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Critical reflection: reflecting on learning to be reflective

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In this paper, I explore reflective practice literature and the elements of critical reflection, and I reflect on my experiences of learning and using a critical reflection approach to better understand a significant incident. This reflective paper is written from my personal perspective as a social worker using Fook and Gardner’s model of critical reflection to provide a framework to reflect, explore and learn from my own experiences. The Fook and Gardner approach to critical reflection encourages deconstruction and analysis of a personal or professional experience to understand the different assumptions, relationships and influences embedded within it and how it affects our practice. As new understandings emerge, the individual is able to reconstruct this incident and develop new techniques to deal with a similar incident in the future.

Keywords: critical reflection; reflection; reflective practice; learning; Fook and Gardner

This paper is a personal reflection of my experience as a social worker engaged in postgraduate study in critical reflection. I am fascinated with critical reflection and I am interested in deconstructing the elements of critical reflection to understand what makes it different to other processes of reflection. In this paper, I will explore reflective practice literature and explain where it is located and how it has developed over time. In addition, I offer my reflections about my experience of learning to use a critical reflection approach to integrate theory and practice.

An introduction to reflective practice

A reflection can be many things. We can see a reflection in a mirror or in a puddle of water, and we can think about an experience and ponder what happened and why. On the other hand, sceptics might argue that what you see is whatever you are looking for. While the concept of reflective practice has been around since ancient times, in recent years we have seen a renewed interest in reflective practice as a way of understanding and learning from experiences. As reflective practice has no precise definition, it is inclusive of varying theoretical perspectives.

With the diversity of definitions and frameworks for reflection and reflective practice, one thing on which writers agree is that there are common themes and no
singular ‘right way’ to go about reflective practice. There is also agreement about the value in reflective practice; however, writers from various disciplines see reflective practice in different ways and use a range of terms to describe methods and techniques. These different ways of understanding reflective practice and the context in which it is experienced result in a high degree of complexity in understanding reflection conceptually, theoretically and in practice.

There are a myriad of methods, tools, techniques and frameworks for reflective practice and these methods can be used individually, in a group, online or by following a self-help book. In addition, people reflect in many different ways, including through a discussion with their supervisor or peer, by writing in a journal, or by expressing their thoughts and feelings creatively through poetry, song, story, painting or dance.

The theoretical framework

In this paper, my interest is in exploring how social workers use reflection and critical reflection. The social work reflective practice literature sources are located broadly in a geographic sense, with most writers from the UK, USA and Australia. However, social work has been influenced by the ideas emanating from a range of disciplines as well as by colleagues in other countries. This began with the influences of philosophers John Dewey (1910) and Donald Schön (1983). Thus it is evident that reflection is not purely a social work process, but is an integral feature of various disciplines, including nursing and education, and an assortment of language, definitions and frameworks are espoused.

In social work, reflection is used as a theoretical and practical concept for enhancing expertise. While Payne (1997) suggested that social workers tend to use the term ‘theory’ to describe the ideas that influence them rather than the way they work with their clients, he also referred to both explanatory theory and practice theory as important to the social work endeavour. Payne (1997) explained that explanatory theory is a bigger picture way for social workers to understand and explain why an action or intervention results in a particular outcome. Alternatively, social work practice theory has developed as social workers try to make sense of what they do, how they do it and who they do it with.

Along similar lines, Drury Hudson (1997) argued that social workers need to use different theories and different models of practice, and this will include personal knowledge as well as theoretical knowledge. Fook and Gardner (2007) have advanced this discussion and explained that they used the term ‘theoretical framework’ in a postmodern sense as a way of describing the beliefs and assumptions that individuals use to understand the ways they interact with their world, rather than as a way of describing the body of literature and research about reflective practice, describing their approach to critical reflection as both a theory and a practice, explaining that ‘we have developed both a theoretical approach to critical reflection and a practical process for how it may be done’ (p. 15).

What is reflective practice?
The origins of reflective practice vary depending on the perspective and the discipline; however, many authors (Fook, 2002; Fook & Gardner, 2007; Johns, 2005; Redmond, 2006) appear to agree that it was the initial work of Dewey (1910), that
was further developed by Schön (1983), Argyris and Schön (1996) and Mezirow (1990) that established the foundations of reflective practice. Brookfield (1994) focused on critical learning and critical teaching from the perspective of the adult educator, arguing that the emotional dimension to learning to be reflective could not be ignored. Similarly, Schön (1994) expanded his research on professional education with an emphasis on unearthing deeper assumptions, distinguishing between reflection in action and reflection on action. Reflection in action is the thought that we take whilst involved in a situation, during which we become aware of what we are thinking, feeling and doing, and reflection on action takes place sometime later, when we consider the events that took place, and recall what we were thinking, feeling and doing (Schön, 1983). Brookfield (1995) named this as critical reflection and argued that we need to include critical thinking, which concerns linking personal experience with social and power arrangements. Brookfield suggested it is important to unearth our fundamental and potentially dominant assumptions about power, our ‘ideology critique’, to be able to achieve social changes through reflective practice.

Several writers have built on these foundations as they have explored reflective practice through different practice lenses. For example, Jasper (2003) and Johns (2005) explored models of reflective practice in the discipline of nursing, whereas Bolton (2001) explored reflective writing, and Lehmann (2006) explored using narratives and stories to develop critical reflection. While Lehmann’s (2006) work grew from the discipline of social work, it was Fook (2002), Fook and Gardner (2007) and Gardner (2009) who linked critical theory and social work practice and developed the framework of critical reflection that I have experienced as a student. My approach to reflective practice was initially influenced by my social work education and practice; however, I now understand that reflective practice is much broader than the social work discipline. Reflective practice is increasingly featured in a variety of disciplines and the reflective practice literature has become enriched by the discussions of reflection from differing perspectives.

So, what is critical reflection?

Mezirow (1990) contemplated reflective practice and identified that there was more to reflection than simply thinking about experiences, suggesting that critical reflection involves a critique on the assumptions on which our beliefs and values have developed. This position is supported by Brookfield (1995), who argued that reflection by itself is not enough, and Fook (2002), who added that critical reflection involves thinking about one’s practice and critically deconstructing how we have developed these skills and responses with a view to developing new theories of practice for the future. Hoyrup (2004) concurred, suggesting that critical reflection needs to include the social aspects of reflection and that critical reflection occurs when the individual is able to understand and challenge the validity of their assumptions. These authors appear to agree that there are extra steps between reflection and critical reflection that involve more than thinking about our experiences. To engage in critical reflection we need to both understand our experiences in the social context and also to understand how we can use this knowledge to develop our practice in the future.

Terms like ‘reflection’ and ‘critical reflection’ are contested in the literature with differing interpretations and definitions presumably influenced by practice experience and the discipline within which they are understood. Redmond (2006) pointed
out that terms such as ‘reflection’ and ‘critical reflection’ are often used interchangeably, without definition or explanation about what makes them different. Some authors have attempted to explain these similarities and differences, including Thompson and Thompson (2008) who explored the similarities between reflection and critical reflection and explained that their use of the term ‘critical’ was in the context of exploring the breadth and depth of practice, rather than to focus on the negative or ‘crisis point’ interpretations of the term. Alternatively, Rolfe, Jasper and Freshwater (2011) suggested that critical reflection is both systematic and rigorous, and their approach to reflective practice was essentially from an epistemological discourse perspective, focusing on reflection as a way to understand what we do, rather than who we are.

I am persuaded by Fook (2002) who suggested that critical reflection involves both a theory and a practice – that is, a clear rationale and analysis, and a clearly structured process for reflection. Fook and Askeland (2006) explained that the ‘critical’ in critical reflection involves reflection through the lens of critical theory. This involves analysis in the context of knowledge, power and reflexivity to understand how assumptions are influenced in the context of social and structural assumptions. Reflexivity means understanding and recognising our own influence on our practice and accepting that what we see is influenced by what we are looking for, including being aware of the context, framework and our own knowledge as we analyse and interpret our experiences, interactions and responses (Fook, 2002; Fook & Askeland, 2006).

**Criticisms of critical reflection**

However, not everyone agrees that reflection and critical reflection are desirable activities. Further, some people react to the term ‘critical’ which conjures up a focus on the negative aspect of an interaction or experience. For others, reflective practice is an activity that is Western-oriented and has no cultural translation (Gardner, Fook, & White, 2006) or is not encouraged or supported in the workplace. While most research about critical reflection is of a qualitative, self-reflective nature, there is a relative lack of research on the effectiveness of reflection, the outcomes of reflection, and the different methods and processes of reflection (White, Fook, & Gardner, 2006).

The criticisms in the literature about critical reflection and reflective practice include Brookfield (1994, p. 208) who warned that there can be a dark side of critical reflection, following his observations that educators who embraced critical reflection reported, ‘that this often caused those around them to view them with fear and loathing, with a hostility born of incomprehension’. Along similar lines, Brockbank and McGill (1998) warned that self-reflection can result in people being seduced by their own stories and beliefs and, therefore, are not able to critically analyse their assumptions. In addition, Yip (2006) cautioned social work students to be wary of the environment of reflection, and cited several case studies where critical supervisors in oppressive working environments forced students to reveal their weaknesses in a way that was destructive, harmful and unprofessional.

While negotiating the risks of critical reflection can be a challenge, Brookfield (1994) argued that if we understand the risks we are in a better position to manage them. Fook (2010) argued that while there might be risks, we need to take notice of the critics and find a way to incorporate reflection in our daily work practice in a
way that is supported and encouraged by the organisation and is structured, practical, meaningful and incorporates modern workplace demands.

**Critical reflection: an overview of the model**

Fook and Gardner (2007) developed a model of Critical Reflection as a structured, two-stage process that is conducted over three sessions (the first session is an introductory session). This model introduced a technique of deconstructing and understanding assumptions about practice, and then considering different ways to reconstruct the incident with other possible outcomes. Fook and Gardner’s (2007) model provides the structure to support students to reflect on their experience, and to deconstruct the assumptions that were used to understand what happened and why. This model of critical reflection is a way for practitioners to develop new knowledge and learn from their own experiences.

The introductory session of the Fook and Gardner (2007) critical reflection model is an overview of the theory and practice of critical reflection, and includes a demonstration by the facilitator modelling the process. In my experience of learning about critical reflection, this was an important stage as it helped me to understand some of the social work theories that had seemed bewildering and inaccessible. I was able to recognise, in practical terms, theoretical concepts and the ideas of reflexivity, postmodernism and post-structuralism.

The second session (Stage 1) involves each participant presenting and reflecting on a critical incident that has occurred in their personal or professional practice. This involves analysis in the contexts of knowledge, power and reflexivity to deconstruct how assumptions are influenced by social and structural assumptions. This is a time when other participants in the group ask questions to help explore perceptions and expectations, allowing enough time for the participant to consider their values and practice. The deconstruction of language and meaning can assist with exploring and unsettling assumptions.

The third session (Stage 2) involves participants reconstructing their practice based on new or affirmed techniques and assumptions that can be used when a similar incident recurs. The time between these two stages is important as this is a period when, consciously or unconsciously, ideas that have been stimulated continue to develop and new understandings begin to emerge. During this stage, participants reflect on their experience of becoming aware of how their assumptions influence their practice and their reactions to this. Participants might identify aspects of their practice that they would like to change and the strategies that could be employed to do this, or values and expectations that may be affirmed and reinforced. At this time, participants are encouraged to develop a label or mantra to describe the way that they will integrate theory into practice.

**But how does it work in practice?**

I explored a critical incident from a personal experience and discovered there were direct links to my professional practice. A critical incident in this context is not a traumatic crisis, but any significant event that leaves the participant to feel puzzled or unclear about the incident and the outcome. Exploring a critical incident was useful because it gave me a structure and a technique to help me to better understand a time several years before that still mildly irritated and confused me.
This incident involved a time when I was travelling overseas and stepped between two angry men—a travelling companion and the hotel owner—to break up an argument. I chose this particular incident as one to explore because this response was out of character for me, and it was an incident that I did not fully understand. I was surprised at how I had reacted in this emotion-charged exchange and I did not understand why it kept playing over in my mind. This aspect is important for social workers as we identify those conversations and interactions that do not go as well as we would like and start to explore why and how we can respond differently.

Using a critical reflection approach, I was able to identify and deconstruct my assumptions rather than focus on the narrative or the story. I began to explore my ideas about uncertainty and change, flexibility, conflict resolution, knowledge, power and control. Guidance by an experienced facilitator is important here to steer neophytes into reframing their reflection into understanding assumptions and exploring how and why these factors can complicate and influence each other and how they interact with other stories in one’s life. I continued to explore my ideas and assumptions about power and uncertainty, and where they have come from. I soon moved into dichotomous thinking of binary opposites, and began to see the behaviour of each character in my critical incident as either right or wrong, and I identified times when I felt powerful or powerless. I began to look for enemies and allies, where people were either with me or against me. I was able to identify assumptions in my family about uncertainty and I could recall times in my life when I have experienced uncomfortable reactions to power and control, transition and change. Fook and Gardner (2007) warned that there is a tendency to construct binary opposites while deconstructing assumptions. This can occur when a person sees that there are two opposing views that are contradictory to each other. I found myself deconstructing dichotomous assumptions about control and change as I had formerly developed the idea that a situation must be either in someone’s control or it was out of control, and therefore not safe. I had also constructed change as something that should happen to improve a situation and, if a situation needed improvement, then there must be something wrong with it. I found this dichotomous construction limiting as I had forced myself into seeing that there were only two sides—one must be right and the other must be wrong. Deconstructing this dichotomous thinking was a significant step in being able to unravel and understand my assumptions about power and control.

Initially, I was worried that I might be perceived as a ‘control freak’ and I constructed this as a very negative label that I wanted to avoid because I believed that a ‘control freak’ was a person ostracised in society for taking over control and micro-managing every detail in life. I became aware of my assumptions about power and control:

- If I am not in control, someone else needs to be in control.
- If no one is in control, it can be threatening or dangerous.

I began to understand that my need to have a plan gave me comfort so that I knew what was happening and there were no surprises. I explored my assumptions about taking control of a situation, and how I constructed that this would allow me to control, or at least influence, the outcome of the change. I also believed that my need to be in control and take action when something looked out of control was linked to my assumptions about good professional practice. When I thought about
this further, I wondered about things that needed to change and if that meant they were initially wrong? Was change a course of action that I see only as a way to improve something? This led me to consider the basis for wanting to change my practice – did that mean that my practice was wrong too? Further to this was another assumption that being wrong was a bad, bad thing.

Fook (2002) challenged us to question what we know as well as how we know it. This is a postmodern way of thinking and builds on modernist thinking, which assumes there is an underlying structure, to explain our knowledge of thinking. It is in this way that critical reflection was helpful for me. By thinking about an incident that was significant to me, and talking about this with a group of colleagues, I was able to deconstruct my thoughts, my feelings, my assumptions and expectations. I was able to consider a number of different assumptions to help me understand why my incident was significant, then reconstruct my own practice in a way that is responsive to my personal contexts.

In the early stages of reflection my language was around ‘dealing with change’ and ‘coping with uncertainty’ and I was able to tease out my assumptions and beliefs about how people are supposed to respond to change, and my definition of words like ‘deal with’ and ‘coping’. This was an important stage for me as I began to realise that I viewed change as one of those things with which people need to learn to cope. Through deeper reflection and discussion with my colleagues an understanding emerged that there are different ways to approach and respond to change, and that change can be viewed along a continuum from positive to negative.

**Baking a different cake?**

For me, the time between the first and the second stage was important and I needed time away from the busyness of work and study to think about my assumptions and to allow space for new ideas to emerge. I began to wonder about my ideas concerning control, change and uncertainty and where they have come from. The second stage of the critical reflection model (Fook & Gardner, 2007) encourages participants to articulate and label their new theory of practice. This is a way for students to integrate theory and practice and summarise their learning and reflection.

I started to realise that my old ideas and habits might not work for me in the future as the workplace and life is uncertain and I wanted to be more flexible and adaptable to accept that things change and to be able to adapt to those changes. I hypothesised that maybe I was using structure to control change so I could avoid not knowing what will happen next. It was an interesting time – an opportunity to develop a new theory of practice. However, I struggled to find words that fitted. I needed to think of new ways to approach familiar situations and to challenge myself. A colleague analogised this by saying ‘it’s a bit like taking a familiar recipe, and using the same ingredients, making a few changes here and there and this time, baking a different sort of cake’.

With the help of my critical friends, I was able examine some new assumptions:

- When I am not in control, it does not mean the situation is out of control.
- Change is not about right or wrong, just different.
- Being spontaneous can be interesting and fun.
- I do not have to be right all the time.
A new theory of practice began to emerge and I started to reconstruct my thinking and assumptions. I recalled a conversation at work where I been talking with a staff member about a workplace change that I was introducing, and I found myself telling him that he needed to stay in the uncertainty, however uncomfortable it seemed. As I was saying this, I was thinking that this advice can equally apply to me. I had forgotten about this conversation and through reflection I was able to develop some new labels like, ‘being powerful in change’ or ‘professional inactivity’.

At first the ideas felt a bit like a new coat. It felt cosy and new, but was not quite comfortable and still did not seem to quite fit. I needed to stretch it a bit around the edges – maybe take up the hem. With these new perspectives in my tool kit, I looked at my incident again, this time in a new light. I began to see with new eyes. I kept asking myself, ‘but why does this matter’, until it began to make sense. I started to realise that uncertainty makes me feel uncomfortable and I struggle to deal with the uncertainty of what will happen next. I reflected on times when I used my leadership skills to take control of a situation, to influence the outcome, to determine what happens next and avoid the discomfort of uncertainty. I had constructed myself as a structured person who does not enjoy unexpected change or sudden surprises.

A theory emerges: structured uncertainty

Armed with this new knowledge, I began to think about new ways to work with uncertainty. I developed a new theory of practice that I call ‘Structured Uncertainty’. Structured uncertainty is a way of building a framework, or structure around the uncertainty – a type of emotional scaffolding that allows me to contain that which is uncertain. By doing this, I can feel safe that the remainder (e.g. that which is not contained with the uncertainty) is as predictable as it normally would (or would not) be. This enabled me to see that change is not just about being right or wrong. I can broaden my view of change so that I can approach change as an opportunity to try something different.

A brief review of the literature revealed that there are already many writers discussing the value of uncertainty in social work (Fook & Gardner, 2007; Fook, Ryan, & Hawkins, 2000; Giddens, 1991; Redmond, 2006). For me, the emergence of Structured Uncertainty as a new theory of practice gave me the opportunity to broaden my view of power and knowledge, flexibility and change. Inspired and energised by my new theory of practice, I was on the lookout for uncertainty in my personal and professional practice. I worked in a large bureaucratic agency and there are always changes, so it did not take long for an uncertain situation to come along.

At the end of the day, I found a quiet place to sit and think and I began to write down my thoughts and reflections. I continued to ask ‘why’ each thought and reflection was important and relevant, and from where these assumptions had come. I wondered about my experiences, my values, my gender, my influences, and how I influence other people around me. I thought about the binary language that I use and the dichotomous thinking that shapes the way I understand my interactions with other people. I enjoyed taking the time to step away from the busyness of the workplace and have a helicopter view of myself being able to sit comfortably with the uncertainty. It was like a light had turned on and illuminated my practice in a way that enabled me to notice my assumptions. I realised that there are many positives
that can emerge from change. I was able to identify many facets of my work that would be unaffected by this change and the metaphoric scaffolding were the aspects that will stay the same. I found it helpful to put the uncertainty into context and I felt comfortable to sit with uncertainty while it was contained in this manner.

One of the later steps in the critical reflection journey was to recognise my ability and skills along with my learning from this experience to reconstruct my assumptions about my practice. This allows me to be open to new ideas and factors that I have not have considered and the ability to change and adapt to new strategies (Napier & Fook, 2000). By using these insights, I can confidently approach an uncertain situation by incorporating my new theory of practice. I can still be empowering, nurturing and supportive and I can now also embrace uncertainty as an exciting opportunity to be creative. I can always be successful when I base my criteria for success on the experience, rather than if I was right or wrong. This is a way to be challenged and I can be relaxed and free from the burden of feeling that I must take control to remain safe.

From my experience of critical reflection, I believe that it is a powerful technique that has the potential to invigorate and energise practice. I agree that there are some limitations to reflective practice, for example, I would encourage neophytes to carefully choose their critical friends to make sure that they will help deconstruction of an incident, rather than destruction of an incident, and they can assist the reflector to understand assumptions in a respectful, considerate atmosphere. I experienced feelings of being vulnerable and out of my comfort zone and it was the environment and the culture of the group that allowed me to sit with discomfort and vulnerability and feel safe. I am sure that I would not have been able to achieve the depth and breadth of critical reflection by myself.

Reflecting on learning to be reflective

In the Masters program, students were required to write a journal of around 200 words each week to describe and analyse what they were reading, thinking and feeling. This weekly journal was emailed to the lecturers and other students, who would respond with references for further reading and suggestions about comments that could be further ‘teased out’ and explored. This element worked particularly well for me. I enjoyed learning about reflective writing and I found it valuable to develop the skills of critical analysis and understanding what I was thinking. I have previously experimented with keeping a journal; however, I did not use any structure or framework for my reflections and my writing style was factual and descriptive, rather than analytical and reflective.

Fook and Gardner (2007) warned that it can be a challenge for students to be reflexive in their journal, and some students have problems examining their beliefs and actions and may tend to reflect at a more descriptive level. Although it was challenging for me, I found it particularly valuable to use a reflective journal because I learned to develop the discipline of regular reflective journal writing and, as time passed, I realised that my recollections and memories of an incident changed. Journal writing also provided me with a valuable tool to aid my deconstruction of assumptions and to chart the development of my thinking about uncertainty and change. Looking back now, I am grateful that I embraced journal writing, as I have a personal, insightful reflective journal, which marks three years of my reading, thoughts and feelings, assumptions and challenges during my postgraduate study.
While I enjoyed learning critical reflection in a structured academic environment, I needed to find a way to embed this in my social work practice. I now understand critical reflection as more than something you do to reflect on social work practice. I see critical reflection as an approach to my personal and professional practice – a way to integrate and make sense of my assumptions, expectations and perceptions.

For me, I can achieve this through reflective journal writing. Journal writing has been illuminating and has allowed me to see and better understand how I respond in different situations and why. In the early days, my writing was at a descriptive, factual level and I needed to learn the techniques and develop the confidence to analyse and explore my beliefs and assumptions at a deeper level. For me, the process of writing helps to energise and focus my reflections. I can go back over these notes and consider which topics I pursued and which I avoided – which suggestions I agreed with and which I disregarded and I can think again about what was overlooked or ignored.

I found that, over time, I became more confident and open to examining assumptions about significant events during my childhood and relationships with my family, and how I learned about control, uncertainty and change. I can read the reasons that I gave at the time and think about the ways that things may be interpreted differently now. I have noticed that in recent months I have gone back to old issues, once ignored and avoided, and now feel like it is the right time to start thinking about them again. I have noticed that since my mother passed away, I am more inspired to engage at a deeper emotional and analytical level, although I am still trying to understand how this transpires and I am open to appreciate what might emerge.

This reflective paper has explored my experiences as a student learning about critical reflection through a Masters program at the Centre for Professional Development at La Trobe University, Bendigo. I used critical reflection as a framework to help me to deconstruct and understand the assumptions that I have about control, uncertainty and change. I learned about binary opposites and dichotomous thinking and I was able to reconstruct this incident and identify and articulate the new theory of practice that emerged. For me, the journey of critical reflection has been an adventure. It has been exciting, energising, sometimes challenging and uncertain. Interestingly, I felt safe, supported and invigorated by the possibilities that can emerge when I am able to look at myself and my experiences through fresh eyes.

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Notes on contributor
Helen Hickson is a social worker, and PhD candidate at La Trobe University, Bendigo. In 2004, she enrolled in a two-day Critical Reflection workshop at the Centre for Professional Development, La Trobe University, Bendigo. She loved the program so much, that she stayed on for the Masters program. In 2007 she completed a Master of Professional Practice (Development) at La Trobe University, Bendigo and in 2008 she was accepted as a PhD candidate.
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