



Gimme That Old-time Reflection: Process Recording

Author(s)

*Emeline Homonoff, PhD
Simmons College*

Process recording is a time-honored vehicle for reflection in schools of social work, especially in the United States (Urdang, 1975). Process recording calls upon interns' capacity for observation and recall, requiring verbatim reporting of an interview with a client or clients. It also encourages analysis: it begins with a description of the purpose and goals of the intervention, as well as the setting and participants; it allows for a description of the rationale for intervention and the skills utilized; and it ends with impressions, plans for the future, and questions for the student's supervisors. Most importantly for reflection, the process recording has space for interns to record their thoughts and feelings in a column or columns parallel to the dialogue of the transcript (Fox & Gutheil, 2000; Graybeal & Ruff, 1995; Neuman & Friedman, 1997; Urdang, 1979).

Process recording is an example of "reflection-on-action, the process of looking back on a practice event or episode to review the experience, including subjective reactions, ways of understanding, and some evaluation of what transpired and what one might learn to improve or change in the next interaction" (Bogo, Katz, Regehr, Logie, Mylopoulos, & Tufford, 2013, p. 261). A process recording is not an academic exercise in which students illustrate their expert competency and knowledge; it is about "exploration, understanding, questioning and probing discrepancies" (Boud in Rai, p. 787) of "ill-structured problems" (King, in Deal, 2003, p. 7) in the "swampy lowlands" of practice (Schon, 1984, p. 42).

What, exactly, is reflection? The original aim of focusing on reflection in the process recording was based on psychodynamic theory, which emphasized "the inner world, including emotions, inner conflicts, internalizations, loss and separation issues, and [...] the power of past relationships and experiences, often repeated in therapeutic encounters" (Urdang, 2010, p. 528). More recent theory includes the concept of intersubjectivity: the "ongoing transactional exchange of feelings between the clinician and client" (Urdang, 2010, p. 531). The current, broader definition of reflection is based on the idea that our understanding is affected by our perspectives, which are in turn affected by our context. In reflection, "the tacit knowing – the intuitive know-how – which guides professional skill

is brought to consciousness [...] when the practitioner is faced with a unique, puzzling situation” (Papell & Skolnik, 1992, p. 19). For example, in reflecting on their interactions with clients, interns can become aware of their assumptions based on age, gender, class, culture, religion, race, and sexual orientation (Brookfield, 2012—see link in Resources section).

A process recording is only as valuable as the effort that the field instructor and intern put into it. Orientation to process recording is essential to explain that, whereas an academic paper seeks to move from the personal to the objective in order to showcase the student’s competency, a process recording moves from the objective to the personal (Rai, 2006, p. 793). Process recordings showcase students’ questions and dilemmas in their interactions with an individual client, a group or family, and/ or other team members or providers. The expectation of regular process recording can encourage interns to become more adept at remembering dialogue and accessing their own reactions. Timing is essential; for example, if the field instructor has not had time to read the process recording and make some written response before the supervision meeting, then the student may feel that the practice is not worth his or her time. The field instructor’s role is crucial in “processing issues, incidents and emotions; making sense and developing meaning from experience; applying theory to practice [...]; documenting and effectively expressing learning; and provision of formative assessment and feedback” (Coulson, p. 409).

Many students come from an environment where the “theory-in-use” is based on competition, control, and self-protection. In contrast, social work education favors sharing control and being open to inquiry (Irving & Williams, 1995; Schon, 1984). What can the field instructor do to facilitate this kind of learning in process recording? A supervisory relationship that is “individualized, multifaceted and therefore more empathically attuned” (Deal, 2003, p. 11) provides the underpinnings for reflection. Creating an atmosphere of collegiality, curiosity, and respect is important, and such an atmosphere can be nurtured by field instructors taking a “non-expert” position, sharing their own mistakes, and enjoying a sense of humor. Open discussion of issues of difference and power is essential. The field instructor should reiterate the function of the process recording as a safe space for the examination of questions, mistakes, and dilemmas. Suspension of self-criticism can be encouraged by the practice of mindfulness: “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment to moment” (Kabat-Zinn, in University of Southern California, 2014).

Feedback from the field instructor can lead interns toward reflection. Field instructors can focus on “moments of meaning-making and impasses” (Mullin & Canning, 2007, p. 171) in the conversation between the intern and client(s). An optimal balance between support and challenge in formative feedback promotes openness in the process recording (Abbott & Lyter, 1998). Deal (2003) suggests asking discriminating questions like, “What are the strengths and weaknesses of being more confrontive [sic] with this client now?” and “What’s the difference between the way this client relates to you

and to [another counselor or family member]?" (p. 13-14). Field instructors can help interns recognize their own internal themes as well as themes and patterns in clients' words and behaviors (Black & Feld, 2000). Finally, they can help interns explore different points of view and alternative options while also discussing and critiquing various techniques and theories. Overall review of the student's practice is facilitated by questions like, "Looking back, would you have done things the same or differently with this client?" or "What clients are easiest and hardest for you to work with?" Most important is regular communication about the supervisory relationship in which the intern is encouraged to give feedback (Birkenmaier & Timm, 2003). These avenues of reflection can help the intern's conversation develop from a "superficial, scant and concrete" discussion to one that is "in-depth, rich [and] textured" (Bogo et al., 2013, p. 268).

Process recording has long been the subject of heated debate. Many interns and field instructors complain that it is time-consuming. Field educators may be concerned that students' recollections of their interactions with clients can lack truthfulness or accuracy, particularly if parts of the dialogue are deliberately withheld or altered (Neuman & Friedman, 1997). Although Black and Feld (2006) explicitly discuss agency issues as external themes to be tracked in process recordings, and macro/systems process recording forms can be used for this purpose, Olson (2014) suggests that, in reality, it is difficult for process recording to "pull for critical thinking about the programmatic, agency or institutional context." In a recent electronic mailing list discussion about process recording, one field educator wrote,

I believe there is a critical point in which process recordings lose their value and fail to accomplish the goals they seek to achieve. I have found that if students complete too many of them, it shifts the focus to the task of completion of the process recording away from the learning that is to be accomplished through the process. Also, overuse of process recordings can undermine students' confidence in their ability to actually intervene effectively with clients [...because] the supervisor's 'presence' in the actual interview essentially 'sitting on the shoulder of the student' may be a distraction and lead to second guessing. (Davis, 2014)

Finally, evaluation of the meta-competence of reflection has been deemed problematic (Boud & Walker, 1998; Ixer, 1999). Although process recording can be useful for formative feedback to students about their strengths and areas for growth, summative evaluation of reflection and other competencies should depend more on objective sources, such as observation of the student's work in the field or tests such as the Objective Structured Clinical Examination (Bogo, Regehr, Katz, Logie, & Tufford, 2012).

On the other hand, process recording has been successfully adapted to work with different populations, such as adults and children (Canning & Mullin, 2008; Mullin & Canning, 2007); in different interventions, such as individual and group work (Cohen & Garrett, 1995); and at the macro as

well as micro level of practice (Medina, 2010). It is also used in other professions, including nursing (England, 2005) and counseling (Irving & Williams, 1995; Myers, 2003). Process recordings can offer invaluable access to students' thoughts and feelings, can help to assuage emotional reactivity that can interfere with the helping relationship (Bogo et al., 2013), and can encourage field instructors to give detailed feedback on the timing and phrasing of communications that is impossible to record with a journal. As one social work student put it,

We're working with clients to help them develop insight (awareness of their thoughts, feelings, associations, reactions and behaviors) and adaptive ways of interacting with the world [...] To do so, we need to help them to distinguish between thoughts and feelings, and between assumptions and observations [...] To teach these things, we have to know how to do them ourselves [...] We haven't come up with a better window than [process recording] into what students are really saying, thinking, assuming and feeling as they interact with clients. (Hill, 2011)

The future of process recording is unclear. A recent poll of social work programs conducted by Najor Durack (2014) showed wide variability in the number of process recordings required by each program: some schools require none; some say that they are optional or "strongly encouraged"; and others require anywhere from one per term to two per week (for a summary of responses, see Resources in this issue). Research on process recording is essential. A national survey would flesh out the available data and differentiate between BSW and MSW programs, programs focused on micro or macro practice, programs from different areas of the country, online and on-campus programs, etc. What do students, field instructors, and field advisors think about the advantages and disadvantages of process recording? How many process recordings are optimal for BSW and MSW students? What kind of orientation is important for students who use process recording? What kind of training is necessary for field instructors? Are there innovative ways in which technology can be used for process recording? How does process recording fit in with other methods, such as journals, that are used to "scaffold" reflection (Coulson & Harvey, 2012; Dempsey, Halton, & Murphy, 2001)? As one field educator said about process recordings, "We need to determine whether they are really a best practice or a 'tradition' in social work field instruction" (Davis, 2014).

References

- Abbott, A., & Lyter, S. (1998). The use of constructive criticism in field supervision. *The Clinical Supervisor*, 17(2), 43-57.
- Birkenmaier, J., & Timm, T. (2003). Feedback in practicum: Givin' it and takin' it. *The New Social Worker*, Winter.
- Black, P., & Feld, A. (2006). Process recording revisited: A learning-oriented thematic approach integrating field education and classroom curriculum. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 26(3/4), 137-153.

- Bogo, M., Katz, E., Regehr, C., Logie, C., Mylopoulos, M., & Tufford, L. (2013). Toward understanding meta-competence: An analysis of students' reflection on their simulated interviews. *Social Work Education: The International Journal*, 32(2), 259-273.
- Bogo, M., Regehr, C., Katz, E., Logie, C., & Tufford, L. (2102). Evaluating an Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE) adapted to social work. *Research in Social Work Practice*, 22(4), 428-436.
- Boud, D., & Walker, D. (1998). Promoting reflection in professional courses: The challenge of context. *Studies in Higher Education*, 23(2).
- Brookfield, S. (2012, November 26) Stephen Brookfield on Creative and Critical Thinking. Retrieved April 1, 2014, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8umk4w8kB8>
- Canning, J., & Mullin, W. (2008). Student process recording in practice with children. *The Clinical Supervisor*, 27(1), 61-75.
- Cohen, R., & Garrett, K. (1995). Helping field instructors become more effective group work educators. *Social Work with Groups*, 18(2/3), 135-148.
- Coulson, D., & Harvey, M. (2012). Scaffolding student reflection for experience-based learning: A framework. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 18(4), 401-413.
- Davis, M. (2014, March 10). Process recordings [Electronic mailing list message]. Retrieved from fielddirectors@cswe.listpilot.net.
- Deal, K. (2003). The relationship between critical thinking and interpersonal skills: Guidelines for clinical supervision. *The Clinical Supervisor*, 22(2), 3-19.
- Dempsey, M., Halton, C., & Murphy, M. (2001). Reflective learning in social work education: Scaffolding the process. *Social Work Education*, 20(6), 631-641.
- England, M. (2005). Analysis of nurse conversation: Methodology of the process recording. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, 12, 661-671.
- Fox, R., & Gutheil, I. (2000). Process recording: A means for conceptualizing and evaluating practice. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 20(1/2), 39-51.
- Graybeal, C., & Ruff, E. (1995). Process recording: It's more than you think. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 31, 169-181.
- Hill, N. (2011, November 22). Process recording is a life skill (really!) [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://practicewisdom.blogspot.com/2011/11/process-recording-is-life-skill-really.html>
- Irving, J., & Williams, D. (1995). Critical thinking and reflective practice in counseling. *British Journal of Guidance and counseling*, 23(1).
- Ixer, G. (1999). There's no such thing as reflection. *British Journal of Social Work*, 29(4).
- Medina, C. (2010). The need and use of process recording in policy practice: A learning and assessment

tool for macro practice. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 30, 29-45.

Mullin, W., & Canning, J. (2007). Process recording in supervision of students learning to practice with children. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 27(3/4), 167-183.

Myers, P. (2003). Process recording: Importing a technique from social work field instruction. *Journal of Teaching in the Addictions*, 2(1), 99-108.

Najor Durack, A. (2014, March 11). Process recording response list [Electronic mailing message}. Retrieved from fielddirectors@cswe.listpilot.net.

Neuman, K., & Friedman, B. (1997). Process recordings: Fine-tuning an old instrument. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 33(2), 237-244.

Olson, N. (2014). Field placement as an ethnographic opportunity. *Field Educator*, 4(1). Retrieved from <http://fielddeducator.simmons.edu/article/field-placement-as-an-ethnographic-opportunity>

Papell, C., & Skolnik, L. (1992). The reflective practitioner: A contemporary paradigm's relevance for social work education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 28(1).

Rai, L. (2006). Owing (up to) reflective writing in social work education. *Social Work Education*, 25(6), 785-797.

Schon, D. (1984). *The reflective practitioner*. New York: Basic Books.

University of Southern California (2014). Reflective learning tool for practicum. Retrieved from <http://sowkweb.usc.edu/master-of-social-work/msw-degree/field-education/form>

Urdang, E. (2010). Awareness of self—A critical tool. *Social Work Education*, 29(5), 523-538.

Urdang, E. (1979). In defense of process recording. *Smith College Studies in Social Work*, 50, 1-15.