



Awareness and emotions

Nicki Weld applies emotional intelligence theory to social work and supervision

Introduction

A fundamental area of social work and supervision is emotions and the way we work with our own and others' in an articulate and responsive way. While social workers need to be able to explain why decisions are made in theoretical or legislative evidenced ways, it could be said that the heart of social work is about recognising, utilising and working with emotions competently. It is my experience that social workers who work successfully with others are able to clearly articulate theoretical and emotional language to describe their response to situations.

Emotionally responsive work

If I could describe effective social work in simple terms, it would be the recognition of walking in other people's worlds and the ability to do this in an emotionally responsive and intelligent way. Our ability to walk into and be in other people's worlds improves as we begin to connect the real world of social work interactions to theory, but also as we become more emotionally and socially

skilled. The ability to recognise and regulate our own emotions and work with those of others comes from being in situations where we have to manage our own emotions and still be able to understand and relate to others.

An example of when I had to do this was when I worked with a mother who had systematically beaten her child to death. This experience was

hugely significant in my social work career and although social work theory played a part, ultimately my emotional responses were the key to how I managed it. I used awareness to listen to what I was feeling and experiencing, I used insight into this to work through moving from

blame to sadness, I used prior learning to realise her fear and to manage my own urge to leave, and finally I combined these to best manage the situation. I was by no means perfect, and I will never forget seeing a child beaten and dying. I will also never forget the woman who harmed him, and who wept as he died. The key emotion I had at that time was sadness for both the child and his mother and this hasn't left me. It has helped inform my practice and my determination to understand people and their behaviour.

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Social work demands and deserves a high level of emotional awareness as it is through the building of meaningful working relationships based on understanding and learning that real change can occur. The language and concepts offered by the work that has been done around defining emotional intelligence are useful to articulate this process more clearly. Emotional intelligence has been described as ‘an array of emotional and social knowledge and abilities that influence our overall ability to effectively cope with environmental demands’. Within this, are the abilities to:

- be aware of, to understand and to express oneself
- be aware of, to understand and to relate to others
- deal with strong emotions and control impulses
- adapt to change and to solve problems of a personal or a social nature
- generate positive effect and be self-motivated.

(Bar-On, 2005)

This list could almost be a pre-requisite for social work graduates to demonstrate competence in before they begin practising. Perhaps the greatest area of challenge in beginning social work may be the third point of managing and controlling our own strong emotions and impulses, especially when faced with behaviour that is challenging and at times abhorrent to us.

Emotional intelligence has also been identified as the ‘ability to monitor one’s own and other’s feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and action’ (Salovey and Mayer, 1990). This is an excellent summary of an essential component of social work and supervision. Salovey and Mayer describe four tiers of abilities

that range from basic psychological processes to more complex processes integrating emotion and cognition.

1. The complexity of skills that allow for an individual to perceive, appraise and express emotions, including identifying one’s own emotions, expressing one’s own emotions and discriminating the expression of emotions in others.
2. Using emotions to facilitate and prioritise thinking, including using the emotions to aid in judgment, recognising that mood swings can lead to a consideration of alternative viewpoints and understanding that a shift in emotional state and perspective can encourage different kinds of problem solving.
3. Labelling and distinguishing between emotions (differentiating between liking and loving for instance), understanding complex mixtures of feelings (such as love and hate) and formulating rules about feelings, such as anger often gives way to shame and loss is usually accompanied by sadness.
4. The general ability to marshal the emotions in support of some social goal. This includes the skills that allow individuals to selectively engage in or detach from emotions and to monitor and manage emotions in themselves and in others.

(Goleman, 2006)

By combining Bar-On with Salovey and Mayer’s thinking, a simple framework can be drawn that can be used as a guide to building emotional knowledge and responsiveness in social work and supervision.

Perceive/label/distinguish own and others’ emotions

Manage and control own emotions and impulses

Marshal and use own emotional knowledge to aid in judgment

Use emotional knowledge to **understand and relate** to others

Adapt and problem solve in an emotionally responsive and competent way

This combines well with the cognitive behavioural idea of ‘think’, ‘feel’, ‘do’ and its application to emotional learning. There are elements of cognition: ‘What is it I am feeling, how does it check out against previous experiences, does it fit?’ followed by feelings: ‘What might others be feeling, how do I know this, what makes me think this, am I projecting my own feelings, am I accurate, how can I check it out?’ Finally we can explore what we did and our actions, and ask how we can best use this knowledge. Future behaviour and action can then be built from the emotional exploration of the situation and the knowledge gained from this.

If intelligence is about developing understanding and the ability to perceive and comprehend meaning, then rather than being an inherent quality, developing emotional intelligence and awareness can be seen as an evolving process. Emotional intelligence can be built and shaped through steps such as awareness, insight/perception, learning, knowledge and, finally, application. Overall it is through the cyclic analysis and application of learning and knowledge that we work successfully and intelligently.

The use of an integration of emotional and cognitive processes to define emotional intelligence raises a number of opportunities for supervision. It is my view that supervision must contain components of reflective practice so workers continue to develop an understanding of their practice behaviour. Supervision that is framed around reflective practice naturally uses cognitive behavioural theory and emotional awareness applied to a work context. Social work can be intensely emotional and it is illogical for supervisors to not discuss or explore this with workers.

The use of Kolb’s learning cycle in supervision (Morrison, 1993) connects well to an application of emotional intelligence thinking. If we take

the first part of the learning cycle, experiencing, where the supervisee describes the details of the story/case/event, then the supervisor can begin to introduce questions from an emotional intelligence perspective that can then lead to the ‘reflecting’ component. These might include:

“What emotions were you aware of when you were engaged in this interaction?”

“What would another person have noticed if they had been watching or listening to you?”

“What do you think the other person may have been experiencing?”

“What is happening to you right now talking about this?”

By then moving to the conceptualising part of the cycle where connections to theory and a way forward can be shaped, the following questions could be asked:

“How did you notice yourself managing or not managing your emotions?”

“Can you see any link between the client’s emotional experience and your own?”

“What would you change, if anything, about how you emotionally responded?”

Finally, with the experimenting section, the following questions could be used:

“Is there a time you can think of when you responded in a way that you felt was okay and relates to this situation, and what did you do that was different?”

“Is there a situation you can think of that would help you build an empathetic response to this person and their situation?”

“How do you marshal your emotions to serve you well in your work?”

A concern around exploring emotional responses to work in supervision is about workers feeling it is safe to do this. There has been some discussion that child and protection organisations are often

about 'doing' as opposed to 'feeling', leading to the 'professional accommodation syndrome' where emotions and feelings are suppressed and kept secret (Morrison, 1997). Generally, people are unlikely to share emotional experiences if a degree of safety and trust is not present. The supervisory process needs to ensure these elements are present and that any required challenges are made to behaviour as opposed to feelings.

It is important the supervisor remains in an inquiring role around these areas, and is constructive in approach and supportive where appropriate. I suspect one of the fears for supervisors talking about emotional responses in social work supervision is a concern that the supervision will become a therapy session. It is essential that the questions and discussion are continuously linked back to the professional situation, and any long-standing emotion issues are supported to be taken to an alternative forum, such as counselling.

The supervisor may also not want to ask questions around worker emotions for fear of feeling overwhelmed. This is more likely to occur if supervisors themselves are feeling unsupported in their work and have little opportunity to express their feelings, let alone support another in this exploration. It is critical that supervisors be able to talk about emotions so that workers have a safe place for the expression of these arising from their work.

Conclusion

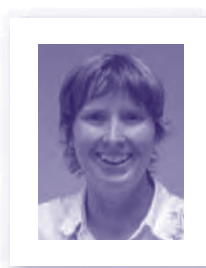
The very nature of social work, its complexity and ambiguity, and the fundamental behavioural changes often required by people we work with, demands emotional analysis and awareness. The theory of emotional awareness and intelligence provides an opportunity to explore emotions and the knowledge and understanding they give us in our work. It is ironic to expect our clients

to discuss their emotions with us if we are not prepared or able to examine our own emotional behaviour in our professional support forums, such as supervision. Supervision is the structured setting where this examination can occur, along with an ongoing internal analysis of emotional responses and behaviour.

One of the greatest gifts of social work can be the emotional journey and learning that comes from those we work with. It is important as workers and supervisors that we pay attention to listening for and finding the emotional voice in our work experiences to enable the recognition of this learning. Through this process, emotionally competent, knowledgeable and intelligent social work can occur, which can only be advantageous for ourselves and those with whom we work.

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