Critical Reflection for Practice

Rosalie Pockett, Lindsey Napier and Roslyn Giles

All professionals aim to be reflective in their practice. It is one of the key elements of being a professional person. In the human services sector it is commonplace to hear that social workers must not only be 'reflective' practitioners but must be *critically* reflective and that critical reflection is integral to good practice. This is occurring at a time when practitioners make frequent comment on the absence of time for pause to think. Rather the requirement is to respond to continuous pressure to find quick fixes, sort out immediate problems, follow protocols, complete pre-categorised assessment forms and perform tasks that require concentrated effort and stamina but may afford limited scope for discretion. Why then is this imperative so important?

Being a critically reflective practitioner enables practitioners to engage with varying perspectives or ways of understanding situations and competing courses of action; to meet with more confidence the challenges that arise from these competing positions; to gain a more in-depth understanding of ethical dilemmas in their practice, and to encourage new ways of thinking. Practising in a *critically reflective* way focuses conscious attention on the 'whole self' of the practitioner: the thinking, feeling, believing, acting practitioner. A better understanding of the assumptions on which our actions are based and an awareness of our subjective position can lead to making changes to our practice. The skills of critical reflection are many. Critical reflection requires an ability to conceptualise and analyse, together with a willingness to examine the assumptions underpinning one's practice, in order to improve it. We must be able to become conscious of the ways in which language is employed to authorise particular perspectives; to make links between the personal, social, and political domains; to recognise and accept

diversity; to invite and work with uncertainty; to examine the ways in which one exercises power and authority; and to imagine and consider unfamiliar and new ways of thinking and acting.

Towards critical reflection

Critical reflection is informed by specific theoretical ideas about the meanings of 'critical'. In this chapter, we provide a brief introduction to critical reflection, drawing in particular, on the work of Jan Fook (2002). There are a number of strands to the development of critical reflection and it is important to understand them so that the specific meanings of critical reflection are clear.

The work of Argyris and Schön (1974) and Schön (1983, 1987) is often cited as the starting point for consideration of reflective approaches in professional education and practice. Schön questioned the traditional assumptions about knowledge generation. He queried the assumption that the only valid practice is the application of knowledge generalised from systematic, empirical research to specific situations. He pointed out that theory is also implicit in our actions, actions that may or may not be congruent with our espoused ideas and beliefs. He highlighted how difficult it is for formal theory to 'inform' fully how to act in the constantly changing world of practice, in all its diversity, messiness, and unpredictability. Creativity, versatility, and judgment are essential. Reflection can promote a more effective practitioner, where the whole of knowledge is valued but not uncritically embraced. Through reflection, the practitioner can also seek greater coherence in practice, by discovering the differences between *espoused* ideas and value commitments and one's *actual* practices.

The contributions of scholars in education, such as Mezirow and Brookfield, are crucial: they pointed to the distinguishing features of *critical* reflection in learning. Mezirow et al. (1991, p. 1) argued that critical reflection involves 'a critique of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built'. Rather than returning to prior learning to confirm that we have acted in line with our prior suppositions, he advocated 'challenging our established and habitual patterns of expectation, the meaning perspectives with which we have made sense out of our encounters with the world, others, and ourselves' (Mezirow et al. 1991, p. 12). He stressed that critical reflection is concerned with 'the why, the reasons for and consequences of what we do' (1991, p. 13). Brookfield too focuses on the recognition and analysis of assumptions—'the interpretive glue that binds the various meaning schemes comprising our structures of understanding' (1991, p. 177)—as central to the process of critical reflection.

Critical reflection is an approach and a process that is derived from adult education, one that focuses specifically on the personal experience of the practitioner. It is an ongoing and developing project in social work, informed variously by critical social theory (Agger 1991, 1998) and associated with developments in postmodern and critical social work. (To gain a fuller appreciation of these directions, we encourage you to read Hick et al. 2005; Fook 2002; Healy 2001; Fawcett et al. 2000; Healy 2000; Ife 1997; Rossiter 1996.)

Let us step back for a minute and remind ourselves of social work's core interests. They are in understanding the social context of people's lives, in highlighting the ways in which well-being is unequally socially distributed, and the ways in which social structures and social institutions oppress, sustain, and open up choices for people, in terms of thinking, beliefs, values, and action. Practitioners are no different: our understanding of ourselves is also embedded in the social structure.

The history of social work reflects the changing nature of the relationships between the social condition and those who work within it. More than a century after its emergence from the charities movement at the beginning of the twentieth century, contemporary scholars in postmodern and critical social work emphasise the following implications of the current context for practitioners. They emphasise the need for social work to pursue its interests and work with the *uncertainties* characterising information-rich but unstable social conditions. They highlight the need for a preparedness to relate to *diverse* interpretations of 'reality' and to people and situations in all their *diversity*. This reinforces social work's attention to *context*, including the specific institutional, policy, and agency context in which practice takes place. They impel us to be conscious of which dominant *discourses* are in place, and their attendants: how problems and issues are framed, the languages that express them, the practices arising, and the *power* relations promoted. How to invite and sustain *participatory* relationships with the people with whom we work, variously called clients, residents, stakeholders, fellow citizens, patients, consumers, or service users, is of central concern.

With these ideas in mind, critical reflection is directed to hunting out assumptions about the social relations of practice. It aims to assist us to uncover the ways in which, in *specific contexts* of practice, we make meaning of people and situations, pursue particular perspectives, reveal those perspectives and frame our actions through particular language, and in so doing make assumptions about power. The work of Foucault has informed much contemporary thinking about the concept of power, particularly in social relations (Foucault 1972). Understanding how power is exercised when people come together requires in-depth critical analysis. Reflective processes are used to analyse and uncover the ways in which unacknowledged assumptions and discourses, of which we may not be conscious,

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construct power relations. In a critically reflective approach, the types of questions asked will direct us towards the political, and potentially emancipatory, aspect of situations that may be changed. Thus critical reflection is a process of 'unsettling individual assumptions to bring about social changes' (Fook & Gardner 2007, p. 16). These assumptions can be held by individuals or by the wider society and inherent in them are ways of understanding situations and contexts. Practitioners are part of these understandings in that their practice is located within these dominant understandings. The process of 'unsettling assumptions' is one in which the practitioner is also a participant, hence the subjective, personal nature of critical reflection.

Activity 1.1 Beginning the process of critical reflection

Think about your own area of work or study. Select one group from your experience e.g. work colleagues, clients, peers, supervisors, teachers. List some of the *assumptions* you have made about those with whom you have contact. On what basis were these assumptions made? Can they be challenged or contested? What might the group you have selected *assume* about you? How might you be affected if these assumptions, which might be positive or negative, were used or acted upon in your social relationships?

The processes of critical reflection

There are a number of approaches to critical reflection that can be used by practitioners to unpack and unearth the assumptions underlying their practice. A model that is now widely used by practitioners is that developed by Fook (2002) and Fook and Gardner (2007). Their approach to critical reflection is based on four theoretical traditions: the reflective approach to theory and practice; reflexivity; postmodernism and deconstruction; and critical social theory (2007, p. 23). The *reflective approach to theory and practice* is based on the work of Argyris and Schön (1974) and Schön (1987), who suggested that professional practice was more than a sum of its parts, that is, theory and skill development. Intrinsic in the process were judgment, discretion and intuitive understandings of the context and situations in which professionals worked. Therefore, being able to reflect on these relationships 'in action' (i.e. in practice) was an imperative for all professionals. The second theoretical tradition is *reflexivity*, which is drawn from social science research. It is used as a way of ensuring rigour in knowledge creation and thus is considered trustworthy. Unlike empirical, basic science, much of social science research enquiry is contextual and situational. The researcher is often located within

the research either in terms of their understanding of the situation or their way of giving meaning to the field of enquiry. Being reflexive is to be intellectually supple and to 'look around' as well as to 'look at' the research. The third theoretical tradition, *postmodernism and deconstruction*, makes up part of contemporary theoretical approaches that explain social relationships in terms of constructed meanings that gain degrees of truthfulness (and hence acceptance or rejection) from the dominance or otherwise of that constructed meaning. Pluralism, diversity, multiple truths, different 'ways of knowing', and dominant discourses are all elements of this approach. Of particular importance in its use in informing critical reflective practice is the construction of binary or opposing positions, which occurs in social relationships. Without acknowledgment these can determine courses of action that perpetuate power and knowledge imbalances by those interacting within them. This includes professional practitioners. Lastly, *critical social theory* is primarily concerned with the individual and social structures and the relationships that form the basis of individual and collective actions for change.

Evident in these four traditions and their use in critical reflection is the subjective experience of the practitioner; their sense of 'self'; and their desire to find meaning and an effective course of action in the dilemmas and difficulties that face them in everyday practice.

During the course of practice, most professional practitioners will be faced with situations that appear insoluble: with problems that are enmeshed in intransigent systems and with a sense of burden that they do not know the best way forward in some situations. Often a choice is made or an action is undertaken that may cause the practitioner concern—one that may trouble them for some time after. Using a critical incident technique Fook (2002) has developed a model that can be applied to a critical incident to facilitate the process of critical reflection. A critical incident is defined by Fook as 'any happening which was significant to a person for whatever reason' (Fook 2002, p. 98). This definition locates the situation or event, and its significance, within the subjective and objective realities of the person experiencing it. The dissonance or resonance between the constructed narrative and the experience of the practitioner begins the process of testing and 'unsettling assumptions' in practice.

Activity 1.2 Critical incident technique

Emma is a social work student on her first placement in a non-government child and family support service. During the first two weeks on placement her supervisor suggested she spend some time in the waiting room to gain an understanding of what it was like to visit the agency as a client. A young Arabic woman and her two small children attended quite

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frequently and Emma had spoken to her in general conversation in the reception area a few times. They had exchanged pleasantries about the weather, public transport and her two small children. Emma's supervisor was the caseworker for the young mother and she thought it would be a suitable case for her to sit in on at the next interview. When the supervisor asked the young mother for her consent she told the caseworker that she didn't wish Emma to sit in as she felt 'uncomfortable' around her. Emma's supervisor asked Emma later if there had been any difficulties with this client. Emma was taken aback when the supervisor recounted the woman's comments as she felt she had tried to be friendly towards her. Emma's supervisor suggested she critically reflect on the incident to help understand why she felt so upset about the comments made by the client to her supervisor.

1   How would you assist Emma to deconstruct the incident? (See Fook 2002 for an extended list of questions.)

2   What are some of the perspectives revealed in this brief account of events, in relation to formal practice theories?

3   Whose perspectives are represented and whose are missing?

4   What might be the diverse perspectives of those who are missing?

5   Consider how diversely this incident could be interpreted.

6   How might the issue be framed differently?

7   Are particular ideas and assumptions evident?

8   What are the sources of the ideas and assumptions being played out?

9   Who is benefiting? Who is losing out?

10   Are particular practices, systems, or structures being upheld?

11   What can be learned about human services in this context?

12   Have you been able to suspend judgment in starting to assist in deconstructing this incident?

13   If you have difficulty in doing so, identify where you are 'coming from' in terms of your ideas and assumptions, and consider their origins.

14   What then does it mean to resist, challenge and reconstruct such an episode?

Activity 1.3 Generating practice theory

- Identify all the voices in the narrative in Activity 1.2.
- Which are dominant and which are silent?
- Reconstruct a narrative of this situation for Emma and for the young Arabic woman.
- Identify areas of new practice theory that have emerged for Emma.
- Consider the issue of power in the deconstruction and reconstruction of the narratives.

The model developed by Fook (2002) and further refined and developed by Fook and Gardner (2007) is now used widely in social work education, professional practice supervision and as the basis of workshop engagement with theory and knowledge building. The model can be used:

- 'to develop professional practice theory'—where assumptions about practice are unearthed enabling the practice theory to be reworked following scrutiny
- 'to research professional practice' where 'unsettling thinking unearths fundamental assumptions' about practice and how these are linked with actions, which has the effect of deconstructing practice
- 'to evaluate professional practice' where implicit assumptions are unearthed to allow comparisons between what actually happens and what is actually desirable and to articulate these changes
- 'to learn directly from professional practice experience' where practitioners integrate an approach to their work that challenges or unsettles their assumptions to enable them to better understand their work both in terms of the actions taken or ways to approach situations that may arise in future practice (Fook & Gardner 2007).

Critical reflection is an important skill for practice and has been successfully integrated into social work student curricula (Pockett & Giles 2008). Selecting a 'critical incident' from their field education, social work students use the Fook framework to analyse the incident through a process of deconstruction. Working with a 'critical friend', students identify and critique key themes arising from the deconstruction exercise and develop practice theory that has emerged from rebuilding or reconstructing the situation. A practitioner's application is demonstrated in Morley (2004). Each of these works invites the critically reflective social worker to consider their own experiences in practice, the assumptions underpinning these practices, the interplay of power among the players and the potential for new knowledge and actions.

Activity 1.4 Critical reflection in practice

Ben is a social worker working on a Juvenile Offenders program. One of the group members has reported to him that Tran, a young Vietnamese teenager with whom he has been working for some time, has been arrested by police and could possibly be sent to a residential facility. Tran is reported to have said that if 'he plays the game' this will be avoided and he will be back in Ben's program very soon. Ben reported this to a work colleague who told him that doing any further work with Tran was a complete waste of time. There is a waiting list for the program and as they are facing a funding cut, Tran

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should not be accepted back into the program. Ben thinks that he has failed Tran. For a while now he has been feeling that he isn't doing a good job and is seriously thinking about leaving.

1   As Ben's social work supervisor how would you assist Ben to critically reflect on the assumptions in this scenario?

2   What questions would you ask to understand more about Tran's life experiences and current perspective?

3   How would you explore the views of Ben's work colleague in relation to Ben and Tran's situation?

4   What questions might assist Ben to consider his sense of professional efficacy? What elements of these expectations are limiting Ben's self-assessment and how can these be expanded to consider his achievements?

5   In engaging in this deconstruction and reconstruction you might also consider some of the following:

- 'life course' approaches
- cultural factors
- research
- dominant view points
- power and influence
- hope and hopelessness
- strengths
- learning and change.

Criticisms and other models

The model developed by Fook (2002) and Fook and Gardner (2007) has been criticised by some in the field as representing one form of critical reflection to the exclusion of others and that it has a tendency to be prescriptive in its approach. In response to these criticisms it can be said that each of the elements of the theoretical traditions upon which the model is based can be used as the basis for critically reflective approaches to practice. The strength of the model is that it provides a systematic way of considering concepts and ideas in a way that can then be translated back into the practice reality (Fook 2008). It may well be that problems and situations remain unresolved; however, the practitioner's ability to process their experience in such a way can be an effective aid to practice that can provide support and a way to 'sit' with ambiguities and difficulties. A more tangible outcome is the potential for gaining new insight and understanding that leads to reformulated or reworked practice. A further criticism is that the perceived outcomes of the model have not been tested through research, which would provide a more rigorous evaluation. We agree that this is an area that is ready for good–quality, practice–based research.

In conclusion

This introduction to critical reflection in practice sets the scene for the remaining chapters in this book. Each practice skill must be anchored in theoretical, contextual and ethical understandings. A critically reflective stance is one means by which you will be able to make sense of, and give meaning to, many practice situations that are underpinned by ambiguities, complexity and uncertainty. All professional practitioners have a responsibility to their clients and to themselves to ensure that their practice is relevant and effective. Critical reflection takes time and space and this must be part of every social worker's practice.

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