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Being Critically Reflective

*Engaging in
Holistic Practice*

Fiona
Gardner

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1

What is Critical Reflection?

My intention in this chapter is to outline briefly the range of current ideas or perspectives about critical reflection and reflective practice with the aim of clarifying the differences between these. In the second part of the chapter I will define how I am using critical reflection in this book, explore principles that I see as connected to being critically reflective and identify the culture of critical reflection that is the background to the examples used here.

I am conscious that interest in including reflection or critical reflection in practice has grown significantly in recent years. Professional accrediting bodies across health, human services and education now generally expect some form of reflective practice in the curriculum. Some professions, like social work (Morley, 2008; Noble and Irwin, 2009) and nursing (Johns and Freshwater, 2005; Crowe and O'Malley, 2006) have a long history of interest in being reflective; others such as allied health professions including physiotherapy, speech therapy and occupational therapy now also include reflective practice as an integral aspect of professional development (Delaney and Watkin, 2009; Cohn, Schell and Crepacu, 2010; Vachon, Durand and LeBlanc, 2010). Much current writing explores the use of reflective practice across disciplines (Fronek et al., 2009; Rolfe, Jasper and Freshwater, 2011; Oelofsen, 2012) but also in specific fields of practice such as mental health (Webber and Nathan, 2010), early childhood education (Reed and Canning, 2010), rehabilitation (Vachon, Durand and LeBlanc, 2010) working with older people (Hughes and Heycox, 2005) and in counselling (Bager-Charleson, 2010) and management (Reynolds and Vince, 2004).

Why the increased interest in reflective practice?

So why is there an increased interest in being reflective or in including reflection in practice? In the workshops Jan Fook and I have run practitioners generally experienced critical reflection as a way of developing a more complex understanding of practice that is helpful in an increasingly multifaceted and uncertain environment (Fook and Askeland, 2006). I find that

professionals in workshops often talk about the pressures of a busy and challenging workplace, where there is little time or opportunity to stop and think, to process, to be aware of the influence of their own feelings, values and assumptions. This combined with the challenges of working with an increasingly diverse population reinforces their questions of how to work with integrity as well as how to be a high-quality and effective worker. Some would say that their impetus to be reflective is also influenced by feeling 'stuck' or challenged by situations that present moral or ethical dilemmas (Laabs, 2011). Similarly, Lam, Wong and Leung (2007) found that 'disturbing events' were catalysts in generating critical reflection processes for social work students.

Different approaches to critical reflection and reflective practice

What people mean by reflective practice varies considerably and this is reflected in the sometimes bewildering range of writing about critical reflection, reflection, reflective practice and reflexivity. It is important to notice that writers about critical reflection and reflective practice often use the same language to talk about different things or different language to talk about the same things (Fook, White and Gardner, 2006). This partly relates to how the writer positions their different professional perspectives and theoretical preferences as well as their varied experiences of being reflective in practice and research. As a developing field, ideas about what works are still being tested, and there is clearly a need for more research about the effectiveness of different approaches. It is important then, when you are reading about reflection, to seek clarity, at the outset, about what the writer specifically means. Some writers see reflective practice and reflexivity as essentially the same; some include critical reflection in reflective practice, while others would see critical reflection as distinct from reflective practice. Redmond (2004) has a helpful diagram and explanatory chapter tracing major theorists and development of ideas about reflection over time. Fook, White and Gardner (2006) review contemporary literature and current approaches and Fook, (2013) reviews concepts.

A key distinction to understand clearly is the difference between reflection/reflective practice and critical reflection. Schön (1983), who is generally seen as key in the development of reflective practice, was primarily interested in professional practice and how and why it worked. The aim of reflection, for him, was to encourage practitioners to 'surface and criticize the tacit understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences of a specialized practice' (p. 61). Such questioning of what is 'taken for granted' means the practitioner becomes 'a researcher in the practice

context' (Schön, 1983, p. 68) moving from reflecting on actions after they have happened to reflecting in action – incorporating the ability to reflect during practice. Schön with Argyris also developed the idea of single and double loop learning in order to illustrate the difference between simply changing actions in response to feedback (single loop) and changing the underlying assumptions or theories that led to the action (double loop) (Argyris and Schön, 1996).

Many writers have used Schön's ideas to build on or to explore more specifically how practitioners can become reflective from their own perspective. Freshwater (2011b, p. 106) from a nursing perspective, for example, sees reflection as a 'cyclic thought process', which she links to clinical supervision: with reflective practice as a 'way of being that comes from the relationship between reflection and clinical supervision', which helps individuals access their ways of knowing that 'are always just below the surface'. This idea of a cyclic process has been used by a variety of other writers and has similarities to an action research cycle –reinforcing Schön's view of the practitioner researching their practice. I have also found that many people relate well to Kolb's cycle, which has been particularly influential with the four stages of learning (concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation) linked to preferred styles of learning (Kolb and Kolb, 2005). In theory, reflection can start at any point in the cycle, with a focus on experience and changed reactions as a result of the reflection. Although this cycle has been criticized for not recognizing cultural influences and for not doing 'justice to the complexity of human learning' (Jarvis, 2012, p. 77), it continues to be widely used.

Learning from experience

Implicit in this view of reflection is that it relates to learning from experience. Dewey (1934) is seen as the person who initially articulated the value of learning from personal experience, which is now firmly embedded in thinking about how people learn both as students and practitioners. How experience is defined here varies including learning from activities that are part of work or life: learning from specific activities in organizations, as part of more formal study or workshops, or learning from other people's experiences. Of course these are not mutually exclusive. I find that in workshops people often learn from hearing about each other's experiences as much as processing their own; some make comments like I can't believe that we have had such a similar experience, but I never thought of seeing it in the way you have. Some writers focus directly on the influence of organizations on reflection and learning. Cressey, Boud and Docherty (2006), for example, suggest the need for 'productive' reflection where organizations create

opportunities in the workplace for learning and reflection on that learning for individuals, work groups and the organization more broadly. Others point out the importance of not forgetting the physicality of experience, that experience is embodied or experienced through the senses at a particular time in a specific cultural context (Jarvis, 2012). Stedmon and Dallos (2009, p.15) put this very well suggesting that learning from experience ‘involves the whole person including thoughts, feelings and senses and ... that learning in this way is a holistic process and that the process of learning is influenced by the social and emotional context in which it occurs’.

The existence of stages in reflective practice

There is also a group of writers interested in how the capacity to reflect on experience changes over time, suggesting a series of stages, which may or may not be sequential. A reasonably typical example of this that can be used to other contexts is Tan and colleagues’ (2010) four stages for assessing how student teachers self-reflect on teaching: (1) pre-reflection (interpretation of classroom situations without consideration of other events or circumstances); (2) surface reflection (considerations of teaching confined to tactical issues concerning ways to achieve predefined objectives and standards); (3) pedagogical reflection (teacher considers how practices are affecting students’ learning and how improvements can be incorporated); and (4) critical reflection (ongoing reflection and critical inquiry on teaching taking into consideration philosophy and ideology). However, they found that only 2 percent of students reflected critically, with 67 percent being pedagogical reflectors. This reinforces that for many practitioners it is important to learn how to become reflective and that reflection will be stimulated in varying ways over time.

This is congruent with Fowler (1981), writing about the stages of spiritual formation. He links a greater capacity to be critically reflective with increasingly complex understandings of the spiritual journey, partly but not wholly related to age and development across the life span. Trelfa (2005) supports this link and suggests stages of spiritual formation have useful parallels to stages of development as a practitioner with learning to be reflective and increasingly aware of self and social context. Carroll’s (2010) six level model of reflection also links changed capacity for reflection with exploring meaning at deeper levels. His levels move from ‘zero reflection’ through empathic, relational, systemic, self and transcendent, with this final level being ‘the reflective stance that sees ‘beyond’ to what makes meaning and gives meaning to life. ... For many, this can be a religious or spiritual stance that reflects a philosophy or a system of meaning that already exists (e.g. Christianity, Judaism), or one that I create (my philosophy of life)

(Carroll, 2010, p. 26). However, like Carroll, most writers emphasize that people do not necessarily work through these stages or levels sequentially. My view on this is that the idea of the stages can be helpful in identifying different ways that people reflect and that these may tend to happen for some people more at particular times of their working lives than others. However, my experience is that the development of reflective capacity is not linear or mutually exclusive. This is reinforced by Hickson (2013) who found from interviews with social work practitioners that rather than thinking about a continuum of reflection, it was more helpful to think about different kinds of reflection. She uses a helpful metaphor of ponds to explore how differently people reflect, but also how people may reflect differently at different times depending on the particular issue and context. Using this metaphor allows for seeing reflection at different levels of depth and connectedness, in different contexts and times, with different people and initiated by varying kinds of events.

Thinking holistically

There are also differences in focus, partly depending on how holistic the approach is, for example, writers are more or less accepting of the place of emotion and the interaction between the personal and the professional. Rolfe (2011a, p. 15) for example, emphasizes that critical reflection focuses on 'the transformation of the way that practitioners view the world and their place in it ... what we *do* rather than who we *are*'. He is somewhat critical of what he sees as Johns' inclusion of personal learning and development; Johns (2005a) expresses concern about the increasing dominance of a rational approach to critical reflection, rather than 'reflection as a mindful, holistic and intuitive lens to view self' that offers a 'way of paying attention, of opening the doors of perception' (Johns, 2005b, p. 7). He goes on to say that '[w]e may thus become mindful of each unfolding experience in such a way as to enable us to learn from that experience and move towards realizing more desirable and satisfactory lives' (Johns, 2005b, p. 11). Johns, like others (Mezirow, 2000; Sawn and Bailey, 2004) affirm the centrality of the emotional in critical reflection: recognizing and engaging with feelings that arise from the experiences being reflected on as well as the process itself. Certainly my experience of the critically reflective process is that it is vital that people recognize and engage with their emotional reactions.

Sawn and Bailey (2004) usefully point out that emotions arise in many ways and can both generate reflection and be generated by reflection. They suggest there is a danger of critical reflection being seen as a way of managing and controlling emotions in organizations rather than as a source of organizational as well as individual change. Armstrong and Huffington

(2004, p. 3) also support the need for organizational understanding and suggest the value of a shift from seeing emotions as disturbing, 'to understanding the emotional undertow of people's experience in organizational life as a source of intelligence into the challenges and dilemmas they are facing'.

Different meanings of 'reflexivity' and 'critical'

Understanding what is meant by reflexivity also varies. For Rolfe, this connects with action: reflexivity then is questioning what is impeding or encouraging action. '[I]f the practitioner who reflects on action is *reflective*, then the one who reflects in action is a *reflexive* practitioner ... reflection-in-action can be seen as a form of practical experimentation or action research' (Rolfe, 2011b, p. 163). Stedmon and Dallos (2009, p. 4) have a related view, using '*personal reflection* to refer to the spontaneous and immediate act of reflecting in the moment ... to describe reflection in action ... In contrast, we use *personal reflexivity* to refer to the act of looking back over, reflecting *on* action'. This is a somewhat different emphasis to Freshwater's (2011a, pp. 185–6), who says:

from a *critical* standpoint, reflexivity involves researchers locating themselves within political and social positions, so that they remain mindful of the problematic nature of knowledge and power inherent in human relationships and organizations (Freshwater and Rolfe, 2001). Critical reflexivity draws particularly on the ... critical theory school of philosophy ... which calls into question the socio-political structures in which we all find ourselves, and which reflects particularly on the effects of power, oppression and disempowerment.

Bager-Charleson (2010) supports this view: 'Critical reflexivity involves questioning our relationship to our own culture. It concerns the link between us and our social structure.' This certainly fits better for me with the ideas of being critically reflected developed for this book.

Writers also vary in what they mean by 'critical'. Brookfield (2005, p. 11) who links 'critical' firmly to critical social theory (discussed in the next chapter), comments 'how the term critical is used inevitably reflects the worldview and ideology of the user'. For example, Crawford (2012, p. 171), says 'reflection becomes more critical and more effective where it also takes account of research and literature-based knowledge' and that more generally, being critical means being 'open, honest and thoughtful' (p. 120). Bager-Charleson (2010, p. 10) acknowledges the value of 'critical friends'; 'someone, such as a trustworthy friend or colleague, who understands where

you are coming from and is able to throw new light on a situation and assist you with your “blind” spots’. On the other hand Thompson and Thompson (2008, pp. 26–7) take the view that it is not appropriate to make a distinction between reflective practice and critical reflection ‘as, in our view, an approach to reflective practice that does not adopt a critical perspective would produce poor quality practice and, in some respects, dangerous practice – for example, by unwittingly reinforcing patterns of discrimination’. Their view of ‘critical’ includes looking at both ‘depth’, what is happening underneath the surface, and ‘breadth’, the influence ‘of a more holistic social and political picture at the macro level’.

More often, writers do make constructive distinctions between kinds of reflection to reinforce the point that people do reflect differently and that some people, of course will use different kinds of reflection at different times. Ghaye and Lilyman (2000, p. 13) suggests reflective practice is ‘about valuing what we do and why we do it’ by ‘linking theory and practice and making connection with meaningful work based on authenticity, intentionality, sensibility and spirituality ... a deep sense of obligation, commitment and moral purpose’ (p. 36). They contrast this with critical reflection that questions accepted routines, and also see critical as referring to practice within larger political and professional systems. Some writers would suggest that reflection is not critical enough. Reynolds and Vince (2004, p. 5) suggest that reflection in organizations is too individual and not sufficiently critical; that ‘experience – the focus for reflection – has been cast in a way which takes insufficient account of its social, organizational and cultural nature’.

Reflective practice, reflexivity and critical social theory all have their own theoretical backgrounds, which are explored in more detail in the next chapter with postmodernism as the four main underlying theories for being critically reflective.

Defining being critically reflective

In this book I am focusing on *being critically reflective*, the capacity to be reflective and to understand how that reflection is influenced by social context. Here, what distinguishes critical reflection from reflective practice or reflection is the inclusion of a *critical* approach: that what is happening in the broader society or culture will inevitably influence practice. I am conscious that for some, or perhaps many, people, the word ‘critical’ is unfortunate, having connotations of being judged or criticized. However, in the sense used here ‘critical’ affirms the link to critical social theory – seeing the influence of social context, which I will explore in detail in the next chapter. The culture of critical reflection stresses the importance of creating an atmosphere that is accepting and non-judgemental so that people feel

able to explore at a deeper level how they are feeling and what they are thinking. This is essential given the process encourages being vulnerable by sharing experiences that are generally at least puzzling, but may well be uncomfortable or painful. The ‘ground rules’ or culture of critical reflection make explicit this expectation of not judging the other. Neither is the process about being critical in the sense of being analytical, although clearly being able to analyse in the sense of being able to explore, consider and be thoughtful is an important part of the process. If critical reflection is being supported within organizations, it is vital to ensure this enabling and accepting culture is embedded in the process, so that it isn’t undermined by expectations of performance or being seen as ‘surveillance, inquisition and a form of required ‘confessional’ (Stedmon and Dallos, 2009, p. 4).

Critical reflection here then is both a theory and a process that ‘involves a deeper look at the premises on which thinking, actions and emotions are based. It is critical when connections are made between these assumptions and the social world as a basis for changed action’ (Fook and Gardner, 2007, p. 14). From a holistic critical perspective, emotions, thoughts, assumptions, values and actions connected to experience are important sources of information about what is meaningful for a particular person. What is meant by assumptions here is what is ‘taken for granted’, our often unconscious beliefs about how things are or ‘should’ be. In the process of critically reflecting such assumptions become conscious and then may be affirmed and used more actively or modified or changed if not reflecting the person’s preferred values and beliefs. The expectation of change is also implicit in critical reflection, specifically, change that is based on values of social justice.

Critical reflection then can be thought of as a way of understanding and engaging with interconnections between:

- an experience (and it helps the process to use a specific experience);
- the emotions, thoughts, reactions and actions related to that experience;
- meaning: what matters about the experience, including related assumptions and values at a fundamental level; and
- the influence of social context and history both individually and collectively with the expectation of the critically reflective process leading to socially just change.

Seeing critical reflection in this way makes explicit the underlying connectiveness between all of these aspects of the self and of the self in relation to the social context. Generally, reflecting critically starts with an experience, which helps ground the reflection. You might also start at another point – with a sense of unease, for example, or discomfort. Alternatively, you might

have a feeling of values being disconnected from your practice and ask where is this coming from? You might then connect this to a specific experience to explore more deeply where this feeling comes from and what it means in relation to values and beliefs. You could begin by considering something general like the influence of a new policy, then connect to a specific experience of the policy and your reactions to it. Possible processes for this are outlined in Chapter 3.

A holistic approach to practice is therefore also integral to being critically reflective and specifically connects to the 'being' aspect. This suggests creating an inner space that allows the dialogue of reflection: validating sitting with and paying attention to what emerges, asking about what emotions and thoughts are influencing reactions, what values and assumptions are surfacing that need to be taken into account, all within the context of the person's own history and their own and the broader social context. From a holistic perspective

The critical reflection process requires workers to use all of themselves, to take into account the emotional, social, mental, physical and spiritual. The process is one that includes recognizing and working with emotions and thoughts, recognizing the influence of social context and the physical world and the impact of what is meaningful. (Gardner, 2011, pp. 70–1)

For Ruch (2005, p. 116) 'a recurrent feature of holistically reflective practitioners is their integration of these personal, propositional and process knowledges and their ability to constantly exercise professional curiosity and ask the question "why?" In relation to their practice'. For example, a practitioner confronted with how a 90 year old is treated in the health system might need to sit with their own inner reactions about what it means to be older, how life is valued and how this is influenced by the broader culture. If there is a question of a major operation such as a heart transplant, questions might be asked about the desirability of this at a conscious or unconscious level such as: how long will this person live? or 'is it worth doing this? Implicit in this is the cultural expectation about it being better to allocate such resources to people who will be more useful/live longer. Practitioners and clients are likely to be influenced by their own experience – perhaps of knowing an active 95 year old. The underlying assumptions compete and it helps to make them conscious, so that informed and aware choices are more likely.

Being critically reflective also assumes that there will be a readiness to work with specific experiences such as these in order to be able to understand practice more deeply. The literature on learning and professional practice acknowledges that people learn in different ways. Professional education has

traditionally focused on a combination of intellectual development and practice experience. The attitude to learning implicit in using critical reflection particularly values the capacity to learn from experience. Particular assumptions underpin this kind of learning such as mistakes are useful for learning. This is not to exclude the relevance of theoretical perspectives, but to balance and integrate these with paying attention to learning from experience. As Morley (2008, p. 409) identifies students, like practitioners, need both skills but also ‘an understanding that the theoretical frameworks that we draw upon, consciously or not, actually inform how we assess a person’s situation, how we conceptualize what the issues may be and ultimately determine our actions in response’.

Principles for being critically reflective

So what might be useful principles for or attitudes towards being critically reflective? I have named the following principles in relatively simple ways to encourage integrating them into an attitude of being critically reflective. This is not to imply that any of these are easy to use when faced with the complexity of everyday practice. They have emerged from my experience of working with individuals and groups using critical reflection over many years, so reflect practice experience as well as being congruent with the theory of critical reflection explored in the next chapter. Implicit in all of these is first working holistically, seeking to integrate all of who you are with your practice. Second, it is also implicit that being critically reflective means approaching practice (or life) with being prepared to be patient, to pay attention to or sit with the surprising and sometimes painful emotions and aspects of practice to allow new understanding to emerge.

Actively remembering or engaging with what really matters

This sounds relatively simple, but, in practice, practitioners often describe how challenging it is in complex situations to identify what is really at the heart of what is happening. It is easy to get distracted. Sometimes this is because of the complexity of the issues and events facing particular service users or communities, and their own mixed feelings and thoughts about these. However, equally it can be the practitioner feeling overwhelmed and finding it hard to identify the fundamental values and assumptions that they want to underpin their work. For both the practitioner and the service user, the organizational expectations and constraints add to the fog of confusion. The question is how to maintain a sense of integrity in practice to be able to consciously and actively identifying the key values in a situation and how to work with them.

First then it is important to identify and engage with what really matters, that is, to do the work of understanding what is significant as a fundamental level. Second it is important to take this understanding seriously and to be active about the implications for work either directly with service users, communities or for you as a practitioner or for the organization or all of these. Often this is related to recognizing and naming the contradictions and conflicts in the work role such as your vision of yourself as an enabler and helper, while limited by organizational expectations about outcomes. What is clear is that identifying what really matters can help workers discern what they are aiming for and to retain a sense of integrity about this even when achieving the ideal may not be possible. This can mean retaining some sense of power or agency in the situation.

Paula, a palliative care nurse, had worked in a large acute hospital with palliative care beds for many years. After she completed the spirituality/pastoral care training she commented that in retrospect she felt she had become overly focused on routines and organizational expectations. What really mattered to her and to the patients and their families were human interactions and she had begun to make relationship building more of a priority and was feeling much more positive about her work role, even when this generated some tension with her manager.

Practice example

Recognizing and affirming difference

Being right or seeking to be right is very strongly ingrained for those of us in Western culture and to some degree in professional practice. We see a professional qualification as equating to a level of expertise expected by particular service users and organizations. This reinforces an underlying assumption of 'rightness' or power differences that may actually be unhelpful for a particular individual or community. We take much for granted about how we do things in all sorts of ways in our public and private life from how to connect with our clients to how decisions are made in our families. One of the aims of critical reflection is to identify our own underlying assumptions and values and in the process recognize that other people have equally valid, but different assumptions and values. In exploring a particular experience, participants in critical reflection processes may see the need to move from an assumption of 'my way is the right way' to: 'my

way is not the only right way'; 'there are many ways'; or 'different ways will suit different people'.

To truly affirm difference, as practitioners, we need to develop the capacity to stand back from our own preferences about how things should be done to allow and affirm the value of how other people approach doing the same things. This can be as simple as different assumptions about what to wear to work or as complex as assumptions related to death and dying. The attitude of being critically reflective can generate a sense of frequent surprise at what we take for granted. It is important in being critically reflective to move from tolerating difference to actively celebrating being different, that is, acknowledging that we are all different from each other, not that everyone else is different from me.

Practice example

Tanya, for example, had left a job that she had been passionately committed to. In the end, she also felt exhausted by it and decided to move to another job in the same organization with fewer hours. A new worker, Sarah, was appointed and Tanya had a week's handover with her. After that initial week, Tanya continued to drop in to see how Sarah was going and to make suggestions about what her priorities should be. Eventually, Sarah became frustrated and told Tanya that she wanted her to leave her do to the job the way she wanted to and that she didn't want to 'burn out' as Tanya had. Tanya felt quite hurt by Sarah's reaction. When she critically reflected on this, she realized that her assumption was that 'my way is the best way to do this job'. She acknowledged that her approach had worn her out and that she couldn't sustain it in practice. This led to a several new assumptions: 'there are many ways to do this job effectively'; 'my way was not sustainable'; 'I need to acknowledge the value of my passion and commitment, but work in ways that I can manage'.

A sense of openness and creativity

Another aspect of being critically reflective is having an attitude of openness. As practitioners, we generally expect this of ourselves in a general sense, but find it difficult to maintain when feeling beleaguered by demanding workloads. The desire to be open is often undermined by the

pressure for closure, efficiency or the awareness of a waiting list or other work expectations. This lessens the capacity to be creative and to look for new ways that might work better for particular people. This sense of openness also means listening for what really matters to an individual, not making assumptions based on initial contact or other people's views. It requires coming to each person or situation with a freshness and readiness to engage with them, rather than being overly influenced by past experience. This is not to negate the value of professional experience in the development of knowledge, but to recognize the danger of reacting from that experience rather than from the person that you are currently engaged with. Ideally, it is as if you are responding as if this was the first time, with your knowledge and experience in the background rather than the foreground.

Sally, is a relationship counsellor who had been working with couple and families for many years. She realized that she had begun to categorize couples when they arrived in relation to the possibilities for remaining together. One day she was surprised that a particular couple she had been sure would separate, said they were feeling so much more positive they had decided to go on a long holiday together. In reflecting on her surprise, she wondered whether the couple had managed this in spite of her rather than because her. She recognized that her feelings of over familiarity with this work might well be getting in the way and that something needed to change.

Practice example

Holding opposites in creative tension

Western culture encourages thinking in binaries or dichotomies, pairs of opposites in which one is perceived as better than the other, more powerful, more able, in some way superior. Eastern culture tends to be more able to simply live with contradictions. Dichotomous thinking limits our ability to be creative: we are too busy trying to decide which of the pairs of opposites is the appropriate one rather than seeing there are many choices. Being critically reflective suggests an attitude of mind that is about allowing for possibilities that are not necessarily consistent. Most of us, for example, would have contradictory assumptions and sometimes values. What can help is simply to 'be' or 'sit' with these until we reach

clarity about our preference or become comfortable about living with the contradictions, for example, wanting to live at the beach, but also in an inland city. Sometimes identifying a range of contradictory possibilities allows or frees up thinking about how things could be or creates a completely new idea.

Practice example

Patrick, an occupational therapist, worked in a small rural community health setting. His experience was of feeling immobilized by his contradictory feelings about a particular family with a child with a significant disability. On the one hand, he believed that parents should make their own choices about how they used his time, on the other hand, he felt he should be making more progress with the child's specific issues, rather than primarily talking with the parent about her experience of having a child with a disability. Is it, he asked, more important to do what she wants or am I right in thinking I should be doing something else? Will the parent be more able to manage the child well if I listen to her more? As he talked more about the family and the dilemma he saw that he was getting too focused on seeing only these options and that he was also assuming it was his decision alone. He decided to suggest to the parent that they brainstorm as a family what they would like to be using his time for and this generated new possibilities that meant the parent and the child's needs were met.

Seeking connectedness as well as valuing difference

Being critically reflective is also about seeking connections as well as valuing difference. In Western culture, we tend to emphasize distinctiveness, uniqueness, individuality often with implications of greater power and influence. Eastern cultures tend to be more comfortable with overlap, synchronicity, what is shared or common between individuals and cultures. In the West, practitioners stress discrete aspects of life, boundaries and neatness of divisions and categories. While of course there are distinct aspects of life, it is also enabling to see when it is more accurate to talk about the complex links and interactions that create commonalities. While it may or may not be helpful as a professional to share aspects of your personal life with another person, it is often significant to recognize and validate the commonness of

the human experience. Being able to empathize with another person is partly about being able to recognize the similarities as well as the differences, a more egalitarian connection.

Tammy started work in palliative care feeling very conscious of her own recent, sudden and painful loss of her father. Because of that she wanted to make clear that she was operating as a competent and professional in control of her life generally and particularly her emotions. Her incident was about feeling hurt by a service user's comment about her cold and remote manner. As she explored where they were each coming from, she realized that she was putting so much energy into looking not 'like a client' that she probably did seem remote. Having shared her fear of behaving 'unprofessionally', she suddenly understood that her assumptions about being professional no longer fitted with what she saw as important in a professional role. Showing emotion, for example, might be equally helpful to clients. She decided that it would be better for her and her clients for her to acknowledge at least to herself, and if appropriate to them, their shared vulnerability and that being empathic did not exclude being competent.

Practice example

Willingness to learn from experience

This particular attitude means being prepared to actively seek the meaning of a particular experience. Part of the expectation here is that critically reflective practitioners will be open to challenging themselves in a positive way, seeking opportunities to delve more deeply into the meaning of a particular experience in order to understand it at a more fundamental level. Some people who have been working with critical reflection for some time say there are particular themes that emerged from their critical reflections. As they have engaged with this over time, their understanding of how this particular way of reacting has developed often deepens. This can then lead to a clearer sense of how to act differently – it may be, for example, that the person understands more fully what the issue is and so what action will be effective.

**Practice
example**

Greg's experience involved a colleague, Ben, criticizing him for being arrogant, because he had told Ben how differently he should approach his work. Greg completely disagreed with this, saying he thought it was reasonable to put another point of view about how things should be done – particularly since he was more experienced. The group asked Greg what he understood as the definition of being arrogant, which he found hard to do, so he asked the group to generate ideas about what they associated with being arrogant. One of the group members said 'pushy', 'keeping on telling you things when you've got the message, but don't agree'. This was an 'ouch' moment for Greg: he volunteered that he had had similar comments in the past, including from his partner. He decided he needed to think more about how he made suggestions.

Linking to context and history and the influence of power

The critical aspect of critical reflection relates to taking into account a person's own social and cultural history as well as understanding how they have been influenced by the broader social context and history. People internalize the assumptions from their individual and collective situations, which affects their perceptions of their own capacity for power and influence. Being gay, for example, is likely to be experienced differently in 2011 compared to 1970 depending on where you live: the general culture has changed and this in turn has changed attitudes in families, which have in turn influenced attitudes in the general culture. Being critically reflective means engaging with the complexities of what this might mean, being prepared to ask what the person's own personal experiences related to history might be and also how these might be mediated by the cultural environment in which they live. For professionals in professional practice, organizations are also influenced by the prevailing culture and continue to influence it in their turn. The organizational culture then also needs to be taken into account in thinking about context and history.

Culture of critical reflection

As will be clear from the examples used above, critical reflection can be challenging at many levels, personally and professionally, as well as stimulating,

revelatory and inspiring. My experience of using critical reflection is that it works best when there are clear expectations and the establishment of appropriate culture, whether you are using the processes on your own, with another individual or in a group, in supervision or informally.

Critical reflection is first and essentially a non-judgemental process: the aim is not to be making comments about whether someone did, thought or felt something that was 'right' or 'wrong', or appropriate or not. The expectation is that the person has brought a particular experience to the reflection because they want to understand more deeply something about it. Usually, this experience is something that is already puzzling, bothering or concerning them. Being critical in the sense of making judgements is therefore not helpful, but it is also not helpful to be simply reassuring them. If the incident is clearly upsetting, it is, of course appropriate to be empathic, but also to bear in mind that the person bringing the incident has decided they want to explore it.

From this perspective, the culture of critical reflection focuses on exploration, what a narrative approach might name as maintaining a 'stance of curiosity' (Morgan, 2000). The expectation is to keep asking why, assuming that there are likely to be many reasons why, not just one. I find that not everyone likes the word why, some feel it implies a judgement. This is why in the sense of: where were you coming from when ...?; what influenced you to ...?; how did you come to ...?; What were you feeling when ...? The aim is to help the person find clarity for themselves about the *meaning* of the experience for *them* – which may well be quite different from what someone else might expect.

Acceptance is the somewhat paradoxical next key aspect of a culture of critical reflection: that the person was doing what seemed reasonable at the time or being what felt like the only way they could be. At the same time, given critical reflection's postmodern underpinnings, there is the expectation that there are always other ways, other possibilities and part of the process is about unearthing these. Sometimes this feels quite confronting, so it is important that it is done in a spirit of what are the other possibilities, not what would have been better to do.

Given the nature of the experiences people may want to explore, it is of course vital that discussions remain confidential. Sometimes the person sharing the experience may also reinforce this by altering details. However, there are times, especially in teams using critical reflection over time, when others will also know about a particular experience and who else was involved in it. If this is the case, it is important, both to affirm confidentiality in general, but to also remember that only one side of the story is being presented and not to allow the discussion to affect other relationships outside the group.

Finally, in critical reflection, because the discussion of an experience can raise unexpected emotions and new understandings it is important that the person presenting the experience be the one who has ultimate control of the process: to ask, for example, for the rate of questions to slow down or to say that they want to stop and take time to think about, on their own, what has emerged.

Summary

Critical reflection, reflective practice, reflection and reflexivity are defined quite differently in the literature. This book is focusing on critical reflection: defined as a way of understanding and engaging with interconnections between:

- an experience;
- the emotions, thoughts and reactions and actions related to that experience;
- meaning: what matters about the experience, including related assumptions and values at a fundamental level; and
- the influence of social context and history both individually and collectively with the expectation of the critically reflective process leading to socially just change.

This definition is underpinned by four main theoretical approaches: reflective practice and reflexivity as well as critical theory and postmodernism, which will be explored in the next chapter.

- What language would you have used to talk about reflecting on practice?
- What is your reaction to the definition of critical reflection used here?
- What do you think has influenced your reaction?
- What beginning thoughts and feelings do you have about the suggested culture of critical reflection?

Questions
for reflection