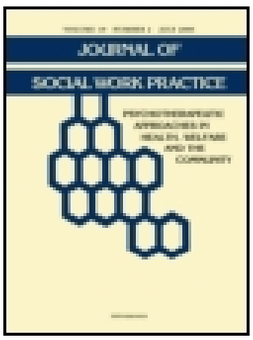

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Exploring micro-skills as the underpinnings of effective social work practice

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the underpinnings of direct social work practice, applying theoretical concepts to demonstrate how to increase practice effectiveness. Given the challenges and stresses of the profession, social workers require training that equips them with skills for every field of practice, every situation and all levels of stress. The heart of direct practice is seen as a psychophysiological integration of skills (concrete tools that practitioners use to create change in users' lives), which provide direct practice's skeleton or frame, and micro-skills (specific actions taken to enact a skill), which provide its flesh. The psychophysiological base of direct practice is fleshed out using concepts of embodiment and mindfulness. A practice example illustrates the application of the concepts. Benefits associated with exploring micro-skills and embodied therapeutic practice are discussed, as well as the concomitant implications of how to expose new clinicians and students to these concepts.

KEYWORDS

Skill; micro-skill; mindfulness; embodiment; psychophysiology

Introduction

This article explores the underpinnings of direct social work practice. Social work practice is multi-faceted and includes procedural and pragmatic tasks (Welbourne et al., 2007), legal capacity work (Campbell et al., 2018), child protection work (O'Sullivan, 2019; Stevenson, 2019) and other types of practice focusing on physical and/or mental health in a variety of environments (hospitals, schools, community centres and mental health centres to name only a few) within which social workers practice. No matter the location or focus of practice, social work is an extremely demanding profession that is practiced in difficult environments within stressful conditions (Ravalier, 2019).

Given the challenges and stresses of the profession, social workers require training that equips them for every field of practice, situation and all levels of stress. Skills, defined as the concrete techniques or actions undertaken by practitioners in direct practice, are as the bedrock of social work practice (Bogo, 2018; Ivey, 1971; Patterson et al., 2018). Yet beneath the level of skills lies an even deeper foundation, micro-skills, on which skills rest. Therefore, to best explore the underpinnings of direct practice, this article looks at both concepts. In viewing micro-skills as the phenomenological underpinning of skills

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we develop a deeper understanding of the mechanics of the latter, while exploring a paradigm in which the former are physically embodied and experienced by practitioners to bring skills into action. The concepts' complementarity is evident, as is the usefulness of micro-skills in fuelling skills, allowing social workers to practice more effectively. This article aims to enhance practice through a richer understanding of its foundation.

The article begins with a theoretical discussion of both concepts. The related notion of mindfulness is discussed and used to suggest a novel distinction between skills and micro-skills. That new distinction allows the latter term to be more precisely defined and deepens, enhances and fleshes out the definition of skills and the relationship between the two terms. A brief discussion differentiates the concept of micro-skills from countertransference, reflection, and mentalising. A practice example illustrates the concepts. The article concludes with a short discussion of the implications of incorporating the theoretical concept of micro-skills into practice and discusses the timeliness of integrating cognitive and non-cognitive aspects of practice into social work as a means of increasing practice effectiveness.

Defining skills

'Skills', the techniques that practitioners use to connect with service users and engage in practice, are often described as concrete actions, tools, and 'interviewing behaviours' intentionally selected for use in service user interventions (Bogo, 2018; Ivey, 1971; Patterson et al., 2018) and reflect a capacity that can be acquired through training for *active* interaction at a specific level of ability (Sperry, 2010). Skills are *what* practitioners do or enact and when successfully used, the service user and practitioner can more effectively engage and work together (Seden, 2005). This concept is central to social work practice as the basis for creating change in service users' lives. Ivey (1971), who has focused much of his professional work on elucidating both terms, provides examples of interviewing skills as actions of attending, reflecting feelings, paraphrasing and summarising. Skills overlie a deeper concept of micro-skill.

Defining micro-skills

The main proponent of the concept of micro-skill has been Alan Ivey who has published widely in this area (Ivey, 1971, 1994; Ivey & Authier, 1978; Ivey & Simek-Downing, 1980; Ivey & Ivey, 1999; Ivey et al., 2011). Ivey sees this concept as providing a concrete framework that breaks a practice skill down into specific actions taken by a practitioner. These actions are smaller micro actions as evidenced in the list provided by Ivey. The skill of attending is broken down into micro-skills of making eye contact, vocal qualities used, verbal tracking and use of body language (Ivey et al., 2011).

Micro-skills provide more specific tangible direction to practitioners in conducting service user sessions, as was Ivey's intention in their development. Micro-skills provide information about *how* to enact skills. Ivey recognised the need for concrete direction to practitioners in training rather than the process in use at that time of throwing trainees into sessions with very little direction other than attending with empathy and positive regard (Littrell, 2001).

Ivey's conceptualisation of micro-skills was an invaluable first step in elucidating skills as he provided concrete directions to practitioners in the course of rendering a more explicit definition of both terms. With more recent developments in conceptual and empirical knowledge in the field, the definition and practice of micro-skill can once again be refined, providing even greater direction and specificity to the already existing definition. The current ability to further refine this concept is a parallel process to the one taken by Ivey in the 1970 s, now almost fifty years ago.

This article's refinement of these terms allows practitioners to more fully break down the concept's earlier iterations. For example, within the skill of attending, the micro-skill of vocal qualities can be further elucidated using the concept of prosody, the patterns of stress and intonation present in speech (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles* 1933/1972). Knowledge of prosody provides practitioners with detailed understanding of the quality of their voice. Experiencing prosody provides practitioners with access to lived and embodied qualities of speech.

The following example of experiencing prosody as a micro-skill within the skill of attending is embedded with rich nouns and adjectives describing an embodied attention: 'I feel the vibrations of [her] voice on my face, like a sort of weak electric current, a slight prickling. When the volume of her voice increases, my sensations increase in intensity. When the tone and the rhythm of the words change, my sensations are also modified.' (Petitmengin et al., 2009, p. 270). This statement demonstrates the practitioner's deeply embodied awareness (the *micro-skill*) of the lived experience of the *skill* of attending. This example, a more detailed definition of micro-skills than that developed by Ivey, fleshes out *how* practitioners can enact the skill of effectively attending to service users.

This more detailed description of the micro-skill of prosody explicates further the skill of attending. A practitioner accessing a lived experience of prosody in attending to a service user will more richly read both their own experience and that of the service user. Using the micro-skill of prosody enriches the skill of attention and that enriched experience of attending to the service user allows for a richer practitioner response (Reading et al., 2019).

Refining the definition of micro-skills

Refining the definition of micro-skills includes integrating Ivey's conceptual definition of specific actions with an embodied definition of the practitioner's felt and lived experience. While skills tend to represent the *doing* of practice, micro-skills reflect the *bodily being* or *embodied knowing* of practice. Embodied knowing is defined first as the knowledge that resides within the body and then as the ways in which we become aware of this knowledge through the body (Rajan-Rankin, 2014; Sodhi & Cohen, 2012). From an embodied knowing standpoint, the body and emotions are intricately intertwined and thus implicated in each other (Sodhi & Cohen, 2012). Embodied knowing provides critical information about processes originally considered to be non-conscious and outside of awareness (Tangenberg & Kemp, 2002), processes considered a part of tacit knowledge (Carroll, 2010). Consciously attending to embodied knowing allows non-conscious tacit knowledge to become conscious and integrated into a holistic framework that integrates non-conscious and conscious experience. Such a holistic context enhances the cognitive dimension of experience necessary in direct practice.

Micro-skills reflect a sense of embodied self-awareness, based in sensing, feeling and acting (Fogel, 2009), in a spontaneous, open, moment-to-moment manner. Micro-skills are the sub-actions or stances we embody to inform and facilitate the performance of the practitioner's cognitive and concrete actions or skills (Sodhi & Cohen, 2012). The key to developing an embodied sense of self-awareness consists of tuning in to one's external and internal cues with the intention of integrating a physically rich experiencing with a cognitive meaning-making of physical sensations. When practitioners tune in to these cues, the information received from service users is deeper given that its nonconceptual, embodied dimensions supplement the cognitive dimensions of speech and thought. Practitioners access a deeper meaning of experience when supplementing speech and thought with their own bodily level of experience.

Such an embodied examination of experience often refers to a 'holistic, implicit bodily sense of a complex situation' (Gendlin, 1998, p. 58) that is not simply a 'physical sensation' (Gendlin, 1998, p. 63); rather, it is a 'physical sense of something, of meaning, of implicit intricacy' (Gendlin, 1998, p. 63). ' . . . the body is never simply a physical object but always an embodiment of consciousness' that is constantly experiencing itself and engaged in a 'pulsating dance of presence and shared becoming' with a service user (Totton, 2003; Rolef Ben-Shahar, 2014, p. xi).

Skills and micro-skills as complementary processes

Preliminary definitions of both concepts lead to the following distinction between the two terms. Skills can be used to further examine and differentiate the ways in which actions are concretely undertaken and practiced whereas micro-skills reflect the manner in which the skills are undertaken. These two terms describe a complementary series of processes and experiences felt intensely by practitioners and experienced more indirectly by service users. Thus, the two terms refer to different and complementary processes, clarifying and further unpacking the term *micro-skill*.

Empirical research documenting bodily grounding of micro-skills in social work practice

A growing literature discusses bodily micro-skills theoretically and empirically (Fogel, 2009; Katz, 2011, 2015; Shaw, 2003, 2004; Sodhi & Cohen, 2012; Stern, 2010; Wallin, 2007). These studies document micro-skill as bodily-based and grounded in a deep moment-to-moment presence based within Eastern thought and also increasingly anchoring novel Western approaches to treatment. Discussing this approach, referred to as mindfulness, is useful in further determining how micro-skills can be identified, developed and trained.

Mindfulness and micro-skills anchoring newer approaches to direct practice

Mindfulness is defined as 'bringing one's complete attention to the present experience on a moment-to-moment basis and as paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally' (Baer, 2003, p. 125). Mindfulness is grounded in an ongoing practice of attention and awareness that questions unfolding

moment-to-moment experience and can be activated at any time, in the midst of any activity. Due to its inherent base in unfolding experience, mindfulness has been taken up by Western practitioners and incorporated into direct practice interventions (Germer et al., 2013). Mindfulness is therefore potentially a central aspect of social work practice, as its mechanisms demonstrate.

The mechanisms of mindfulness strengthen attending and awareness in both mind and body, with foundations that lie within a body-mind integration. Mindfulness fosters experiencing all aspects of the body and integrating bodily-based feelings, mind states and thoughts (Analayo, 2010). Mindfulness can be related to micro-skills because micro-skills originate within psychophysiological experience, as embodied lived experience. Mindfulness, as a set of practices, provides concrete tools with which to integrate mind and body in daily living and practice.

Saleeby (1992), Sodhi and Cohen (2012), and Tangenberg and Kemp (2002) describe social work as a disembodied profession that focuses on rational thought rather than embodied experience. The above authors acknowledge the continued hegemony of Cartesian dualistic thinking that emphasises the mind's rational thinking over the body's experiential knowing. Tangenberg and Kemp (2002) highlight the irony of the profession's disconnection from the body when so much of social work revolves around traumatised individuals, many of whom have experienced bodily trauma. The literature cited points to the importance of bodily knowing, echoed in Tantia's (2011) statement that embodiment grounds our life experiences, allowing us contact with experience as it unfolds. The primacy of embodied experience has been highlighted in the above discussion of micro-skills and mindfulness. Sodhi and Cohen (2012) work documents the absence of embodied learning within social work training. Musicant and Peled (2017) cite the usefulness of integrating embodied experience into home visiting, an area of social work in which embodied knowing enriches professional interventions. These articles call for greater emphasis on embodied learning and experience within the profession of social work.

Differentiating micro-skills and mindfulness from countertransference, reflection, and mentalising

Those in the field of social work may think that the field's knowledge of the processes of countertransference, reflection and mentalising duplicates the newer terms of micro-skills and mindfulness. Professionals may think that all of these terms are the same, that they enact the same processes, and that there is no need to repackage more traditional terms with new terms. However, there are important differences amongst micro-skills, mindfulness and countertransference, reflection and mentalising. The latter four involve conceptual processes (Bogo, 2018; Burr et al., 2016; D'Cruz et al., 2007; Falkenstrom et al., 2014; Ruch, 2007) that include higher cortical reflective and intentional thought. Ruch's (2007) four modes of reflection are conceptual in their focus on conscious thinking though Ruch does allude to, but does not explicate, a bottom up aspect to reflection. Countertransference, while defined as the worker's conscious and unconscious reactions to the client (Bogo, 2018) is also grounded in conscious reflection on those reactions. Defining mentalising as understanding how people behave through knowing their underlying mental states (Falkenstrom et al., 2014) privileges the cognitive and reflective aspects of this term. Micro-skills and mindfulness differ in that they privilege the non-

conceptual bodily-based experiences of pulsing, throbbing, pushing, etc., underpinning basic physiological sensations, which subsequently become objects of reflection (Katz, 2015; Petitmengin, 2006). Micro-skills and mindfulness underlie countertransference, reflection and mentalising, making those three processes possible.

While both non-conceptual and reflective experience form part of a holistic human experience of an event, reflective experience has been emphasised and non-conceptual experience neglected in human understanding (Petitmengin, 2007). This unnecessary dichotomy is another form of a dualistic Cartesian parsing of human existence. In direct practice, Christensen and Rudnick (1999) describe the difference between mindfulness and countertransference in saying that countertransference's reflective thought aims to make change in the service user and is therefore a deliberate act to direct the work, whereas a mindful non-cognitive emphasis allows full bodily experience of that which is unfolding. A mindful non-cognitive process recognises the deep physiological beginnings of experience and allows that experience to enter reflective awareness.

As in the discussion of skills and micro-skills, countertransference reflection, mentalising, micro-skills and mindfulness are all integral to direct practice effectiveness. The benefit of an awareness of micro-skills and mindfulness is an awareness of a deeper level of experience, which can inform countertransference, reflection and mentalising. The integration of non-conceptual and reflective levels of experiencing enhances interventions and practitioner effectiveness.

Equipping practitioners with micro-skills

Equipping practitioners with micro-skills involves teaching practitioners to include their bodies and their minds in work with service users. As discussed above, one way that practitioners can include their bodies as well as their minds in working with service users is through the use of their own mindfulness in social work practice.

A growing literature documents the inclusion of mindfulness in academic and work settings (Birnbaum, 2005, 2008, 2009; Gockel, 2010; Gockel et al., 2013; Haight, 2010; Kessen & Turner, 2012; Kroll, 2010; Lord, 2007; Lynn, 2010; Lynn & Mensinga, 2015; Newsome et al., 2006; Shier & Graham, 2011). With the intention of fostering an embodied sense of awareness in practice, there has been a renewed focus on a more *holistic reflective learning*, recognising the integral foundation of experiential learning for social work practice (Lynn, 2010).

Giving the same value to bodily experience that we attribute to conceptual knowledge requires greater emphasis on the phenomenology of experience and the integration of the body and emotions with the mind (Lynn, 2010). Explicitly integrating body and mind in social work practice is seen in the integration of conceptual skills with the bodily experience of micro-skills. Mindfulness is a starting point for engaging in this type of paradigm shift, as it supports the development of a holistic reflective practitioner in service user sessions and in the classroom. Mindfulness cultivates practitioners' and students' awareness of their inner psychophysiological voices. Mindfulness enables use of the 'holistic self' as a tool in the therapeutic relationship, doing so through integrating not separating mind and body (Lynn, 2010). Developing and emphasising an 'embodied self-awareness' in training and practice allows for the examination and development of self-concept in both students and practitioners (Birnbaum, 2009). Intensity in emotional

interactions with service users challenges the self, pushing students and practitioners to modify their internal perceptions. In modifying internal perceptions, mindfulness enriches an individual's ability, as Schon (1983), Schon (1987) would describe it, to reflect-in-action, in the midst of practice, and to reflect-on-action, after having engaged in practice (Birnbaum, 2009).

Gockel (2010, p. 250) discusses the impact of mindfulness training as a 'practical means of enhancing and expanding' tools and skills essential for clinical practice. This is especially true for anxious new social workers and students, and applies to all practitioners, as mindfulness provides the opportunity for reflection to resonate with embodied experiences, giving way to a deeper exploration of micro-skills (Gockel, 2010). This kind of 'reflective practice' promotes personal examination, allowing a space to challenge pervasive perceptions, contexts, and biases that goes 'beyond simple reflection' (Shier & Graham, 2010, p. 29, 34). Service users are able to 'feel the quality of this kind of focused attention' that practitioners demonstrate when engaged in mindful practice, highlighting the 'impact of mindfulness practices on relationship development and intervention with service users' (Gockel, 2010, p. 254).

Such benefits may improve social workers' 'subjective well-being' and foster self-awareness (Gockel, 2010, p. 256, 258). Heightened 'awareness of moment-to-moment experiences' plays a role in reducing stress and increasing one's coping abilities (Shier & Graham, 2010, p. 36). As such, mindfulness can assist social workers in stressful work situations, job environments and in difficult interactions with practitioners in reducing the stress that is often part of social work practice (Hulsheger et al., 2012).

Shier and Graham (2010, p. 40) maintain that the literature has not adequately examined the 'overlap of practitioner and person', potentially ignoring important dynamics that occur between service user and practitioner. The 'interconnection' of service user and practitioner is the space within which mindfulness may be able to help 'negotiate an individual balance' and further explore micro-skills at play in practice (Shier & Graham, 2010, p. 40).

The ability to sense meaning within our own bodies, while experiencing and feeling micro-skills associated with engaging in skills in practice, fosters awareness of our relationship to others in a subjective, dynamic, and fluid way (Shaw, 2003, 2004). Similar to Schwartz-Salant's (1986) concept of the 'subtle body', when 'experience is constellated between two people' through micro-skills, 'both people begin to gain access to knowing' either on a non-conscious or conscious level.

Application of skills in an education setting

Micro-skills often go unnoticed by most practitioners unless they train to become aware of them. The more practitioners engage with micro-skills, the more explicit and intentional their use, the same as the way in which skills are traditionally used. Explicit training in this area is therefore invaluable. A direct practice course with a goal of training students to work with micro-skills was created at the University of X's Master of Social Work programme at the Faculty of Social Work. The course goal was to explore and elucidate micro-skills while observing and identifying these concepts during a weekly live direct practice session working with a family that formed the heart of the course. The class was held off site at a children's mental health centre with an academic connection to the university. At the beginning of class, the professor and students engaged in a brief

mindfulness meditation session. The professor then facilitated 40 minutes of teaching and discussion of course material. Following the mindfulness and didactic content, the professor conducted live sessions with a family. The family had agreed to being observed by students in an academic program focused on learning direct practice. Sessions were live-streamed to students in a separate classroom located close to the treatment room. Students were encouraged to actively identify skills and micro-skills as the sessions unfolded. Upon completion of each session, the professor facilitated a thorough debrief and discussion, bringing together theory and students' observations to discuss micro-skills, progress and plan the next session. Assignments were self-directed. Students selected specific skills and micro-skills to explore further in applying the concepts of skills and micro-skills to real-world learning and case examples in their field placements.

Qualitative analysis of feedback from students about the efficacy of the course (Author, 2017) revealed students' experience of valuable learning of micro-skills. Two of the present authors (AA, BB), students in the course, verified the impact on their professional development of becoming aware of micro-skills in direct practice at the beginning of their professional lives. Incorporating mindfulness and embodiment into their own practice significantly impacted their therapeutic interactions and progress with clients. The professor/practitioner demonstrated the process of embodiment throughout the course, inviting students to 'experience her world through her body', bringing attention to bodily processes which are often not conscious (Rolef Ben-Shahar, 2014, p. 153; Kurtz, 1990). Teaching students how to engage with micro-skills on a deeper level 'allows for a more comprehensive processing' of interactions with service users, with the potential for future impact on their work as practitioners (Rolef Ben-Shahar, 2014, p. 154).

Case example illustrating the use of micro-skills

To demonstrate the experience of micro-skills in practice, a case discussion reflects one author's (AA's) experiences at her placement on a Nephrology unit at a Toronto hospital. The patient, Mary Patel[1], was admitted to hospital with acute renal failure and began to decline rapidly. Mrs. Patel's husband, Peter*, and two daughters, Tammy* and Katie*, became frustrated with what they saw as poor nursing care on the ward. This situation came to a breaking point and a heated family meeting was held, which was when AA took over her care. AA used skills of silence, building the therapeutic alliance, acting as an advocate, and emotional intelligence. These skills turned out to be less important than the corresponding micro-skills.

When AA used silence with the family, she became aware of a micro-skill of embodied self-awareness, based in spontaneous sensing, feeling and acting (Fogel, 2009). In her interactions with Katie, AA energetically felt Katie's stresses and exhaustion relating to caregiving and physically began to feel this tension and stress while using silence. AA experienced a pounding rapid heart rate, becoming restless in the intensity of Katie's family's emotions. AA noticed that embodying silence in the presence of the family cued her into her own personal triggers. This worried AA, as she cognitively thought that using silence would create a helpful self-awareness allowing her to better understand and intervene with the patient and her family. However, the silence experienced by AA was replete with her own emotional experience. Non-cognitively sinking down into and immersing herself in the micro-skill of embodied self-awareness fostered a cognitive awareness that the

emotional energy AA was producing while using silence was harming her ability to feel an embodied resonance useful for the patient's family.

Building an alliance with this family alerted AA to the micro-skill of embodied intuition, the empathic attunement that fosters an implicit communication and understanding between people (Tantia, 2011). Embodied intuition within practice can manifest as psychophysiological insight into the physical/emotional states of another person; physiologically feeling a spontaneous 'letting go' or 'slowing down'; and cognitively providing solutions that simply arise for problems in which there is not enough information for logical processing (Tantia, 2011).

Several interactions strengthened and solidified AA's therapeutic relationships with the family. When Katie spoke about her exhaustion, caregiving stresses, and depression, AA spontaneously felt her body physically turning towards Katie, a sharp, focused attention, and the psychophysiological 'slowing down' experience. These micro-skill experiences cognitively alerted AA to use skills of clarification, reflection or reframing, depending on the conversation. In response, Katie psychologically softened, cognitively reflected on her experience, and became more emotional. AA's embodied intuition directed her towards cognitively knowing what to emphasise and reflect back to Katie. AA's use of micro-skills strengthened skill of creating a therapeutic bond.

Reflecting on how AA acted as an advocate for the family, she realised that the micro-skill she experienced was an embodied protectiveness, which arose from the strong therapeutic alliance with the family. When members of the medical team came into the room, her shoulders, chest and jaw physically tensed, and she became aware of a strong psychophysiological protectiveness towards this family. Any negative opinion or cold remark from the medical team caused her heart to pound and brought forth words she used to protect the family. AA saw that her advocacy work for the family was becoming an unhelpful embodied defensiveness, requiring mindfulness and tact in all of her interactions with the interdisciplinary team.

AA moved beyond labelling the family's emotions. She experienced family members' emotions as they were happening, a micro-skill of embodied emotional resonance. As AA came to know the family better and began to understand their emotional responses, her embodied emotional resonance became uniquely attuned to each family member's experience. As Mrs. Patel became tearful while recalling former memories from her past, AA psychophysiologically felt a warmth of positive nostalgia, and the physical anxiety associated with recalling painful memories. When Katie expressed extreme anger in relation to her negative memories about her father, AA physically felt her anger as a pounding heart, a tightening in the chest, and restlessness in the arms and legs. AA was able to move beyond labelling and recognising emotions, to experience the embodiment of emotional intelligence, which she then began to use positively in helpful interventions for the family.

Implications of including the theory of micro-skills in social work practice

What does a discussion of micro-skills contribute to the field of social work when so much of practice focuses on using skills in the areas of policy, procedures and cognitive tasks? What can practitioners do with the knowledge and experience of micro-skills? What does this discussion of refining and enacting micro-skills mean for practitioners?

Why should social workers learn productive ways to trust their gut feelings (the stomach being a second brain) and their intuitive experience of what their bodies are telling them?

Both skills and micro-skills are integral to effective practice. Cognitive skills are needed to reflect on what is occurring and to choose and plan actions. Non-cognitive micro-skills are needed to increase awareness of the subtle and initial aspects of an experience. When these subtle aspects of initial experience are experienced first non-consciously and then consciously, information gained through the non-conscious experience of micro-skills can be integrated into the reflective and cognitive choice of skills. Skills are then chosen and enacted in a more deliberate manner, causing practice to be more effective as the base that it rests on is an integration of knowledge at both the embodied and cognitive levels.

The discussion of micro-skills highlights that all of our work involves an element of embodiment and that social workers are not only individuals who work with bodies but are themselves bodies at work (Cameron & McDermott, 2007). We feel, laugh, cry, create, and age, which indicates that intentional actions and notions of identity are naturally connected with the body. Social workers engage with service users through a variety of sensory, cognitive, affective and behavioural domains, anchored in the body (Cameron & McDermott, 2007) and can more effectively use skills that are anchored in micro-skills.

Integrating micro-skills into practice also highlights the ability to deeply explore the bodily-based nature of social work practice, its integration with the mind's conceptual nature and the ability to use concepts such as mindfulness to understand, explore and teach the integration of skills and micro-skills to practitioners. This is contrary to Jude's (2018) statement that concepts of embodiment and mindfulness belong to the art of the profession and are therefore challenging to teach. Once concepts of embodiment and mindfulness are understood, these same concepts provide a path for teaching the embodied nature of social work practice, micro-skills, to practitioners.

Conclusion

This paper locates a gap in the definition of the term 'skill' discussing the distinction between what we do as social workers and how we do what we do. Alan Ivey's writings developed and disseminated the concept of micro-skill, changing the training of practitioners. He planted the seeds of this paper's focus in an interview he gave to John Littrell (2001) in discussing his interest and exposure to (i) meditation in studying psychology as an undergraduate at Stanford and (ii) explicitly working with the body later in his career. Yet at that point in time the acceptance of meditative processes such as mindfulness and concepts of embodied knowledge were not discussed. If Alan Ivey was currently refining the concept of micro-skill, given his own background, perhaps he would include some of this paper's discussion.

The current examination of micro-skill provides an avenue for examining how we enact skills and, how micro-skills flesh out skills. The paper's focus on embodied experience and mindfulness highlight the embodied aspects of micro-skills, fleshing out Alan Ivey's development of micro-skills. Micro-skills usefully describe how to enact skills, thereby complementing and fleshing out the concept of skills. In discussing how practitioners attend to service users, micro-skills, as grounded within embodied experience, add to the knowledge of how practitioners can attend to service users through

embodied attention and deepen descriptions of the skill of attending to service users. The ability of micro-skills to flesh out skills can ground social work as a profession in ensuring that embodied knowing is taught alongside the profession's conceptual foundations. If skills act as the skeleton or frame of social work practice, micro-skills are the flesh of social work practice. Only when the flesh is toned, can the skeleton move. Social work practice requires a greater attention to embodiment to flesh out the frame of social work practice for its optimal use by practitioners.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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