

Introduction:

This journal comprises my reflections on three meetings that I had with Ms. A, the owner/Director of a private social care company with whom I had arranged a placement. The meetings were intended to plan and organise the placement, introduce me to the organisation, meet some of the staff and to complete the necessary paperwork. Unfortunately, though eventually to my relief which I explain in the final reflection, the Covid-19 pandemic meant that the placement could not proceed as planned. Therefore, I have used the meetings as the basis for my reflections. The meetings were of varying lengths and this is mirrored in the reflections. I have utilised a number of reflective methods in my reflections which I felt were appropriate to my thoughts, including Schön, Gibbs and Kolb.

Reflection 1:

This reflection will outline my experiences and learning during my first face to face meeting with Ms. A, the owner/Director of a private social care company providing care and support to a number of people with enduring mental health and more complex needs. The company is located in a small town in south west Wales and provides support and care for adults of all ages from across south Wales. The company is registered with Care Inspectorate Wales and with Companies House; I therefore had the opportunity to undertake some research on the company beforehand, though I did not disclose this to Ms. A. Forewarned is forearmed is a common idiom which I felt was appropriate as I was somewhat anxious about what to expect.

The meeting, which had been arranged by way of email, messaging and by telephone, was primarily to establish whether it would be suitable as a placement for both me and Ms. A, to clarify the reasons for the placement and to discuss the compulsory paperwork. I decided to dress casually, rather than to wear a suit, which is what I would do for, say, a job interview, which I felt was appropriate for my role as a student in accordance the 'dramaturgical' tools theorized by Goffman (1959).

Ahead of the meeting I had reflected involuntarily, as described by Dewey (1910), on my own position with regards to the placement. It was necessary for me to press the reset button in term of the placement as in previous employments in the fields of public sector housing, and in social care in the mental health field, I have set up and led several services for vulnerable people, specifically homeless people and those with mental ill health. I was aware however, that my work experiences in these areas ended some 16 years ago, and that the principles and values of services develop and evolve; for example community settings are preferred to psychiatric hospitals, where possible, since the advent of community care, the principles of which were established through the National Health Service and Community Care Act (1990) and in Wales under the Welsh Office All Wales Mental Illness Strategy (1989) for individuals with mental health problems. In addition, having recently undertaken some reading on Neural Linguistic Programming (NLP), which I was introduced to in a lecture, I believe that I am a 'through-time' person (Ready and Burton, 2010) and that I have a tendency to gaze into the past on former achievements, and both positive and negative events, rather than being focused on the present and future possibilities. However, I am also aware that these experiences underpin my beliefs, values and my personal concept

of my own identity and social identity (McLeod, 2008). I have therefore resolved to focus more on the present, and on setting realistic and achievable future goals using SMART techniques.

Ahead of the meeting therefore, I had to consciously position myself as a student seeking a placement in a whole new setting. During the placement I would be learning about the provision and delivery of services in the care and support of the most vulnerable, and consequently had to set-aside my knowledge and experiences in order to understand the placement in a novel context.

This internal preparation followed Schön's theory of reflection 'on-action'; this involuntary process of reflection has provided me with an understanding that in preparing myself for the meeting I had a heightened self-awareness, resulting in my belief that I had to adopt the role of a student at the beginning of a new experience, anticipating Ms. A's expectations. I also felt that I had to distance myself from all of my previous experience and existing knowledge. I concluded that it was necessary to adopt a role and behave within the parameters of that role (Goffman, 1959). This adjustment in my thinking is reminiscent of Behaviour Change Theory (Ajzen, 2011) which identifies the external factors which effect the change in an individual's behaviour; however, my mental pre-planning and dissecting my knowledge is the inverse of this theory. I found a solution for what I had perceived as a problem and had identified barriers to my future success, finding solutions to issues which may have affected the process (Egan, 2010).

I met with Ms. A, as prearranged, outside the accommodation where I would be shadowing and observing the duties of the care and support staff. Ms. A was late, which I found annoying and unprofessional as I prefer to arrive early for appointments.

The properties were two semi-detached dorma-bungalows on a private road. There were no external signs that it was a care facility, and each home was anonymous in that respect. The properties looked like other homes on the street and were to my view externally pleasing and well maintained. Ms. A asked whether we could convene the meeting at another care facility which was located a few miles away. I agreed and followed her to the new facility, which was only a very short distance away. I noted Ms. A's convertible Mercedes and reflected that she must be quite well-off, her car being symbolic of wealth within my frame of reference or schema (Horowitz, 2012). I found that Ms. A was happy to disclose personal information whilst I was quite reticent as I felt unsure of the social boundaries and our individual statuses.

The meeting was reconvened at what was once a grand old house with an impressive portico. Currently, however, the building could only be described as a building site. I was informed by Ms. A that this building would soon be a new residential facility which would be the home for 14 people and would be the flagship of care provision in the County. I was taken on a tour of the building without a hard hat, stepping over building materials and spluttering from the dust. After the short tour we had our meeting in one of the flats which was close to completion.

In terms of initial induction to the company, discussion focused around property and future planning, rather than discussion around the processes of delivering care and support and the origins and mission and vision of the company. I had psyched myself up to have a support worker discussion with the owner, during the meeting I consciously attempted to steer the discussion away from strategy and higher-level aspects of the sector to the basics of care and support. I had also consciously reminded myself to stay 'in the moment' and to remain aware of the role expectations (Goffman, 1959), ensuring that I was implementing my well-prepared plan of taking a fresh approach to services and subduing any past knowledge.

I was committed to behaving in the way that would be expected of a second-year undergraduate student entering a new workplace. I tried to ask questions which were relevant to the provision of care and support and kept these as broad as possible. I felt deceitful and disingenuous as I masqueraded as a person new to the sector, but in all intents and purposes this was the case as many years have passed since working in the care sector. However, I was fulfilling all of the traits within Social Identity Theory as I aimed to be categorised as a student (McLeod, 2008). There was also little discussion on the aims, and objectives and philosophy of care and support, although Ms. A did speak fondly of the people receiving support, however I felt the tone to be pitiful, matriarchal and condescending rather than empowering. Interestingly when discussing the care empire Ms. A was planning to develop, she was also telling me about other business interests that she had, or was developing.

As we proceeded to discuss service user needs, work processes and structures Ms. A appeared to change the subject, seamlessly, to the quality of the granite work tops that were being installed in new facility and high specification of the accommodation as a 'new residential' care home. I now realise that at this point, as I was feeling more comfortable in Ms A's company, I felt like a child in school who is desperate to demonstrate their knowledge with their teacher. I enquired as to whether as a company director, Ms. A had instigated any meaningful conversations with commissioners to discover what they had identified as a need in the area and what was required within their planning. Again, I consciously moderated my questions posing them as matter of fact enquiries of fact, making the assumption that these key steps had been undertaken as part of the company's planning process. Ms. A responded that she had not spoken to anyone relating to the need and had not told any commissioning authority that she was planning to open a residential care home. Ms. A was confident that the home would fulfil a desperate need, and would therefore be occupied within weeks of completion, and the facility would accommodate people who had extremely high levels of complex needs. Ms. A stated that accommodating this client group would generate a very high income, although she conceded that no prospective residents had been identified as yet.

This conversation caused me a dilemma; I had attended the initial meeting with Ms. A to complete my paperwork and gain a sense of the company values, vision and mission. I had suspended my existing

knowledge and beliefs and the interest I have in the sector in order to commence a 'new beginning' as a student on placement with an objective view. However, I was aware of something, which is public information, that commissioning of services is moving away from 'residential care' to the supported living model which offers more independence. The commissioning authority for the area considers that it has over supply of residential care homes and consequently many are being de-commissioned.

I have since reflected on the awkwardness that I felt during this exchange. I now understand that this was due to my 'need to affiliate' (McClelland, 1961) This need is a reflection of my desire for acceptance, to be liked, to be compliant and agreeable in order not to jeopardise my placement and to adopt my role in the hierarchy of this company. The owner held the knowledge of her business, but appeared unaware of the structures surrounding the commissioning of care and support, specifically when a number of people are to be placed, such as the need to have the support of statutory teams.

As Ms. A concluded the meeting, and the next meeting at one of the homes to meet key workers was arranged, I struggled with the issues of the potential of this scheme being a white elephant, and was reflecting, at this point, 'in-action' (Schön, 1991). I therefore tried to guide Ms. A's thinking by commenting on the required infrastructures to support a care facility, such as the location of a Community Mental Health Team. I was aware however, that I am not overly familiar with the locality within which the facility is located. If I felt like an imposter arriving at the meeting, I felt like more of an imposter leaving as I felt that I could have shed a light on some aspects of her future planning and possibly helped Ms. A with her plans; however my concern was fulfilling my placement objectives and not spoiling the role for which I had been accepted. Therefore, I believe I felt what Hogg and Vaughan (2008) describe as cognitive dissonance, where my belief, in this case in my knowledge and expertise was counter to my behaviour which was to behave in a way which might be expected of a second-year undergraduate without relevant experience.

Using Gibbs (1988) model of reflection on past actions I understand that the need to fit in, to 'belong', and not make any statements outside of my position comes from past experiences of hosting social work students on placement within the mental health and housing organisation where I was Coordinator. Previously I have hosted many student social workers, all armed with academic theory and enthusiasm who freely challenged policy decisions, practices and processes. While this was encouraged, and seen by me as a way of improving the quality of service, the feeling of being under scrutiny and of being challenged professionally could be uncomfortable. I realise that I was transferring these past feelings, assuming that Ms. A would feel the same way as I had felt when challenged on my practice. I will have to consider the ways that a negative message can be delivered in a positive or neutral way. I was also aware that by challenging Ms. A in my interactions with her, I would not be acting within my perceived role as a student (Goffman, 1959). I was also appreciative of the opportunity for this placement, as other areas I investigated had fallen through. I was also aware of the need to secure this placement as

timescales were becoming increasingly tight, and did not want the possibility of it falling through, nor did I want to repay Ms. A with challenging information, although I knew it to be pertinent and accurate.

Reflection 2:

This reflection is based on my second meeting with Ms. A, the Director/Owner of a private social care company with whom I was attempting to agree the conditions of a placement. This meeting was arranged for me to be introduced to one of the key workers who provides the care and support to the service users and for the sharing of information. The meeting was held at the Company's head office, which was now the office at the new facility which was under development.

Following reflection on the earlier meeting, I had decided as a point of conscious and congruence to be more open about my past employment background and share any information which I felt could be relevant. I decided that, if appropriate, I would provide any information in the most benign way possible. This would be evidencing my aim of a non-judgemental way of being (Rogers, 2003), a trait desirable in support workers. I also decided to dilute my declaration further still, by advising Ms. A that since leaving the social care sector I recognised that there have been many changes in practices and commissioning processes. This statement would, I considered, redress the power balance and place Ms. A in charge of the interaction, allowing me to readopt the observational role as a second-year student as planned, and not be in a position of expert power. Foucault (1982) points out that power is present in all aspects of society, not as a 'thing' but as an aspect of social relations which only exists when it is put into action.

One of the company's Support Workers attended the meeting and was invited by Ms. A to share basic background information regarding the needs of the service users that I would be observing when receiving care and support. I was informed by Ms. A that staff worked 12 hour shifts, with a long weekend off each month amounting to a continuous four days, and shifts adjusted to provide staff with late starts and early finishes to extend their free time. The support worker nodded in agreement

Ms. A then absented herself to check on the building works, leaving me to continue the discussion with the Support Worker. As soon as Ms. A was clearly out of earshot the Support Worker told me that contrary to the possibility of having long weekends and set days off, this is rarely possible due to staffing shortages. Working hours would frequently be extended to 14 hours and beyond, as staff top and tail hours to cover the shortages.

The conversation moved on to times for the shadowing, and a brief questions and answer session followed, discussing policies and procedures, dress codes and conduct and my role in shadowing which more or less followed the expectations I had anticipated. Ms. A re-joined the meeting and updated me and the staff member on the progress of the building work at the new facility; she was pleased that the plastering was going well and that the communal areas were taking shape, both the others discussed the

investment and the future planning of the layout and the way in which housing benefit would pay for the rent of each room and communal areas, leaving me as an observer. There was a discussion around the, as yet unidentified, future occupants and the furnishings of the rooms. and of the communal areas of the new home. The discussion moved on to the anticipated cost of the care and support packages and latterly the rent and service charges Ms. A planned to charge for the residents per room.

They discussed the high rental fees which could be charged, Ms. A informing me and the Support Worker that she could charge whatever she wanted as any rent would be covered by housing benefit as she would be providing a care service to vulnerable people. Having decided to be open about my past experience, and reflecting 'in action' (Schön, 2007) while observing and listening to the discussion, I advised Ms. A that I had set up a similar scheme and understood that the law with regards to tenancy agreements as rental charges had undergone significant change and I had kept up with these as I still wanted to maintain a degree of continuing professional practice and keep up my knowledge (Schuller and Watson, 2009). I explained that housing benefit rules had been introduced which limited the payment of high rents to private landlords to a local reference rent. I explained that high rents for furnished accommodation for 'protected groups', that is vulnerable and/or disabled people, is now only available to Registered Social Landlords (RSL) or registered charities. I understood these rules were introduced because of concerns over profiteering by private landlords using inflated rents. Ms. A responded that her company would therefore have to become a charity as she wanted a significant sum for the rental of the accommodation this being the purpose of establishing such a facility. This demonstrated that Ms. A had not grasped my point. I pointed out in a 'low key' way, mindful of my future placement and the need to maintain a balance and a good impression, that it was not possible just to 'become' a charity and also be a business, and importantly that any rents charged that went over the threshold of benefits under the current business model would be the responsibility of the tenants/service users. This would place a significant financial burden on residents, potentially causing distress and affecting mental well-being.

I felt however, that Ms. A had not listened to me, and had paid no attention to my comments, despite being told of my past experience. I therefore felt that my value had been diminished. I later reflected that in, this actor-observer situation (Watson, 1992) I had attributed my knowledge to my perceived past successes, and attributed Ms. A's response to the fact that she may have observed me as a student, glossing over my experiences. I had not wanted to 'push' the point as I wanted to appear cooperative and pro-social, and did not want to self-aggrandize (Watson, 1992). However, I felt that Ms. A had treated me at face value, and was showing resistance to my knowledge, as suggested by Foucault (1982), seeing me in the present and not as someone who had experience in the sector with an understanding of the requirements of benefits and commissioning to the needs of service users. While the accommodation would (apparently) be of a physically high standard, the priority aim for the existence of the

accommodation was for income generation, and not for the comfort, care and well-being of the residents.

Whilst throughout the meetings Ms. A had stated that she intended to have the best quality homes and services possible, but also wanted to extend her businesses and ‘make loads of money.’ Ms. A was clear however, that she wanted to pay the staff the best wages possible, and stated that she would be looking at paying the support workers £12 per hour. However, in stating this figure, it is clear Ms. A had not considered the hourly fees that are paid through commissioning for care and support which, I understood, would not allow for this level of pay. Having spent around two hours meeting with Ms. A and with staff, I noted that there was little mention of the current and future service provision, nor on how this company would make a difference to the lives and wellbeing of the service users. The focus therefore appeared to be on maximising income for the business and I felt that having previously been employed by a charity, and currently as a volunteer for a charity, profit was being put before care. Müller (2019) states that in capitalist societies there is an “abjection of care” (p.1) as care work is devalued and incidental to profit.

There appeared, therefore to have been little consultation and planning, either financial or practical, in terms of the new service beyond the physical attributes of the home, and Ms. A was driven by an income target, which had become the principle focus for the service. I was also concerned for Ms. A whose business plans appeared to be heading into uncertainty.

I left the meeting feeling somewhat uncomfortable with the idea of care for profit. I had not previously considered my attitude toward the issues around the provision of care in a private, rather than charitable or not for profit setting. Therefore, I decided that as part of my reflective process I would examine my own experiences and feelings about this using Kolb’s cycle of reflective practice (Kolb, 1984).

Reflection 3:

This reflection based on my original reflections regarding my placement meeting with the director and staff members of a care and support provider. This is an informal reflection which I have placed in order and follows Kolb’s Reflective Practice Theory (Kolb, 2015).

The placement unfortunately did not go ahead due to the Covid 19 pandemic and the need for the company to maintain consistent staff within the setting to minimize risk to the vulnerable service users. The decision came as no surprise in light of scale of the pandemic. While I was disappointed at the time that the placement would not go ahead, the disassociation from the placement was able to dislodge many of my thoughts and feelings. While committed to a placement with this company I had become conditioned, as in the field of force relations, so that I had to concede to the values of the company (Foucault, 1979) even though these jarred with my own ideals.

When Ms A. told me that the placement could not proceed as planned due to the situation with the coronavirus, I had vivid recollections of the meetings which, I believe, allowed me to clarify my thoughts on the true values of the company.

My first visual memory of the company would be of the owner arriving in a top of the range Mercedes convertible, and following introductions, proceeding to share information around her property portfolio, before suggesting we go to the other facility to continue the meeting/induction. I realise this is image building as a way to exercise power (Huczynski, 2004). On arrival at the house I remembered that there were two further expensive four-wheel drive vehicles, both identical except for number plates. Ms. A stated that she had ordered two as she was unsure of what colour leather interior she wanted. Most of the conversations, even those with other staff present, were related to acquisition of symbols, capital investment and financial reward. There appeared to be little regard as to the financial situations of the people she employed; it is well established that in Wales care staff are amongst the lowest paid (Dromey and Hochlaf, 2018). This represents a showcasing of objects of wealth to the people who have the least; staff and residents.

I realise that my discomfort is due to my intrinsic values, some of which at least, are derived from my previous working life leading a reputable mental health charity. This organisation held values across management and staff compatible with the charitable objectives stated in the governing document., such as fair wages for employees, and the investing of surpluses into services. Everything was around professionalism and good will, staff were paid and trained well and there were always sufficient numbers of staff. The people that were supported through the services were the priority and they were discussed in a professional way, as the values of promoting independence underpinned all that was undertaken.

The values therefore which are within me did not sit comfortably with what appeared to be a pursuit for financial gain, the principles of providing a caring service caught up in the need to pursue the maximisation of earnings from the public sector and individuals' scant resources (Müller. 2019).

The lack of emotional intelligence and awareness of others stood out as the owner demonstrated her wealth by the grand objects on display, while the lowest paid employees work long hours to make ends meet. There is a disconnect between the owner/Director and the company staff; the employees clearly having a view of the work environment which is contrary to that of the owner.

The people who receive support appeared to be secondary on Ms. A's agenda to the earning of money. The focus on people with higher end complex needs was not an altruistic aim, but as a means of generating maximum income. In my experience, complex needs require complex and skilled support, whilst the attitude I witnessed was a 'get them in' approach. Service users were seen as commodities, not individuals, and there appeared to be little or no understanding of the difficulties of supporting individuals with highly complex needs.

Furthermore, there was an evident lack of concern for those who would occupy the care home, who may find themselves having to 'top up' their rents and service charges from their personal resources, since it was evident that these would not be covered by housing benefit. There appeared either a lack of empathy, or a disregard, for the impact on the wellbeing on the service user for this additional financial burden.

It seemed as if there had been little or no planning into the overall vision, mission and strategy for this scheme. Decisions appeared to be irrational, taken without considering the implications and on unfounded assumptions. I felt that it was like the 'garbage can model' (Cohen et al, 1972), where decisions are made without resolving problems, and that lower hierarchies often find bespoke solutions without recognition or reward, such as in this case, the need to top and tail shifts to cover for staff shortages. This failure of logical decision making is a high-risk-high profit strategy which appears to be taken blindfolded of the facts (Buchanan and Huczynski, 2010).

One thing that stood out for me in term of inclusion was that there was no personalisation of any of the rooms. It was evident that furniture would be installed ahead of occupation without reference to the individual occupant, walls were painted a uniform magnolia, without asking those who would occupy the home what their preferences are in terms. of colour and so forth; all of which would provide them with a sense of belonging and individualism (Maslow, 1943). In terms of complex need, there also may be a range of adjustments and specialised wall and floor coverings required as a matter of health and safety; however the owner seemed to have a vision of a boutique hotel rather than a care home, and in fact it appeared quite institutional because of the uniformity despite the high quality of finishes. The people receiving care and support were discussed 'fondly' by the owner in the way that someone might refer to a pet or a mascot. I felt they the residents, both current and expected upon completion of the new facility, were being objectified as a means to achieving wealth, and were incidental to the aspirations of the company, whereas they should be central. This is not that I judged that Ms. A was being unethical. Business ethics is a highly complex area (Buchanan and Huczynski, 2010) and Ms. A was clear about her financial objectives from the outset. I have yet to resolve, however, my attitude to capitalism as a means of delivering services to vulnerable people and will need to give this much further consideration.

I now realise that I have had 'double loop learning' experiences during my meetings with Ms. A (Argyris and Schön, 1978). Double loop learning promotes learning to change values, assumptions and underlying norms (Argyris and Schön, 1978). I had decided, and intended to continue with the placement despite my own core values in the provision of care services being the polar opposite to the company. My personal views have been augmented due to these meetings. Previously, I believed that private companies made a valuable contribution to statutory and third sector organisations for the benefit of the vulnerable, and that profits were incidental although relevant. As stated above, I now

question whether private companies should be delivering and providing care and support to vulnerable people. This cultural value, which underpins business objectives derived from the pressures to make money and increase shareholder value has become anathema for me. I realise that times have changed from when I led a small but important services, but the overall aims of the statutory services which lead care and support packages have not changed greatly.

On the other hand, I had a great deal of empathy for the staff member I met, and for her colleagues who worked extensive hours to ensure the schemes were covered, without recognition or reward from Ms. A, and who as a consequence did not get their entitlement to days off and leave. However, the Support Workers appeared to have accepted these informally enforced changes to their employment conditions and elected to work the additional hours as means of increasing their earnings, reinforcing my belief that private social care services are, in general, poorly paid. In addition, I would question an organizational ethos which requires support staff to work fourteen-hour shifts, and the impact on the quality of the service. Many of the processes that I was able to discuss or observe seem to be driven by the need to comply with care regulations rather than about service user outcomes, leading me to think about the relevance and effectiveness of regulators such as Care Inspectorate Wales.

I recognise however, that I am casting judgement on Ms. A, her plans and the services she provides and intends to provide, from a perspective that is biased by my own experiences, values and attitudes. I also encountered an ideological dilemma (Billig, 1991) in liking Ms. A and wishing her care home to be successful, whilst realising that I am increasingly uncomfortable with the idea that wealth should be acquired through exploitation of a publicly funded system intended to support the vulnerable. In the end, I felt relief that the placement would not proceed.

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