

## CRITICAL REFLECTION - Mentoring, Supporting and Leadership Skills

This reflective essay will explore the development of my leadership, mentoring, and supporting skills as part of my MSc Applied Psychology degree, building on skills I had previously developed during my BSc Psychology and counselling studies. Throughout this module, I have engaged in a range of activities and assessments involving group work and peer support, contributing to the improvement of my interpersonal and leadership skills. I have been introduced to new communication approaches such as Motivational Interviewing (MI), which has improved my ability to support and guide others in a structured and empathetic way. This improvement is in line with MI, which aims to improve intrinsic motivation empathetically and collaboratively (Miller & Rollnick, 2013).

To critically evaluate my development, I will use Schön's model of reflection (Schön, 2017) and the ongoing notes I have made to discuss both reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action across key experiences in this module, but also the MSc course and university as a whole. This simple model allows for an analysis of not only what occurred in specific situations, but also how I adapted in the moment and what I have learned retrospectively. This reflection will look at challenges I faced, my impact on others, and how my personal values and prior experiences have shaped my leadership and communication styles and link these thoughts to classic theoretical literature examples.

During the first active listening and SOLER skills assessment, I was able to draw heavily on techniques I had developed during previous counselling training as part of BSc Psychology and Counselling, which I had only completed the year before. This gave me a strong sense of confidence going into the module. During the practical assessment, my partner and I were able to effectively demonstrate SOLER skills, using skills we remembered from previous courses and despite only having had two practice attempts the week prior. In the moment (reflection-in-action), I was consciously aware of the presence of live assessors that added extra pressure when compared with previous skills assessments that had only been recorded. I felt an increase in nervousness, particularly around being observed in real time, which made the scenario feel less natural. However, I was able to overcome this by focusing on the structure of the scenario, the conversation with my partner, and consciously applying SOLER skills such as maintaining eye contact, reflections, affirmations and open body language. I also drew skills from person-centred counselling approaches, particularly empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard, which are central to effective helping relationships (Rogers, 1957). This helped me stay present and engaged with my partner rather than becoming distracted by the assessment environment.

Looking back (reflection-on-action), my prior experience in SOLER, active listening and counselling skills clearly helped my performance and allowed the interaction to feel natural and familiar. However, the shift to a live assessment highlighted my potential overreliance on familiar assessment formats, as I had underestimated the added pressure of being observed. In future, I would benefit from using different conditions when preparing for assessment, such as demonstrating/practising skills in front of others and in real situations, to better prepare for the pressure of live assessment settings. Overall, this experience reinforced the importance of adaptability, preparation and maintaining composure under pressure.

During the MI assessment, I found different kinds of challenges. Although I had become more comfortable with the live assessment format, I struggled to fully shift away from my previous counselling skills training. In the moment, I noticed that I would often default to core counselling skills and the teachings of Carl Rogers (Rogers, 1995) rather than staying within the newly taught MI approach. During practice, I also found myself slipping into a “problem-solving” role, offering suggestions and fixes rather than facilitating motivation. However, I was able to recognise this as it was happening during the assessment and adapt by rephrasing closed or leading questions into more open ones and by consciously focusing on “change talk” rather than getting distracted by following tangents. I also had to make a conscious effort to slow down my speaking pace, as I am aware that I tend to rush to fill awkward silences too quickly and not prepare responses before speaking, increasing my cognitive load (Sweller, 1988).

In hindsight, I can see that my foundations in person-centred counselling skills were both a strength and a limitation. Familiar skills such as reflections, affirmations and summarising helped and felt mostly natural, but I did not always use them in ways that were aligned with MI principles. While I initially felt as if my MI questions were thoughtful and engaging, I later realised that many of them were similar to those used by my peers in their own individual assessments, which made me question how unique my approach was and how effective my motivational communication would be in real practice or everyday interactions. Despite this, feedback highlighted a clear improvement in my speaking pace and control. Klob (2016) states that new skills can be developed or changed through repeated experiences and reflection that results in adaptations over time. This experience forced me out of my comfort zone and made me adapt existing skills to new frameworks, rather than relying on what feels most familiar. During the mock team meeting assessment, I went in feeling mostly confident in my leadership abilities based on my previous experience as a martial arts coach and as a supervisor in a fast-paced nightclub job. These roles required me to have clear communication, peer trust and the ability to manage different personalities. I had also developed a light theoretical understanding of different leadership styles from my time on a previous college course (*laissez-faire*, *democratic*, etc). These styles were originally identified by Lewin et al. (1939), who suggested that different leadership approaches can significantly impact

group behaviour and effectiveness, so I expected to be able to apply similar approaches here. However, in the moment, this confidence was challenged when I was tasked with leading/managing a group of exaggerated and often abrasive/ambivalent personalities. As I was first to be assessed and unsure what to expect, I found it difficult to apply clear, authoritative leadership. Instead, I resorted to asking each group member for their opinions and turned the meeting into more of a brainstorming discussion. This meant I took on more of a facilitative role rather than actively leading, which helped create some structure but not obviously show leadership skills.

Looking back, I believe that this assessment was designed to reflect Tuckman's (1965) stages of group development, particularly the "storming" phase, in which group conflict is more likely when any one individual asserts themselves. This experience showed me the difference between my perceived leadership skills in a cooperative environment versus my ability to adapt to unfamiliar or challenging situations/personalities. While feedback stated that I managed some of the more outspoken individuals well, internally, my experience felt much less in control. I realised that my previous leadership experience had been in more real and cooperative situations, where authority was more naturally accepted, and most team members shared a desired goal and had existing good team cohesion with little real resistance or disruptive behaviour. I should aim to develop a more flexible and adaptable leadership style, potentially drawing on a more democratic approach in cooperative teams, but also recognising the need to be more assertive when required, and having the confidence to do so. Although the exaggerated nature of the assessment does not fully reflect real-world settings, it still shows that I may struggle with more difficult group dynamics. This is an area for further and important development if I am ever to lead in a professional setting.

Reflecting on my leadership and mentoring style as a whole, I feel that I am most effective and comfortable leading a group that shares a common goal and genuine interests in the task. In these situations, I tend to adopt a supportive but relatively hands-off approach so I can remain people-focused but also trust team members to carry out their roles effectively. This aligns with aspects of a democratic leadership style, where responsibility and input are shared across the group (Lewin et al., 1939). My use of this approach is helped by my organisational and timekeeping skills, which allow me to maintain structure without needing to control every aspect of the task. However, I recognise that this style is highly dependent on the motivation and cooperation of the group and may be less effective when this is lacking.

Over time, my theoretical understanding of leadership has greatly improved. Previously, I would approach leadership more instinctively and attempt to adapt in the moment based on the situation. Through studying psychology, I have become aware that leadership can be understood and improved through established frameworks and theories, such as leadership styles and group dynamics (Tuckman, 1965). This has

encouraged me to reflect more critically on my own leadership style and actively incorporate these frameworks, rather than relying on instinct, yet this will still need further development until my leadership style is influenced by theory naturally, rather than being forced.

My personality also plays a significant role in shaping my leadership style. As a person, I tend to avoid conflict where possible, while also preferring to maintain a good degree of control over most situations, two realities that often clash. On the other hand, I am willing to delegate responsibility after trust has been established, particularly when team members have shown competence and engagement in the task. I believe I naturally communicate clearly and can create a positive and cooperative working environment. However, I also recognise key weaknesses, including a tendency towards stubbornness when I strongly believe in my own ideas/approaches and problem-solving skills, sometimes leading me to not consider the opinions of others. I also have an admittedly high sensitivity to perceived disrespect within group settings. This highlights the importance of emotional intelligence in leadership, particularly in managing emotional responses and maintaining professionalism under pressure, a quality that benefits groups as a whole when held by all team members (Chang et al., 2012). Looking forward, I would like to become a more adaptable and confident leader, particularly in unfamiliar or more professional settings. I will need to continue to develop the ability to remain composed under pressure and adjust my leadership style based on the needs of the group.

Finally, I would like to reflect on my overall experience of developing counselling, active listening, leadership and empathy skills during my four consecutive years at University, as my time here comes to an end. I feel I have developed a greater level of confidence in having genuine and empathetic conversations, with one of the most noticeable changes being my ability to slow down interactions and become more present in conversations, rather than immediately focusing on problem-solving. I am particularly proud of the progress I have made in areas such as eye contact (which was previously lacking), genuine active listening and the use of SOLER skills, as well as my overall ability to empathise with others better. These skills align with core person-centred counselling principles that I found to be the most personally meaningful, particularly empathy and active listening, which I now know are considered essential for building strong interpersonal relationships (Rogers, 1957).

However, I have also found that using these skills outside of structured or professional (university) settings has been more challenging than expected. While techniques such as MI are effective in clinical or academic contexts, I have struggled to reliably use them in everyday interactions. In many real-world situations, I have found more success when speaking more instinctively and genuinely, rather than consciously trying to apply learned techniques, a potential example of Perkins & Salomons (1992) challenge of transfer of learning. This raises a question as to whether these skills have

become more natural to me over time without my knowledge, or whether they are less suited to the informal situations I typically find myself in. This fits the idea that skill development involves a gradual shift from conscious to more automatic use through repetition (Fitts & Posner, 1967).

Despite these challenges, I have noticed clear improvement in my ability to approach sensitive conversations in a calmer and more empathetic way, rather than defaulting to problem-solving. I am now more likely to listen and understand before giving unsolicited advice. While these skills do not yet feel fully natural, I believe that continued practice and real-world application will allow them to develop further. Overall, I feel I am leaving university as someone who has a greater awareness of how to understand others and adapt my communication style depending on the situation.

## REFERENCES

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I confirm that I have not used any AI tools in the research and creation of this assignment. I confirm that I have not presented any AI-generated materials as my own work. I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used, which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

### Personal Development Plan

| <b>Learning and Development Need (competency, skill, qualification)</b> | <b>Specific goal</b>                                                                                                                    | <b>When do I want to achieve this?</b>                                | <b>Which obstacles may get in my way?</b>                                                                                                                         | <b>How can I improve my chances of meeting my goal?</b>                                                                                                                | <b>Where can I go for further info/support?</b>                                                                                |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Complete MSc Applied Psychology Course.                                 | Complete my MSc Applied Psychology degree with a minimum Merit classification.                                                          | By the end of the current academic year (September 2026).             | Poor time management for deadlines, lack of motivation during high-pressure periods and difficulty keeping a balance between academic work and other commitments. | Use structured time management strategies (Daily word count targets) and seek regular feedback on assignments.                                                         | Lecturers and dissertation supervisors for academic guidance and online academic resources (Academic journals/Google Scholar). |
| Develop confidence in professional communication.                       | Develop confidence in professional communication, particularly in presenting and discussing my work at the dissertation showcase event. | By September 2026, in advance of dissertation showcase event.         | Nervousness when presenting, lack of practice/confidence and low confidence in answering questions.                                                               | Practice presentations regularly, ask for feedback from peers, have a comprehensive understanding of my dissertation topic and rehearse answering potential questions. | Module tutors, dissertation supervisor, peers and university presentation workshops.                                           |
| Find opportunities for long term career.                                | Increase motivation and identify clear career pathways aligned with my MSc in Applied Psychology.                                       | Within the next 6–12 months, before and shortly after MSc completion. | Uncertainty about career options, lack of direction and lack of motivation during high-pressure/personal struggle periods.                                        | Research career pathways, set short-term goals and gain relevant experience.                                                                                           | University careers service, academic tutors and professional bodies (e.g., BPS, NHS jobs).                                     |

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| Continue to work on parts of my psychological wellbeing. | Improve psychological wellbeing by developing greater emotional intelligence, resilience, self-awareness, and stress management skills. | Ongoing, with measurable improvements over the next 6–12 months. | Falling back into old habits, lack of self-reflection, and difficulty having routines during stressful periods.            | Practice regular self-reflection and build consistent daily habits.                                                                               | Wellbeing apps and academic literature on psychological wellbeing. Also, support from family and friends.                                |
| Build professional network and career opportunities.     | Build a professional network and increase awareness of career opportunities within psychology-related fields.                           | Over the next 6–12 months, alongside MSc completion.             | Limited confidence in networking, lack of opportunities and uncertainty about how to approach professionals.               | Attend networking events, engage on LinkedIn, and reach out to professionals for advice.                                                          | University careers service, networking events and LinkedIn connections.                                                                  |
| Gain experience in Personal Training and life coaching.  | Further develop interpersonal/people skills via experiences in personal training and life coaching                                      | Within the next 6–12 months alongside my job in a local gym      | Limited opportunities to take on responsibility without official PT qualifications and balancing this with university work | Seek out opportunities to support clients, observe and get advice from experienced PT's and apply communication/ motivational skills in practice. | Gym colleagues (existing PT friends), fitness training courses, online coaching resources and general gym/ leisure industry environment. |