

LISTENING TO THE SELF-DOUBT VOICE

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ABSTRACT: This phenomenological inquiry examined the ways in which child and youth care practitioners experience self-doubt in their practice. Qualitative interviews were conducted with four key informants and a thematic analysis was performed to gain an understanding of their lived experiences, meanings, and impact of self-doubt. The data revealed that self-doubt is not a static construct but an experience that changes over time. Exploring the experiences of self-doubt encourages self-reflection in practice when practitioners want to move beyond their doubts to seek more understanding and clarity in their work.

Key words: self-doubt, youth work practice, self reflection, phenomenological inquiry

AN INQUIRY INTO SELF-DOUBT IN CHILD AND YOUTH CARE PRACTICE

*“Doubt is what gets you an education.”
—Wilson Mizner (Maisel, 1996)*

Listen. Listen. Listen to the self-doubt voice within. What is it telling you? Looking within and revealing this inner voice of self-doubt may be risky, yet it can help professionals remain in touch with their own perceptions and feelings about what they value and believe in their work. An understanding and exploration of self-doubt can lead to a growing awareness as inner thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are examined in search of meaning and self-knowledge.

In 2004, I conducted an inquiry for the purpose of coming to a more thorough understanding of the nature and meaning of self-doubt in child and youth care practice (Sanrud, 2004). The findings of this research are useful for developing practitioner resiliency, enhancing the quality of supervision and education, and promoting a closer examination of self in practice. Questioning motives and reasons for being, doing, and feeling can help professionals become more authentic and ethical in their work. When practitioners become more reflective, and are able to articulate their thoughts and feelings more clearly, they can function in more meaningful and purposeful ways.

The goals of the inquiry were a) to come to a more thorough understanding of the meaning of self-doubt in practice, b) to understand the ways in which child and youth care practitioners experience self-doubt in their practice, and c) to pro-

vide a research-based grasp of the meaning and impact of self-doubt in child and youth care practitioners' practice, in order to inform child and youth care training and education.

The questions that guided the inquiry were a) What do child and youth care practitioners experience when they experience self-doubt in their practice? What does it mean to them? b) How do the practitioners describe their self-doubt in their practice? What does it look and feel like? c) How does self-doubt affect their practice? d) Are there different kinds of self-doubt in practice? What are they? , and e) What can practitioners learn from their experiences of self-doubt?

The assumptions that influenced the inquiry, developed from my own beliefs and experiences of self-doubt in professional practice. Practitioners are not alone with their thoughts and feelings about self-doubt. I believe that everyone, to some degree, experiences self-doubt in practice. Thus, the purpose of writing this short article is to share with the reader some of these experiences.

The Research Paradigm: A Phenomenological Approach

Bentz and Shapiro (1998) state:

Phenomenology is used to obtain knowledge about how we think and feel in the most direct ways. Its focus is what goes on within the person in an attempt to get to and describe lived experience in a language as free from the constructs of the intellect and society as possible. At its root, the intent is to understand phenomena in their own terms – to provide a description of human experience as it is experienced by the person herself (p. 96).

Therefore, a phenomenological method was well suited to address the research question of what it is that child and youth care practitioners experience when they experience self-doubt in practice. My intention was to listen to, illuminate, and understand another person's experience. As a qualitative researcher, I joined each participant in the interviews and entered her world to generate the data which came in the form of words, stories, metaphors, and drawings.

Based on Kvale's (1996) and Seidman's (1991) work, I conducted conversational in-depth interviews with four female child and youth care practitioners about their experiences of self-doubt in their practice. I listened actively and responded to the participants' descriptions using empathic responses to communicate understanding and open-ended questions to elicit personal stories and in-depth descriptions. A relationship developed quickly between the interviewees and myself as I used respect, genuineness, and curiosity to create an open, personable, and collaborative atmosphere. I approached each interview with the willingness to hear and understand what the participants were saying about their self-doubt so that I could decipher meaning.

I invited the process of making art during the interviews by simply stating that I was a child and youth care practitioner trained in art therapy and if the participants wanted to create a picture of what they were talking about in the interviews they were welcome to do so. As I was not asked, I did not talk extensively about my art

therapist title, nor did I give elaborate detail about what an art therapist does. This information may have intimidated the participants and I wanted to create an informal, non-expert, and person-centered approach (Rogers, 1961) to the interviews. I also wanted to listen intently to the experiences of each participant and not influence what they would say or do during the interview process. Thus, I simply invited each participant to create a picture of self-doubt if she chose to do so. Caroline (a pseudonym) chose to do so. The other participants (Marcie, Tracy, and Penny [all pseudonyms]) illustrated self-doubt in creative ways by describing metaphors or stories. This suggested that these participants found it helpful to utilize art, metaphors, and stories to illustrate what self-doubt meant intimately for each of them. Self-doubt is a personal journey and in the expression of art, metaphor, and story each person was able to give voice to her own experience.

Discoveries and Impressions

I see that doubt has two faces,
 one the heroic face of the eternal questioner,
 the other the defeated face of the constant worrier.

—Eric Maisel (1996)

Essence of Self-Doubt

Self-doubt is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon that can mean different things to different people, yet at the same time can exhibit commonalities. All the participants described self-doubt as involving worry about needing to “measure up” to expectations of self and others. Three out of the four participants described self-doubt as second-guessing or questioning self. Two out of the four stated that self-doubt is about being unsure of self, worrying about “doing it right,” achieving confidence on the job, wondering if they are doing a “good enough job,” experiencing a negative quality of self-doubt, and simply not knowing. Individual descriptions of self-doubt included a cognitive environment of a lack of clear expectations, an ambiguous job description, wanting to feel valued, comparing self with others, experiencing pressures of the job, and having low self-esteem.

These essential features of self-doubt suggested that at its core is a cognitive component of questioning self. For example, “Am I good enough?” or “Have I done it the right way?” are typical questions. There are also emotive aspects of self-doubt that can create feelings of uncertainty, worry, fear and anxiety, and physical and bodily sensations such as rapid breathing, upset stomach, crying spells, and stiff joints. Behavioral aspects included sleepless nights, sulking, poor decision-making, self-reflection, and new learning.

Many described the importance of “paying attention,” and “tuning in” to these cues taken from their body, mind, and emotions to learn new ways of responding to this phenomenon while performing on the job. The process of understanding their self-doubt helped these practitioners alter the way they practice so that they can begin to respond in healthier and proactive ways. Ultimately how we respond to our experiences of self-doubt can alter how we choose to function in our daily work.

Origins of Self-Doubt

While all of the participants mentioned childhood influences during the interviews, two of the four discussed this in more detail. For example, Marcie said, "Over my lifetime what I'm realizing more and more is that there are events that happen in the present that are tripping me back to the past. I think as a child growing up I had a real emphasis on being an 'example' (to be a good girl and to meet other people's expectations)." Penny said, "Well, I think it goes way back. Like I think I'm really little. I... I... I think I just always expected a lot out of myself. I think I was born into my family to make them happy. I think it was always part of just wanting to be good at whatever I did and then, but always doubting my ability in whatever I did, and I think that carries into my work today." According to Langford and Clance (1993), Clance (1985), Clance and O'Toole (1987), and Clance and Imes (1978) messages from families of origin and childhood can have an effect on the development of self and the imposter phenomenon. The cited examples above suggest that this is true for self-doubt as well. It would be fascinating to explore the relationship between childhood and the development of self, self-doubt, and the imposter phenomenon in more depth.

Categories of Self-Doubt

The participants all spoke of self-doubt as being either negative or positive. Negative self-doubt was described as debilitating, overwhelming, nauseating, and compelling. The descriptions of self-doubt were rich with metaphors of being lost, feeling stuck, landing in quicksand, being in a fog, not seeing the light, expecting the worst, imagining "catastrophes," making "mountains out of mole-hills," and seeing only "half of the self." Even though these descriptions are very different, they share a common quality of distress.

Positive self-doubt was described as a way of learning about self and of remaining healthy in the field. It becomes a positive force when it helps practitioners to reflect critically on their practice so that they can perform more competently. As the four participants experienced their self-doubt and learned from it, they became more introspective and self-reflective about how to function in practice. All the participants spoke of moving beyond the doubt and acknowledging the significant lessons learned when they became overwhelmed by their negative self-doubt. For example, early in practice the experience of self-doubt was devastating for the participants, yet all talked about how they turned this around in their practice. This is critical for avoiding burnout and fostering resiliency. Caroline spoke of getting stronger within herself. When her inner strengths and outer expectations are equal and parallel then she is able to see more light and opportunities in her work because she values herself more. Marcie spoke of needing to balance her negative experiences with positive inner dialogue to discover what her "triggers" can teach her about herself. She found this process helpful to go beyond the doubt rather than staying stuck in it. Tracy recognized that taking a more positive attitude toward self-doubt helped her to take a more active role in her practice to do things differently and create an approach of "best practice." She said she definitely does

not like being in the quicksand too long!! Penny acknowledged the importance of learning from her mistakes and naming the self-doubt so that she can start to give herself more positive affirmations. She spoke about it being important to “not hide” parts of the self, but to strive for congruency and balance. Being congruent and self-aware in practice means bringing the inner and the outer parts of the self together so that practitioners can “walk their talk” and “talk their walk” (do what they say and say what they do) and feel more confident in their capabilities and more satisfied in their work.

Seeking creativity and making mistakes is significant in helping practitioners discover the lessons they need to learn in their practice to create feelings of hope rather than debilitating feelings of self-doubt. For example, Caroline spoke of the light bulb, in her last drawing (Figure 1) helping her to see better when she is in the fog of self-doubt.

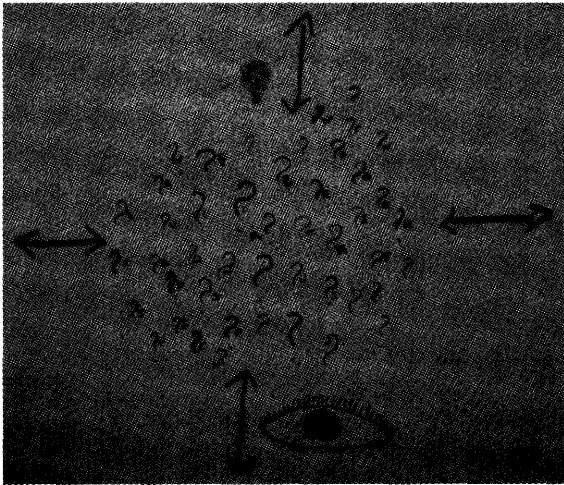


Figure 1: Caroline's Drawing

She said, “Well, in the fog things don't look as bright. The world just doesn't have the same kind of shine or sparkle. And then as the... as the self-doubt gets smaller (the fog), the light bulb appears to be bigger. The light bulb is always there ... it's just a matter of whether I see that it's there and whether I believe that I can reach out to that idea.” Marcie stated, “And there will be more lessons to learn and the self-doubt is just saying, even if I lose my balance I'm moving forward. So the self-doubt are my fears and my fears, well, I'd have to say they're my friends too. They have sparked me to do things differently and it's like dancing with the dark side to see more light.”

Management of Self-Doubt

The movement from negative to positive self-doubt, as illustrated above, indicates that a keen awareness of self is needed to begin to learn how to manage and cope effectively. Being self-aware, talking to others, and taking care of self are the three most popular techniques which these participants talked about using. Other individual coping skills described included: taking risks, having a sense of humour, and maintaining clear boundaries.

Talking about self-doubt with others in a supportive and trusting work environment is essential for practitioners to achieve resiliency and sustainability in their work. Sharing experiences of self-doubt with others lessens the impact of the overwhelming nature that can fuel the negative quality of self-doubt. Looking within and sharing personal and intimate experiences with others, who are trustworthy, supportive, and non-judgmental, can help practitioners to process the role their self-doubt plays out in their practice. Much meaning and understanding is gained. Penny stated she becomes more grounded and gains more clarity in her work after talking things through with someone who truly listens to her in a non-judgmental way. She said, "I had to talk about it. I had to talk about what was going on for me with someone and when I did, I could reflect on it and learn from the experience because I did not feel judged by that person." Marcie also stated she learns from talking about her self-doubt with others and that this learning is life long.

Further, staying alert to self-doubt in practice brings a humbleness to the work and helps in the understanding of the complexities of life with which the children, youth, and families are struggling. During her interview Penny stated, "There needs to be some healthy self-doubt in there to keep me humble." A time for humility, for self-examination, and for openly acknowledging doubt creates awareness, which facilitates change in the practitioner so that arrogance is avoided and learning is enhanced. It is important that practitioners and their supervisors engage in a dialogue about feelings of self-doubt and how they impact practice. Tracy stated, "Yeah, there needs to be some outside feedback, some mirror that says, 'Yeah, you're okay, you're cool, do your thing, and what are you learning?'" I had the best supervisor of my life who taught me lots about myself and my self-doubts!" When Tracy is in the quicksand of self doubt she said she needs someone to help her out, as she indicated, "The more I fight it (self-doubt) the more I sink and I need somebody to throw me a rope (to listen)."

Self-care is another coping skill which the participants talked about using to manage their self-doubt and maintain a balanced and healthy professional life. For example, Caroline spoke of wanting a balance between self-doubt and self-care to help her feel good about the job she is doing. Marcie talked about nurturing herself by being in tune with all aspects and layers (the sunshine and self-doubt parts) of herself so that she can operate from a more authentic place. When Tracy set clear boundaries, relied on her faith, and trusted her sense of humour, she maintained a healthy and positive attitude toward her self-doubt. Penny talked about using self-care techniques, such as reading, reflecting, affirming herself, getting enough sleep, and changing her thinking to help her understand her self and self-doubt better.

Thus, child and youth care educators and clinical supervisors could include a specific piece about self-reflection in their courses or supervision sessions to address practitioner self-care with an emphasis on self-doubt in practice.

Implications for Child and Youth Care Practice

This inquiry has provided some insight into what it is like to experience self-doubt in child and youth care practice and may assist us in the development of a greater appreciation and understanding of the inner world of the professional. The findings presented here can help practitioners practice in more meaningful and purposeful ways by helping them examine their own self-doubt more closely. Krueger (1991) points out that being a child and youth care practitioner is about "... caring and acting – about being there, thinking on your feet, interacting, and growing with children" (p.77). The child and youth care profession is very demanding work and it takes a confident and resilient professional to immerse herself in the lives of the many children, youth, and families she serves. Caring intimately about others while maintaining professional and personal boundaries involves great integrity and competency in interpersonal skills. It is vital for child and youth care professionals to possess self-awareness so that they may look within to discover how they are impacted by the work. It is through this process of self-reflection that practitioners can learn from their experiences of self-doubt in their practice and discover what child and youth care work means to them. When practitioners gain an understanding of their self-doubt, they have the opportunity to establish emotional stability and face the children, youth, and families' often distressing experience. Talking to others and sharing doubts brings more passion and commitment to the work. Krueger further notes that "...with the help of supervisors, teammates, and teachers [child and youth care practitioners] have to constantly strive to understand their own feelings and experiences in relationship to [know] how they influence interactions with children and families" (p. 82).

The awareness of self is essential for understanding child and youth care work as noted by Fewster (1990, 1999), Krueger (1997), Rose (1991), Kass and Mann-Feder (1995), and Ricks (1989). An understanding of self-doubt encourages further exploration and awareness of self in practice. This exploration leads to new knowledge about who one is, what one does, and how one does it in child and youth care. When children, youth, and families are in the care of professionals, it is vital for the professionals to feel competent and responsible in their practice. Ricks indicates:

In order for learners to examine, understand, and integrate self they need knowledge about self and how it works; they need skills in reflecting and changing self; and they need to integrate this knowledge and these skills in their child and youth care practice. Once the knowledge about self and how it works and the skills of reflecting on and changing self are integrated into one's daily child and youth care practice, one can be responsible and accountable for one's child care practice (p. 3).

Thus exploring self-doubt in one's practice helps the practitioner to recognize strengths, learn from mistakes, gain more confidence, and above all, to examine self in order to gain a deeper understanding of experiences and interactions in professional practice. Revealing these inner thoughts, feelings, and behaviors helps professionals to identify who they are and what they do. This is relevant to their personal and professional growth. Understanding their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of self-doubt enhances their ability to work to their fullest capacity. Listen. Listen. Listen to the self-doubt voice within. What is it telling you?

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