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Practice Reflections
Practice reflections is a section for opinion pieces. These articles are reflections on recent events or current topics in social work, welfare, or community work education and practice.

8. Critical reflection observed

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If it is easy to be critical of ideas that are going out of favour; it is especially sensible to interrogate practices which currently seem positive and progressive. That is, in so far as a practice has the status ‘this is a given’, even more ‘wow, this is a good one’, it follows that this practice is entitled to critique. This applies whether such practices form a discipline, such as social work or psychology; an approach, such as strengths-based or solutions applications; or a rubric, such as family therapy or case management. Critical reflection (CR) may be more a rubric, or a developing tradition, than it is an application or discipline, but as this body of practice is being enthusiastically explored and developed, so it should be questioned and reviewed.

For example, rather than allowing CR to be understood as a stand-alone innovation, in her plenary session to the recent AASWWE conference (September 2009) Jan Fook noted that CR should be seen to stand on the shoulders of particular philosophical traditions, not least of which is
Socratic dialogue. In this openness to self scrutiny, key figures in CR are alive to the importance of acknowledging the range of questions that CR raises. ‘What is our genealogy?’ is one of these important questions and ‘what are the key critical questions for CR?’ is another.

In this spirit, this brief paper attempts to introduce queries which might be usefully examined in an open and non-defensive exploration. This seems timely, given that CR presents within and beyond social work as an upbeat and increasingly popular phenomenon. Against this background, and albeit in a preliminary manner, the following brief paper outlines three classes of query. Each of these will be discussed in turn:

(i) Are the linkages between critical reflection and its conceptual neighbours sufficiently articulated?

(ii) The issue of power: who owns the game and writes the rules with respect to CR? and

(iii) Is it masculinist to think of CR as ‘transformative’?

In presenting this material it is important to note that what follows is a summary of some preliminary thoughts, responses that were initially stimulated by attending the conference mentioned above. Energized by this participation, a number of queries arose and were then further developed. Hopefully, the articulation of these ideas might be of interest to other social work practitioners and teachers with a lively interest in CR.

The aim of this short piece is not directly academic. Rather, the paper represents an attempt at discussion rather than analysis or evaluation. I’d like to encourage discussion and to outline lines of enquiry – suggestive avenues that might prove to be the basis for scholarly investigation. Crucially, the current paper uses only one basic reference: Fook and Gardiner (2007). Therefore, the ideas raised might be a long way from being applicable to, and representative of, the large and rapidly expanding literature on CR that is now available. Given the idea is to raise preliminary ideas, and not to offer anything in the way of conclusions, what follows can be seen as ‘serious play.’
Although not the focus of substantial examination in the text used as the reference point for the current review (Fook & Gardiner, 2007), there is a great deal in common between the theory and practice of CR and adjacent post-modern practice traditions. For example, initially prompted by Tom Anderson’s work on the use of reflective teams in family therapy, Harlene Anderson (no relation) developed a range of practical ideas that seek to free-up supervisees and trainees who have become ‘stuck.’ This project clearly has obvious parallels with the goals and process of CR. (Interestingly, in common with writings on CR, Harlene Anderson also references Donald Schon’s theories on the importance of professional reflection)

Of particular note, a clear protocol for group based discussions in training and supervision was set out over five stages (Anderson and Rambo, 1988; Anderson and Swim, 1993): the becalmed or ‘stuck’ presenter nominates what they seek from the process; the presenter outlines the crucial information; questions of clarification from the team are discussed; there is a reflective team exploration; the presenter summarizes what s/he has experienced and learned. Importantly, in Anderson’s iteration what is distinctive is that the reflective team exploration stage can only be witnessed by the presenter who is not permitted an active role in the discussion at this point. This is proposed so the presenter is barred from contributing to this stage of the exchange process in order to pre-empt the kind of defensive dynamic that is often generated in such consultations. In so far as Anderson and Swim’s version of the process has advantages, this innovation offers the iteration of CR I read about, and directly experienced, an additional option.

1. At short notice Jan Fook and Fiona Gardiner generously read a close-to-final draft of this paper. Each was happy that the current paper sought to critically discuss ideas evoked by the theory and practice of critical reflection. Of particular note, Jan was clear the current paper represented a very limited engagement with CR for two reasons: (i) it is referenced to only one text (Fook and Gardiner, 2007) which means no generalizations to other CR iterations are warranted, and (ii) given this qualification, the present text should be seen as a kind of partial discussion document rather than as an analysis or evaluation. I thank Jan and Fiona for their feedback and have embedded this content into the final manuscript.
Similarly, the usual sequence in CR seems to resemble those ideas concerned with supervision, consultation and training associated with narrative practice. These developments can be dated to the late 1980s, e.g. a special edition of the Dulwich Centre Newsletter (summer 1989/1990) took the lead in discussing, and then putting into action, a rush of innovative ideas around reflective processes. For example, in narrative practice a number of consultative processes have been formulated, usually but not necessarily, constituted in based-team participation (see for example, White 1999; 2007). These formats seek to be conceptually and ideologically coherent as they also seek to be practically useful in opening space for the ‘stuck’ practitioner (‘witnessing circles’ are the most popular of these formats). In working-up these processes narrative practitioners have devoted significant effort to, and have evolved a considerable expertise with, structuring these consultations so that group processes are conducive to the imagining of new possibilities whilst also remaining sensitive to complex, and often problematic, themes around accountability and blame. (see for example, White, 1999).2

Another example of an absence of cross-citation can be seen in the manner positive outliers – ‘exceptions’ – are considered in and beyond CR. That is, in narrative there is a keen interest in ‘unique outcomes’; in solution-based work there is a focus on ‘when is the problem not the problem’; in strengths-based practice there is an interest in ‘exceptions’ – as there is in CR. Despite these apparent parallels, there seems little cross-referencing between these traditions in any direction: between CR and narrative, between narrative and strengths, and so forth.

A further example of conceptual relationships being under-articulated is that popular representations of CR do not seem to link themselves to the available literature on systems consultation. This is regrettable, as these linkages seem particularly relevant yet seem to be left more or less undeclared. Although the development of this point is beyond the scope of the present work to begin to outline in even a preliminary

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2. Christine Fagan and I discussed our responses to the CR workshop in October. Christine, a narrative enthusiast, was good enough to read the first draft of this paper.
form, suffice it to say there is a substantial literature that is available on systems consultation within and beyond family therapy as there is also a set of linkages with the emerging interest in (so-called) ‘complex cases’, complex systems and complexity theory.

In this instance, and presumably more generally, it seems likely the growth of CR might be stimulated by a close, and explicitly acknowledging, dialogue with its adjacent, and often very lively, colleagues. For example, Amies and Weir (2001) put forward a process for reflective group supervision. This formulation explicitly acknowledges, and then practically integrates, Jan Fook’s substantive development of ideas from the reflective tradition; equally, Amies and Weir clearly acknowledge what they have taken from the narrative tradition. Likewise, Pizzi (2001) offers another contribution, one that is specifically tailored to a consideration of social work supervision, that publically affirms its conceptual embeddedness. Such collaborative conversations have the advantage of being mutually informing.

(ii) THE ISSUE OF POWER: WHO OWNS THE GAME AND WRITES THE RULES?

A key distinction in the theory and practice of CR is between ‘learning’ and ‘therapy’: the aim of the CR process is always said to be the former, not the latter. Whilst those in the movement, such as Jan Fook in her plenary comments, are alive to the fact that this is to construct a binary, there remains a potentially troubling issue that may be common to the two espousedly distinct projects of CR and therapy.

Foucault (1973), Pentony (1981), Furlong and Lipp (1995), along with many others, have long argued that traditional accounts of the therapeutic project make the power relationship between the therapist and the client invisible. This glossed-over story renders the therapist as benign, neutral, possessing a privilege that is assumed to be pro-social, and so forth. Despite its demotion in critical texts, this naïve account still holds sway in many circles.
Similarly, it is possible to hold a vision of the action of CR that is
grounded in a parallel understanding. This eliding version does not attend
to the matter of power – to the crucial question of `who writes the rules
and who owns the game?` when it comes to CR. This root question can
then be resolved into its component elements: who is the proper authority
when it comes to defining adequate, sufficient, genuine, etc., qualities in
the participant’s process of, or outcome from, critical reflection?; who is it
that judges reflection, especially if the consultant (if that is the right term)
has a sponsor, that is, has been brought in by management and/or has a
clear position in the agency’s hierarchical structure?

There was an earlier version of CR: ‘consciousness raising.’ In structural
social work texts, and in other emancipatory projects (such as those
dedicated to second and third wave feminist and also Marxist political
programs) there was, and there still is, an ambitious and high-toned
purpose, as well as a troubling imperial tone, in the articulation of the
process that is referred to as ‘consciousness raising.’ In this process the
right-thinking expert, it is assumed, is able to discern instances of false
consciousness from correct consciousness and to lead the less knowing
to the form of knowing that is correct.

A powerful case can be made for the possibility that ‘correct thinking’
can, at least in some instances, be distinguished from ‘incorrect
thinking’ mindful that this distinction has to remain an actively
interrogated possibility. This noted, it appears that the usual discourse
of critical reflection tends to beg the question of power that the issue of
‘consciousness raising’ introduces. At least in my limited experience of
CR it is here that it is necessary to ask: is it the participant, the group or
the leader (the more knowing expert) who determines how successful the
outcome of the CR process is?; is there an ongoing dialogue about the
criteria that should be used to judge the success of CR?; is the question
‘who knows best?’ up for dispute?.

In so far as these kinds of questions are not regularly debated there
is a potentially troubling resonance between the traditional account
of therapeutic neutrality and CR. In so far as this is so, there might
also be a conflict between the modernist project of ‘raising the client’s consciousness’ and that of ‘undertaking a process of critical reflection.’

(III) IS THE IDEA THAT CR IS ‘TRANSFORMATIVE’ A MASCULINIST CONCEIT?

CR has been described by its enthusiasts as ‘transformative’ and as associated with ‘breakthroughs.’ That CR may, at certain times and within specific conditions, be experienced as a powerful change agent is not open to question. This acknowledged, CR is no silver bullet and it is important to underline this limit because it is tempting to ‘over-egg the pudding’ in the pragmatic, even craven, organizational and professional environments within which most of us currently work. This context invites grand claims to be read into the outcomes of the process of CR. Given that the organizational and cultural environment CR is positioned within favours determinate action and masculinist claims to utility, it follows there has to be a tug towards coupling with this ethos.

To hold against this temptation, to not allow itself to be ramped-up like the salespersons for products like cognitive-behavioural therapy are happy to do, CR needs to be clear about its project and its nature. Yes, CR can be understood as a form of strategic consultation within complex systems but it can also be understood as something more aesthetic, as a kind of Trojan horse – an action that might be productively smuggled into highly stressed settings and used as a prompt for group-based processes of mutual support and affirmation. That enhanced relationalities – supportive relationships and a firmed-up sense of collectivity – might be occasioned by the introduction of CR processes is an important, arguably the central, attribute associated with CR. This should not be under-valued as many of us are hungry for experiences of solidarity. Even as our employers – that set of human service, health, community and educational organizations we have to dance with – increasingly demand masculinist outcomes ‘delivered’ by muscular actors, it is a healthy counter-moment to be prompted to stand together.

That CR is not reducible to a masculinist technique contradicts the possibility CR might be mis-read as a psychologising trick, as a quick
and effective way of bumping individuals into assessing alternative subjectivities, even identities, so as to be empowered to identify (faux) personal solutions to structural issues. A 30 minute intervention, however well designed, is never likely to be an adequate response to problems of resourcing, workplace design or the bullying culture that is sometimes present in organisations. To be allowed to be presented as a device that offers the dream of a transformative ‘ah-ha!’ experience would be to challenge the values of struggle and solidarity that are inherent to CR or, more precisely, to one more political reading of what is central to CR.

Of course, there are always multiple readings of what is at stake. For example, the conclusion reached by Fook and Askeland’s (2005) in their report on the effectiveness of CR emphasised that workers became, across a number of overlapping dimensions, more professionally autonomous. This sounds positive, yet this conclusion might also be read as problematic: might a preferred outcome that allows a capacity for power to be individualised discount the weight of empirical materiality and the importance of solidarity? Such a preference could be seen as an elision that is inconsistent with what some would contend is the crucial dimension to CR: the structural dimension.

There must be contesting positions with respect to what is inherent to CR. One version advocates an outcome where individual workers are able to perform a greater capacity for sense, self-determination and professional power as the preferred stand-alone effect. Another view contends that such an effect is not necessarily positive and that ‘good’ CR is essentially associated with the promotion of relationalities and group solidarity, as well as with more aesthetic outcomes including an enhanced capacity for personal accountability and mindfulness.

CONCLUSION

The contest around the proper nature of CR is a lively concern and flows into more finite questions: Is CR about a ‘stuck-point’ to be negotiated, a critical incident to be un-picked or is it best used as a de-briefing process that is to take place after lesser experiences of trauma? Is it about an issue to be worked through, or a process that acts as a pep-talk to gee the
worker into more imaginative and empowered personal action? Perhaps, it is best understood as a practice that is about group functioning rather than it is about individuals: that staff groups, for example, might be aided to be better primed to hold against the depredations of anxiety or disorganization, self-blaming or me-firstism. These and other questions arise as soon as we step back and temper an enthusiasm for CR with a critical spirit. How deep do you go in the process of CR: does one have to proceed from situation to assumptions, and then into personal values?

At the level of radical review a further nest of questions also arise: is the process of CR worthwhile if it does not lead to a sense of enhanced agency?; might participation in the process of CR be less about individual ‘empowerment’ than it is associated with a greater understanding of accountability and/or a deeper capacity for contemplation and compassion. As explored by Fook and Askeland (2005) these are some of the questions practitioners and authors identified with CR are happy to consider.

REFERENCES


