

The Struggle Bus: Using Critical Self-Reflection for Psychological Introspection and Self-Care

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Abstract: Take away all titles; humans need support. As we add titles to our existence, the observed need for support shifts. When a title like social worker, CEO, doctor, teacher, or coach is attached to an individual, it can strip the individual of believing they can reach out for help. The helper is the help. People think the social worker must fix everything and not warrant support due to a title. How does the social worker seek help without appearing “weak”? Obstacles faced in asking for help can create dark and isolating holes, referenced as rides on the struggle bus. In this narrative, we examine the culture of self-care, being a passenger on the struggle bus, and explore the process of critical self-reflection. Finally, we introduce the Critical Incident Questionnaire and recommendations for potential critical self-reflection as tools in managing the struggle bus phenomenon.

Keywords: social worker, critical self-reflection, burnout, well-being, self-care, introspection

Psychological Introspection: Checking Yourself Before Wrecking Yourself

The lessons I (Tolbert-Banks) have learned, especially in 2020, created a framework to design my days, weeks, months, and if I want to be alive to see it, my years to come. Schwitzgebel (2019) defined introspection as “a means of learning about one's own currently ongoing, or perhaps very recently past, mental states or processes” (p. 1). Introspection allows me to take a step back and breathe because that is an essential component of self-care and calms down my amygdala, enabling me to think and act rationally and appropriately towards myself and those around me. Nothing is perceived worse than being that person who everyone “fears” or turns a blind eye to when you walk into a room because you have not engaged with and been made aware of, through introspection, potential off-putting behaviors.

I was not too fond of the struggle bus. I did not particularly appreciate riding, driving, nor being hit by the struggle bus. There were many days I asked myself if this bus ride would ever end. Some days the answer was “yes.” Other days, the answer was “no.” I wanted the struggle bus to drop me off, leave me, and allow me a moment to figure out where I was going next, how I would get there, and my chosen mode of transportation. No one knows when the onslaught of crises and everyday life stresses will hit you in a way that may temporarily knock the wind out of you. No one can predict, especially during a pandemic, how each day will begin or end. With that said, it is vital to utilize a bit of critical self-reflection (CSR) to gain a better perspective of where each of us reside mentally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally.

As you journey through this article, it is with anticipative energy that you find one thing that resonates with you and allows you a moment of clarity through CSR and introspection to move forward with a plan about how to be better tomorrow than you were today. This life's journey is not for the faint at heart. You will be challenged and not know which way is left or right some

days; however, with awareness, an open mind, and the ability to introspectively look within, you can gain a better perspective about what is next for you.

How can one determine if introspection is truly a tool that will be beneficial or even decide where to start in this introspective process? In moments where I (Tolbert-Banks) may feel fuzzy or unclear, I take a step back, usually with some random journal out of the pile of new journals I have promised myself I would use, and I think to myself, “What am I unclear about at this moment?” As I begin to jot down some notes about what is unclear, I begin to drive down the lack of clarity path a little further to ask myself, “What is it that I'm looking for at this moment?” Addressing what is unclear and working to pinpoint what I would like at that moment allows me to pull in the reins a bit tighter and streamline potential scattered thoughts to maybe one or two, and then begin to think about how to tackle said thoughts. Without clarity, or the willingness to sit down and look within, the weight of all the issues that have not been dealt with properly will begin to fester and potentially manifest in unappreciated ways. Introspection is necessary.

Since 2020, many of our lives have been turned upside down, torn, shattered, or any other quirky adjectives that may be befitting. There is a level of self-care that many of us had to implement that had not occurred prior. Many quarantined, worked from home, were temporarily displaced, found themselves eye to eye and hip to hip with family members at home, furloughed, and many other unfortunate situations. Yes, it takes a level of introspection to get yourself into a space in which you can survive. Our experiences over the past two years afforded us a different level of awareness than ever before. Psychological introspection offers a way to better connect with ourselves, care for ourselves, and provide a roadmap. The roadmap permits carefully plotting out and utilizing an identified self-care plan that can help us navigate the ups and downs, the ins and outs of life, and be the healthiest us we can be. The process of psychological introspection allows us a gateway into CSR necessary and used in many aspects of our lives and life's functioning. Without this vital tool, we each become at risk of a lack of knowledge and insight necessary to equip us with armor to battle the many situations that may come our way.

Critical Self Reflection: Struggle Bus Examination

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Delegate Assembly voted to implement new self-care language to the NASW Code of Ethics effective June 1, 2021 (Grise-Owens & Miller, 2021a; NASW, 2021). Self-care language included the Purpose & Ethical Principles—with the goal that by explicitly including the value of self-care in the NASW Code of Ethics, this emphasis will support a healthy culture among social workers. Pyles (2020) notes that though this is a step in the right direction for social workers to be intentional about self-care, how will the social work profession advocate for the well-being of social workers? How will self-care be of significance in agencies who are navigating the perpetual issues the pandemic has heightened? Ashcroft et al. (2021) and Smullens (2020) identified that the increase in social work services to individuals and organizations during the pandemic has impacted the level of burnout and compassion fatigue among social workers.

As a social work educator and practitioner, I (Shaw) have witnessed the meltdowns, anxiety, and exhaustion faculty, students, and field instructors have experienced as the pandemic continues. Social workers in isolated areas and lone social workers in some practice settings have shared that their isolation from colleagues while working remotely has left them little time to discuss ways to cope. For essential workers, there have been few breaks in the demands. As these conversations have continued with little change in the content, I revisited the practice of CSR and Critical Incident Questionnaires (CIQ) as tools for self-care professionally and personally (Shaw & Glowacki-Dudka, 2019). The application of CSR as a supportive model for the struggle bus roadmap may help us navigate decisions for our well-being in all levels of social work practice as we continue through the pandemic.

I was introduced to CSR in my doctoral studies by reviewing the work of Mezirow (1998), which led to a phenomenological study on the topic of CSR with life coaches. As the researcher, I was intrigued by the recruitment outcome. Initially life coaches were interested in the study. However, as the details emerged as to the method of collecting data using CIQ (Brookfield, 2021) and completing bi-weekly journals for eight weeks, the fly ointment melted, and the number for the study reduced to five. Of those five participants, three were master's level social workers who were practicing as social workers and life coaches. The study design included eight weeks of introspective work involving the completion of the CIQ before and after a client session, a journal summary from the collective CIQs every two weeks, and participation in a semi-structured interview at the end of the eight weeks (Shaw & Glowacki-Dudka, 2019).

What is a CIQ? In our social work language, critical incidents may refer to something heightened and a crisis, and we move into crisis debriefing. Brookfield (2006, 2021) is an educator who contributed widely to the idea of using CIQ with his students for feedback and course correction. The CIQ was a tool, simply five questions used at the end of every one of his classes. The students filled out those five questions anonymously, and that would help him get feedback on how his class went and help him either course correct or continue whatever he chose to do. I decided to modify the CIQ (Brookfield, 2021) for the life coaches to generate some of the feedback and data to analyze. The five questions the coaches used were as follows:

1. At what moment in this session did you feel most engaged with what was happening?
2. At what moment in this session did you feel most distanced from what was happening?
3. What action that anyone in the session (group member, client, you, colleague) took in this session did you find most affirming or helpful?
4. What action or experience in this coaching session did you find most puzzling or confusing?
5. What about this coaching session surprised you most? (This could be something about your own reactions to what went on, or something that someone did, or anything else that occurs to you.)

The development of the study revealed that not every professional wants to do introspective work for professional or personal development. However, the themes emerging from the study revealed that introspective work is challenging, rewarding, and, at best, revealing. Five themes emerged from the study: (1) structure and discipline, (2) increased self-awareness, (3) passionate

purpose, (4) professional development, and (5) enhanced relationships. The application and deeper dive of CSR through the CIQ and journaling was promising as a model when riding the struggle bus. This deeper dive resulted in an experience, which contributed to our self-awareness, which can be helpful when on the struggle bus.

Critical Self-Reflection: Passenger Experience

I (Carter) was fortunate to be a participant in the study mentioned above. As we began, the requirement was to ask and answer questions after each coaching session. Yes, EACH coaching session. I flipped out and thought, “Are you kidding me? I can't do that, and I don't have time.” You know how we do it. It's back-to-back to back-to-back-to-back bus stops only to pick up the next client, not to rest ourselves.

High Speed, Bumpy Road

As helpers, social workers, and coaches alike, we are trained to help our clients hone in on self-improvement, aspirations, SMART goals, action steps, accountability, evaluating, and reflecting on how well the interventions work. We ask open-ended questions to get them to think, acknowledge, validate, reflect, and evaluate. We repeat this with each client, yet we tend not to do the same for ourselves. When do we stop to reflect or evaluate? Instead, we drive the bus until we cannot see any more or run out of gas (burn out). This study and the questions allowed me (Carter) to stop in-between clients and genuinely offered a structured discipline to review how I showed up in each session.

The more I found myself incorporating the structure and discipline of stopping and answering the CIQ in-between clients, the more self-aware I became. My skills improved, and my passion for my work increased. My purpose became more robust, and I was more excited for my clients. My clients could sense my passion, and the engagement process bloomed. While they were feeling good about hitting their goals, I was feeling good about improving myself and recognizing that my passion was increasing along the way.

As I stated, we, as helpers, continue helping others and sometimes forget our personal and professional needs. The structure allowed me to take time, breathe, and reflect on the session I just accomplished. My perceptions of “not enough time” and “more, more, more” were no longer obstacles. Instead, the structure and discipline of doing the CSR activities also helped increase my self-awareness in how I coached and what I needed to work on as I reviewed my journal. It also helped me take the time to review the current client, and my work with that client, put that client's stuff on the shelf, and pay attention to my skills. Finally, it brought my presence and mindfulness back, which increased my passion for coaching and my clients.

As a result, I began slowing myself down, focusing, and better preparing while being more in the moment during each session. I noticed during the sessions I was evaluating myself automatically. I would hear my internal voice saying, “Whoa! I noticed what I did in that session, and I don't want to repeat it in this session.” So I refocused and redirected myself during sessions instead of after the session. It revealed that the development, process, structure, and

discipline became ingrained in a perpetual internal awareness and redirection to increase my skills' effectiveness.

Struggle Bus Detour

Then we transition to home. (Instead of using our valuable skills at home—heaven forbid we “social work” our family or friends.) We may take our tiredness and frustration out on our family. At the time, my (Carter) coaching office was in my home, and I was raising two kids adopted from foster care. I'm doing this reflection, paying attention to my clients, yet what was I doing at home to help with the issues of raising kids with a history of trauma? As my self-awareness increased, I realized I was not bringing my best skills to the home front. So, I decided to transfer my reflection and skills to my family. I paid more attention to how I showed up with my family, kids, spouse, and parents. CSR helped me to understand that I was not taking the time to genuinely listen.

It was the professional development piece, but it truly began to enhance my personal relationships, and I saw my kids change. I saw them slow down. I saw them looking at me differently, and CSR improved and enhanced our relationship. Unfortunately, or fortunately, I realized I was not as good to my family as I was to my clients, and that is not the way it needed to be.

From Struggle to Reflection

In my coach training program, I (Carter) had a mentor coach. Having a mentor coach is a practice to get feedback from a more experienced coach on developing our skills to be more effective. An excellent service, yet you are out there on your own once the program ends. The same holds true for social workers and their supervision. Who do we turn to for introspection and reflection once we clock in the client and supervision hours? Moreover, how much does supervision incorporate introspection and reflection?

I've started incorporating the CIQ questions with my social work students so they can have it from the start. Academic stress is real, and if we start self-reflection early, we might save many future social workers from severe burnout. As they enter the field, the practice of self-reflection can alleviate the effects of trauma exposure (O'Neill et al., 2019).

I have found that the more introspection and reflection I do in all areas of my life, the more I feel passionate and humble. I judge myself by what I know I need to improve upon, not anyone else. The struggle of the judgment bus was real, and I introspectively traded it in for the reflection bus, my bus.

Tools for Struggle Bus Navigation

Take a moment to think about your last unclear moment. How did you feel, what were your thoughts, what did you do? Tapping into the “how did you feel” and “what did you do” will give you some introspective insight into how you do or do not handle situations that can cause

uneasiness. Bollich et al. (2011) addresses ways in which introspection, feedback, and self-knowledge can provide an individual with additional self-insight and knowledge regarding one's personality. As we take this process of psychological introspection a step further towards the journey of self-care, it is essential to remember that we all have obstacles and limitations. How do you hold yourself together when things are going well? How do you maintain yourself when things are scattered and in complete disarray? Your self-care is essential. How you manage stressful and tense times is critical. When you are on the struggle bus, and your back is against the wall, what you do is of the utmost importance. When the daisies grow, the sun is shining, and the unicorns are present, what you do is essential. Psychological introspection and CSR offer insight. They can tell our behaviors, attitudes, and actions in our everyday lives. Both can help us to determine areas of potential growth and areas of maintenance. There are things we are pretty sure we are doing well. As we take moments to introspect and critically self-reflect, we find ways to better ourselves, improve upon self-care skills, and put into action those things that will be most beneficial in our daily journeys. Without the time to truly and fully engage in introspection, you may find yourself at a disadvantage.

Below you will find ideas which may be helpful in implementing psychological introspection and CSR.

1. Shift your perspective from the “Struggle Bus” to a “Reflection Bus”—reframe your stressors to an adventure.
2. Reframe the beliefs that keep you on the struggle bus.
3. Think about and create a tool that may be helpful for you to navigate your daily journey. Use the CIQ or modify with your own questions.
4. If supervising others, encourage psychological introspection and CSR. Innovation can be in a variety of forms that fits your staffing environment and needs such as incorporating the CIQ questions.
5. Use other reflective tools such as a journal, prompts for the journal, mindfulness practices, or other means to pause and reflect.
6. Participate in self-care activities that fit your values and beliefs.
7. Explore the benefits of self-expression such as art, painting, and dancing.
8. Schedule and take mental health days (PTO is not just for being ill).
9. Recognize your self-imposed rules of how and when you work. Ex: Set times during each day to take a break, check your email, or respond to phone calls.
10. Allow yourself the time needed to de-stress and renew (even a 5-minute mindful exercise).
11. Celebrate your wins! If you got out of bed, dance.

Recommendations

We would be remiss not to reference the projected mental health issues arising from the pandemic. We have been on the struggle bus attempting to navigate uncharted highways through the pandemic of 2020+. Our recommendations include utilizing daily tools, seeking support when needed (whether for physical or mental health), and establishing a self-care culture in your agency or work environment. For student social workers, it is recommended that the

competency of self-care be introduced early in their social work education (Grise-Owens & Miller, 2021b) and that self-care be added to the Council on Social Work Education competencies (Pyles, 2020). We recommend supervision training include CSR practices to enhance the supervisor/social worker relationship. Finally, continue to participate in research opportunities to emphasize the continued need for self-care strategies in the profession of social work.

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