potential to produce transformation and political emancipation.

Reliability and validity are important aspects in all evaluation research. In Mirror they are guaranteed by open and appropriate documentation. The process is made visible and conceptualized with participants.

In critical evaluation, it is agreed that all produced information is partial and supports or challenges certain knowledge and power structures. Mirror promotes consciousness towards evaluation's role in the society as an information producer.

The success of critical evaluation can be seen in many ways, e.g. whether the participants' self-esteem has increased or their personal relationships have improved. Owning service evaluation is a key part of empowerment because it means that those who fund and manage services will be required to listen to the voice of those who have been traditionally silenced (Whitmore et al 2006, 352; Dullea & Mullender 1999, 96). Evaluation should also enable changes towards equality and challenge oppression (Everitt & Hardiker 1996, 158). Therefore, critical evaluation is by no means an easy task. It requires further planning and co-operation with evaluators and researchers as well as involvement by all the stakeholders.

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