Beyond reflective practice: reworking the “critical” in critical reflection

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Abstract

What exactly does the “critical” in critical reflection mean, and how is this useful in taking our thinking beyond an individual focus? I take this focus for two reasons: first, because there is a recognized lack of consensus (and clarity) about the concept of critical reflection; and second, because of the increasing calls for attention to a collective orientation towards reflection in workplace learning. I argue that it is useful to revisit our understandings of the “critical” aspects of critical reflection, since this holds the seeds for understanding the links between individual experiences and social contexts. By better understanding how the social and personal dimensions are integrated in experience, both in theory and practice, we are better placed to develop methods for using critical reflection in a collective way in workplace contexts. To this end I revisit some fundamental understandings of the theory of critical reflection, and then further develop what it means in practice by analysing some written assignments of students in a critical reflection post-graduate program. This illustrates the complexities of how the social and personal components of experience are integrated in the critical reflection change process. I then look at the implications for our understanding of the “critical” in critical reflection, as a more complex theorization of the individual in social context. I end by briefly positing how such an approach might be operationalised as a system of professional practice review within organizations.

Introduction

If we want to move “beyond” reflective practice, what are some of the directions we need to be taking? In this paper I look at this issue through the prism of critical reflection. I focus on the problem in two main ways: first I revisit what the “critical” in critical reflection means; and second, I address the potential for a collective focus, which forms one of the current concerns regarding the applicability of reflective practices in the workplace.

Why do we need to revisit an understanding of the “critical” in critical reflection? First, there is a broad need to be clearer about what we mean when we talk about critical reflection and reflective practice. There is of course widespread recognition that critical reflection (and its close cousin, reflective practice) has widely divergent usages, spanning many different disciplines and intellectual traditions (Fook et al, in press), and of course, popular usages (Moon, 1999). On the one hand this may be a worthwhile and necessary
underpinning for an inclusive set of practices and approaches, and indeed may be one of the very aspects of critical reflection which makes it widely appealing and applicable. On the other hand however, it does make it extraordinarily difficult to research and further develop the concept in more systematic ways (Woerkom et al, 2002). It is necessary I think to both include different understandings, but also work from some common basis of understanding, if we want to be able to refine and improve our practice of critical reflection.

One of my aims in this paper therefore is to return to the idea of critical reflection, in particular revisiting the “critical” aspect, in order to shed some further light on what this might mean in both theory and practice. I have chosen to narrow my discussion to critical reflection, rather than reflective practice more broadly, as this enables me to develop a particular theoretical framework in more depth. In addition, I think that as with any practice, the actual enactment of critical reflection may not necessarily match the theorising of it. In this paper, therefore, I want to try and see what might be learnt from its practice in order to enable further theorising of the idea. I do this first by elucidating my own theoretical framework for critical reflection, and by then presenting some detailed analysis of changes which have occurred for students in one of my critical reflection postgraduate programs. Spelling out some of the complexities of the process of changes and outcomes of critical reflection will I hope provide a basis for continued research. And in addition I hope this reworking might provide a clearer basis from which to better develop critical reflection as a process for both research and practice review, within and outside the workplace.

A second major trend in the current literature indicates calls for a more collective approach to critical reflection in the workplace (Reynolds & Vince, 2004; Boud et al, 2006). These calls are based on the observations that: most workplace learning literature “sees reflection as an ability belonging to human subjects as individual learners, in principle detachable from social practices” (Elmholdt & Brinkman, 2006, p. 170); and that in the educational literature, individual reflection is essentially focused on individual learning from personal experience (Boud, 2006, p. 160). These arguments imply that the focus must either be individual or collective. I do think that in practice this has often been the case, but I do not want to risk the danger of over-reacting by focusing solely instead on collective, social, or more organisational forms of reflection. Instead I want to argue for the need to revisit how the individual and social realms are linked. I want to take another look at the theoretical underpinnings which do link these realms, and to see what implications these might have for making the links in practice. I therefore want to revisit the notion of critical reflection, as practised individually, and redevelop its collective potential from this point of view. My focus will therefore also be on re-articulating a theoretical (and practice) framework for critical reflection which emphasises the individual in social context, and in particular which this might mean for changed practices within organisations. By analysing the detailed experience of the change process in critical reflection, and in particular focusing on the implications of this for the social contexts broadly (and organisations particularly) of the learners, I hope to further develop our understanding of critical reflection as a process which is neither inherently individual or collective, but instead one which is based irrevocably upon an
understanding of individual in social context. I argue that it is this integrated understanding which provides a sound way forward in developing better collective applications of critical reflection.

There are also sound reasons I think, especially in the field of professional lifelong learning, to maintain some kind of critical reflection learning process which takes individual experience as its starting point, and to link this with social contexts, rather than switching focus solely onto their collective application in these contexts.

First, many educators of practising professionals work independently of the workplaces in which learners are employed, and of course a good deal of their contribution to workplace learning is the ability to maintain and use this independent perspective in order to inform different approaches to organisational practice. It is important therefore that they see their students also as individuals, often seeking formal study because of their desire to learn independently of their own employment. In this sense, whilst I firmly believe that professional learning must be relevant to workplace context, I also think there is just as much call for people to develop a sense of their own professionalism, and professional practice, independent of specific workplace setting. This is vital I think for professionals to develop a sense of integrity (Sullivan, 1995), especially in the climate of current challenges to professionals. My focus in this paper thus is on the social contexts of professional practice more broadly – this includes workplaces, but also professional cultures, social, political and cultural contexts.

Second, individuals are likely to change workplaces several times throughout their professional careers, or at least their workplaces will change around them. Therefore individuals need to learn ways of learning which are transferable between workplaces, in addition to actions which are context relevant. Third, there is some evidence to suggest that it is characteristics of the individual worker, as opposed to characteristics of the workplace, are more important as factors influencing critical reflective working behaviour (Woerkom et al, 2002, p. 378). Fourth, workplace cultures can be very powerful, and also hidden in their operation. There is good educational reason to equip professionals with the ability to make sense of these, independent of their operation in specific contexts, so that they enter a new workplace alert to the operation of hidden, more fundamental organisational values. Fifth, if the focus shifts too markedly from individual practice to organisational context, there is a danger that “victim-blaming” may be replaced by “system-blaming”. My contention is that neither individual or organisation is “to blame”, but rather that both realms are constructed by each other. What is important is to better understand this co-construction, in order to make organisational changes which are meaningful at both individual and organisational levels. In this paper, however, my focus primarily begins with personal experience, and the operation of the social and political dimensions within it.

I begin by revisiting the common understandings of the “critical” theory of critical reflection and how this is enacted in the particular process of critical reflection that I use. I then present an analysis of some of the changes which occur in this process (from students in one of my postgraduate programs). I then rework my understanding of critical
reflection in the light of this analysis. I finish by putting forward a preliminary model for
how critical reflection might be used for practice review in an organisational context,
based on this theoretical framework.

The theory of critical reflection

The reflective process in professional learning basically involves an examination of the
assumptions implicit in practices. Not everyone of course distinguishes between
reflection and critical reflection. However for those who do, there appear to be essentially
two main understandings of what makes reflection critical. First, it may be critical
because of its focus on unearthing deeper assumptions or “presuppositions” (Mezirow,
1991, p. 12). “Critical”, in this sense, is about the ability to be transformative, “…to
involve and lead to some fundamental change in perspective” (Cranton, 1996, p. 79-80).
Second, it is critical because of its focus on power (Brookfield, 1995, p. 6). In particular
therefore, it is transformative because it focuses on dominant or hegemonic assumptions
(Brookfield, 2000, p. 126) which may influence our practice unwittingly. The two
perspectives are not necessarily of course mutually exclusive ie. the deeper assumptions
unearthed may, or may not, be about power. But of course what becomes clearer when
we consider these two directions, is that what is considered “fundamental”, and of course
how power is theorized, then become crucial to our understanding of the critical aspects
of critical reflection.

For instance, we can further extend the above to encompass an awareness of how
assumptions about the connection between oneself and social context/structure can
function in powerful ways to maintain existing (often unequal) power relations, so that
awareness of these assumptions can provide a platform for transformative action towards
a more equitable society (eg. Kondrat, 1999; Fook, 2002). These latter understandings are
associated with a critical social theory tradition (Agger, 1998; Brookfield, 2005), and of
course are related to earlier ideas of “conscientization” (Alfero, 1972; Hart, 1991) and
other understandings of the ways in which critical theory can change people (Fay, 1977).

Critical reflection, from the standpoint of this type of critical perspective, is reflection
which enables an understanding of the way (socially dominant) assumptions may be
socially restrictive, and thus enables new, more empowering ideas and practices. Critical
reflection thus enables social change beginning at individual levels. Once individuals
become aware of the hidden power of ideas they have absorbed unwittingly from their
social contexts, they are then freed to make choices on their own terms. In this sense they
are freed to change the operation of the social at the level of their personal experience.

However this basic view may be theorised more specifically in any number of ways, by
any number of disciplines including philosophers, sociologists and educationalists,
beginning with Socrates (Nussbaum, 1997), through Dewey (1933), Freire (1972), Schon
(1983), Habermas (1971), the critical theorists (Brookfield, 2005), discourse analysts and
those with an interest in narrative and linguistic construction (Taylor & White, 2000),
Foucault, feminism (Issit, 2000), postmodernism (Fook, 2002), Giddens (1991) and most
latterly spirituality (Ghaye, 2005). Therefore, depending on what other frameworks may
be invoked, critical reflection may also be primarily involve understanding, for example: how people engage with their social worlds and construct a sense of self (Giddens and reflexive modernity); how people make meaning from experience in order to guide action (Mezirow and adult education); how social structures and relations (including gendered ones) mediate and create personal experience; how language use and discourses construct personal meaning and identities; how people’s fundamental values connect with professional and personal experience; and more specifically, how professionals construct their knowledge and identities within a workplace context. None of these functions are of course mutually exclusive, but of course to some extent the type of learning that develops will partly depend on what frameworks are used to theorise the process, and of course what foci are considered important and how they are linked.

In this sense, for the purposes of critical reflection, individual experience may be seen as a microcosm of the social. This relies on an understanding of how knowledge and power are linked; how individuals participate in constructing knowledge (and therefore power); and how individuals act reflexively in their social worlds as agents, both constructing and responding to their environments. The critical reflection process provides a new awareness of the operation of the social in personal experience, thus enabling choices to be made anew. In the context of learning about professional practice, critical reflection is theorised as taking a focus on how the new individual control and changed personal/professional identity that results from the new understanding translates into professional practices (new or reaffirmed). Change is thus effected in the individual’s social world through a change of individual orientation towards social ideologies/discourses and their effects on the individual.

In the next section I show how I have developed this theoretical framework into a practical process of undertaking critical reflection for the purposes of changing professional practices.

**The process of critical reflection**

In my own work I attempt to use a mixture of theoretical approaches: reflective practice; reflexivity; postmodernism (including a Foucauldian approach to power, notions of discourse and narrative); and critical social science, to comprise a broad two stage process of critical reflection, primarily for professionals who wish to learn from practice (Fook, 2004a & b). I use a mixture of theories as I find that different ways of understanding the process can help in ways: they maximise the opportunities for different people to find a meaningful framework; they add some depth and richness to the process; and they better allow the exposure of different perspectives. The first stage focuses on developing a critical reflective analysis/consciousness of practice through the exposure (unsettling or “shaking up”) of fundamental (dominant) assumptions and their sources; the second stage develops this awareness into possible practice strategies. By connecting changed awareness with changed practice, participants therefore develop their own practice theory. Both stages therefore focus on learning from practice; the first focuses on changed awarenesses and second on changed practices. The whole process focuses on how these are linked and therefore enables more transferable learning. Further stages can
be added for follow up to enable initial changes to be sustained. When the process is used for more formal study (such as in postgraduate award programs), participants are asked to write formal assignments based on the above model, and also undertake subsequent stages in which they are asked to further develop the “theory of practice” through research and/or experimentation in their workplaces.

In more informal continuing education settings, I normally conduct critical reflection in small groups (up to 10 participants) over several sessions in which each participant presents a piece of practice for reflection in two stages: a reflective awareness stage and a linking with practice stage. The ultimate aim of the groups is to develop some changed practices as a result of reflections on fundamental (dominant) assumptions) ie. to develop a theory of practice directly from one’s own practice experience (and incorporating one’s desired values rather than those which are dominant). The process however functions in many different ways, according to the meaning of the specific incident which is raised for the person themselves. This will also depend on how it is theorised and understood, and of course on what types of fundamental assumptions are unearthed and “shaken up” for each person.

Participants bring a “raw” description of critical (significant) incident from their practice. Group members help them reflect by using a set of questions derived from the above theoretical frameworks (eg. “what does your practice imply about…..? What were you assuming when….? How did you influence the situation through your presence; perceptions; interpretations; assumptions? What were your beliefs about power and where did they come from? What perspectives are missing? What are your own constructions (especially binary categories)? What language patterns have you used and what do they imply? What is your own thinking and what is the result of power relations (eg. gendered, cultural, structural”).

The process is conducted within a deliberately reflective group culture which has been termed “critical acceptance” (Fook et al, 2000, p. 230): a climate which balances safety and challenge in order to maximise learning. The main purpose is to create an environment which enables a person to reflect and learn for themselves, including determining for themselves the thinking and practices they wish to develop (rather than being taught a predetermined framework of assumptions or values). This involves the following principles: participatory; non-judgemental; openness to new and other perspectives; responsibility not blame; the right to draw limits; acceptance of multiple contradictory views; focus on “story” not person; focus on “why” not ‘what to do”; non-directive.

**Analysis of the process**

What actually happens in the change process? What changes are made and how are individual and social understandings linked and integrated by participants?

The following traces the processes of change, and the outcomes for workplace practice, analysed from the written assignments of three postgraduate students. The students were
enrolled in a Masters of Professional Practice Development at the Centre for Professional Development at La Trobe University. The subjects involved were two subjects designed to teach the process of critical reflection, and to apply this learning in some way within their organisational context. They spanned a full year and involved two 5,000 word written assignments (one each at the end of each semester) which described and theorised their learning through the critical reflection process. With regard to the above generic process outlined above, students in fact undertook a series of stages of learning which went beyond the two preliminary stages. In the first semester they undertook stages one and two, and in the second semester they built upon this learning by formulating their “theory of practice” into something which could be further researched in their organisation, with a view to implementing it in that context. Learning was continually processed through on line journals (fortnightly) and class discussions (approximately monthly).

The three students were all social workers by background who worked in quite different organisations and roles. Cilla worked in a generic community health centre in a deputy manager role. Her initial incident involved designing a staff appraisal instrument sympathetic with feminist thinking. Tessa worked as head of a student unit, responsible for student placements in a large human services government bureaucracy. Her critical incident involved an angry confrontation with a colleague over a student’s placement project. Anne was a team leader in a large government income security bureaucracy. She began with an incident from her personal life whilst on holiday overseas: her intervention in an angry argument between a hotel manager and a friend. I analysed the assignments thematically, looking for common themes regarding the nature and ordering of changes made.

The pattern of learning can be summarised as follows:

1. **A first level of assumptions is unearthed.** These assumptions may often be the “safer” ones, that is, those which are more easily identifiable and more acceptable as they fit closer with the person’s stated theory. For instance, there were assumptions about power and gender, deriving from an explicit feminist framework. In Cilla’s case, assumptions about power being equated with the possibility of abuse meant that Cilla constructed binaries of her work roles (“manager vs counsellor”, or “management philosophies vs narrative therapy”); and for Tessa, there were clear binaries constructed regarding “victim/perpetrator” (by definition, victims are powerless, perpetrators powerful, and therefore perpetrators/abusers cannot be powerless).

2. **These may move to another (deeper) level through further reflection.** Sometimes additional assumptions are unearthed which may appear unrelated to the earlier ones. Students, for instance, noted other assumptions, such as for Tessa, a concern with conformism (strong resistance to conformism); and for Anne, a concern with uncertainty, control and change which implied a strong value on activity (and anxiety about inactivity), because activity implied control of change.
3. “Breakthrough” connections are made, often through the connection with a past (emotional) experience which integrates them and provides an overall meaning. In struggling to see which assumptions are more fundamental, it is often the realisation of connections with a personal experience (past or current) which allows connections to be made between all assumptions. In particular, it is often the emotional element of these experiences which provides a pointer as to their connected meaning.

For instance, Tessa reported remembering a powerful adolescent experience in which she had had a relationship with a young man contrary to the wishes of her parents. She began to experience this relationship as abusive at some point and made a firm decision to end it. From this she traced her strong value on the need to resist being made to conform. In her own mind she had constructed “non-conforming” as resistance to control, and this was vital to her identity (personal and professional). Her fundamental assumptions therefore moved from being explicitly about power and victimhood, to being about the importance of not conforming, or resisting control. In Tessa’s case, it might be said that the connection with her past experience enabled her to theorise her assumptions as being about her own identity formation, and the importance to her of being in control of this process.

Cilla experienced great anxiety at this point in the reflective process. She reported almost deciding to discontinue the course. She traced her anxiety to her childhood experiences of abuse. She realised that she had been using her feminist theory as a way of containing this anxiety (and a way of containing any tendency of her own to use power in an abusive way), and this led her to explore the connections between the anxiety experienced from this early abuse, the anxiety she experienced through the critical reflection process, and anxiety in her workplace context. She realised she had equated anger with abuse, which led her to construct conflict (and therefore anger) as something to be avoided in the workplace. The connection for Cilla was about connecting similar emotions, and realising she had therefore equated the experiences associated with these emotions.

4. This/these assumption/s are evaluated against current experience/values/assumptions (and also other people’s opinions/experiences, literature). Often the framing of the assumptions in the light of powerful experiences allows people to revisit the assumptions in a new light, and they are freed to examine them from different perspectives. It is almost as if understanding this thinking in the light of the context in which it developed allows people to be open to remaking their thinking in the light of different contexts. In other words, contextualising assumptions allows them to be further contextualised. But more than this, the impetus for this remaking appears to involve a recognition of the political aspects of the emotion, that is, the realisation that the emotional learning which has been taken from the experience itself
performs political functions in their lives (that is, is used as ideology to preserve a particular set of assumptions or actions).

Cilla reported being struck with two particular articles. One spoke about the connections between power and emotion in the workplace (Vince, 2001) and the other about how enemies and allies are constructed in the workplace (Fook, 2000). This led her to retheorise her anxiety. She realised she had assumed that any anxiety triggered old fears about abuse, so that she avoided any conflict in the workplace, so as, she told herself, she would not risk being abusive towards others. But, she reasoned, anxiety can in fact be caused by a variety of experiences (including the anxiety of any new learning). So, in fact, this avoidance of conflict was also functioning to protect her as well. Therefore it also functioned as a use of her own power. Cilla wrote in her assignment, taking on Vince’s (2001) views with some force, that “emotion is political”!

Anne revisited her original critical incident, and decided that her value on activity, and professional leadership being about controlling change, was masking her own need to avoid the discomfort of uncertainty. She felt that her need to intervene was in fact also a way of controlling uncertainty.

Tessa decided that her theory of practice (assumptions about not conforming = resistance to control) was inadequate, as it was a reactionary stance, not necessarily strategic, and held the potential to be destructive if so closely tied to her own emotional needs.

5. **Old assumptions are then reframed as their desired theory of practice.** This may feel like a more ‘freeing” formulation – one which may embrace the original fear/emotion and allow a reformulation of meaning. The reframing also involves turning the original issue/concern/set of assumptions into an actionable problem – something which can be researched and acted upon in the everyday workplace setting.

Anne decided that what she needed to do, rather than continue to avoid uncertainty, was to reframe her practice in more empowering ways. As a focus for further research on her practice, she decided to investigate “how can I practice powerfully in uncertainty”? For her this involved looking at how she might create an “emotional scaffolding” that allowed her to contain uncertainty, to broaden her view of change into one of possibilities for opportunity.

Tessa decided to look at how she could reframe resistance as a positive thing. Her question then became one of investigating how resistance can be seen as identity-making, and as therefore central to self-care in an organisation. In a sense she began to see making her own meaning (and therefore her fundamental theory of practice) as a form “identity politics”: that the power to make one’s own identity in the organisation is important to self-care.
In order for Cilla to further investigate her theory of practice, rather than focusing on how power might not be abusive, she reframed it in terms much closer to home: “how can I exercise power to influence work relationships that are characterised by unresolved conflict?” Not only was this a more positive formulation, but it was also something which acknowledged the place of power in personal experience, and was framed in a way which allowed Cilla to research it directly from her own experience.

6. Changed practices which result:
   - more open to others and differences – all reported starting with being more open to different ways of communicating, of dealing with uncertainty, of resistance and identity-making. In particular Cilla started by trying to create new environments which would allow for other people to communicate in ways that suited them. Tessa built multiple and different perspectives into her own understanding of resistance, so that it became “resistance as creating the space within bureaucracy for complex/multiple/contradictory perspectives, and the space for reinventing/negotiating identity”. She spent a lot of time having informal conversations with colleagues, and surprised herself at the multitude of different ways of resisting which she learnt about.

   - multiple choices for action – all reported having a lot more options for ways to act, and to be more open to “experimenting”. For instance Anne was able to deconstruct the idea of uncertainty, so that she was able to prepare for a confrontational interview by separating what remains constant, and what is new or unknown. She was able to draw on past experiences and clarify boundaries which allayed her anxiety in conducting the interview. Cilla reported many more ways to discuss issues with her co-manager, and different tools for supervision used with her supervisee.

   - more empowered stance – all reported feeling more “active”, often accompanied by a sense of relief, of being released from past restrictive thinking. For example, Anne spoke of feeling enabled to “embrace uncertainty”, to move towards controlling the structure rather than being controlled by it. She reported discussing a plan for a new program with a colleague, and surprising herself by asking him to think of it “without the structure”.

   - an “other” focus – all spoke of different relationships with co-workers, particularly Cilla, who experienced previously fraught relationships as more fun and supportive, and of having a breakthrough with a supervision relationship in which only 4 sessions managed to produce what the previous 3 years had not (a focus on clinical skills). She also made a conscious decision to factor in her own constructions of other people in relating to them. Anne spoke in particular of developing “new ideas about
how to share knowledge in a community of learners” and “how to create a learning culture”.

Overall the process seemed to involve a complex interplay of reflecting on specific personal experiences, filtering out different sets of assumptions, and again using the prism of personal experiences, particularly the emotional element, to distil some fundamental meaning (theory of practice) which connects the disparate assumptions. Sometimes part of this fundamental meaning involves the awareness of the importance of the past experiences in identity formation, or in emotional politics. This fundamental meaning is then scrutinised against current contexts (literature, current experiences, other perspectives) and remade in ways which seem more appropriate in these contexts. This remaking involves turning the fundamental meaning (theory of practice) into an issue which is researchable and actionable in current workplace context.

Implications for retheorising critical reflection

On the face of it, this process appears little different from the changes which it is claimed are made through critical reflection and reflective practice (eg. Boud et al, 1985). There is clearly a move from Model 1 to Model 2 thinking (Argyris & Schon, 1974) and both single and double loop learning take place (Argyris 7 Schon, 1996). For instance, there was general recognition of how social contexts such as professional ideologies (assumptions about change and activity), workplace cultures (assumptions about organisational conformity, or cultural contexts (value on feminist approaches) might have influenced fundamental assumptions. However what is interesting is that these awarenesses do not figure large in the written accounts of the students. We will return to this further on. In terms of critical social science perspectives, we do see a move towards unearthing more fundamental assumptions regarding power, and a transformation in the way these are evaluated and reworked in line with current experience. There is a recognition of the social origin of some of these assumptions (in that they originated from other theories about power, abuse, leadership and control), a sense of the restrictiveness of this thinking, and a sense of empowerment with more aware and individual choice in reworking these. (Fook & Askeland, in press)

However there are also some aspects which require further scrutiny, and raise further questions to be examined. For instance, here are many levels and types of assumptions raised, many of them complex, and without clear relationships between them. Some are clearly more fundamental (from a cognitive and logical perspective) than others. Others may seem to have an origin deep in personalised experience, but also connect with the social context and position of the person. What criteria do we use to decide which assumptions are more fundamental than others? And how do we know when we have reached an appropriate level of fundamentality? In the learning process generated through our course, it seemed as if meaning could only be made of apparently unrelated assumptions through reconnection with personal experience.

A second issue centres around an apparent trend in the above accounts of change. Students tended to start with assumptions which were gleaned from their social context of
beliefs about professional practice (because this was their espoused theory), but seemed almost irrevocably, in the reflective process, to delve the personal meaning of these. On the face of it, this runs counter to conventional critical theory, in that the learning process is presumably primarily about arriving at a social understanding. However it almost seemed that this more personal level was more unsettling for these students (this may have had something to do with the professional background of the students as social workers – they had already been educated with some social and critical awareness?) It was perhaps that they needed to rework their understanding of their own socially critical views in the further light of personal experiences. But does this also suggest that (deep) meaning may only be made (for some people) through further connection with personal experiences? This indicates I think a need to revisit and further research the nature of the connections between personal and social realms. It is perhaps not so easy to divorce the realms from each other, either in experience, in learning, and in action. What are the complexities of the relationships between personal meaning and collective social changes? A critical awareness which results from a process of critical reflection, may in this sense be much more complex than simply deriving a better understanding of the operation of social ideologies in personal experience (which in some senses is the traditional linear view of learning we take from our understanding of consciousness-raising (Hart, 1991; Fook, 2004a) and a freeing from these in order to act in more collective ways. It may involve an integrated understanding of how these social ideologies are also constantly remade personally in ways which sometimes run counter to intended collective changes. This perhaps suggests that personal experience may be one prism through which social meaning is made in a critical reflection process.

And what is the place of emotion? It was almost as if emotion not only triggered learning issues, but acted as the impetus and motivation for finding meaning and continuing reflection. Whilst most major writers on critical reflection acknowledge the importance of emotions in learning (Boud et al, 1985; Mezirow, 1990, 1991, 1994, 1997, 1998, 2000; Brookfield, 1995), what exactly does this mean in social terms? Do we need to factor a social theory of emotions more explicitly into our theory of critical reflection? Many writers have developed the use of psychodynamic or psychoanalytic theory (eg. Vince, 2001; Obholzer & Roberts, 1994). In addition there are social constructionist views of emotion in organisations (eg. Fineman, 2003) and the concept of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1979). However I wonder whether we may need some more sophisticated understanding of the complex interplay of personally and organisationally experienced emotions incorporated into critically reflective learning? This would at the very least involve having a better understanding of how the emotional aspects of professional experience, both negative and positive, contribute to the making of professional identities and professional practices in particular workplace contexts. For instance, Olesen (2001) posits that professional learning and personal development are intertwined – the subjective side of work can be understood and theorised through an examination of workers’ life histories. In this sense professional practice can also be understood as made in workplace context with professional identity. How does emotional work underpin notions of professionalism (Smith & Kleinman, 1989)? We might, for instance, understand critical reflection as involving a more complex understanding of how the social management of emotion (through internalized assumptions) impacts on notions of
professional identity (Shields, 2005) and related practices. And of course we need to develop the direct links between emotional experience and power: the ideological role of emotions in preserving power relations at individual and social levels.

It is also important to point out that a process which is primarily focused on personal learning from personal experiences, nevertheless yields concrete results and changes in relation to other people, and to organizational practices. Mezirow (1991, p. 369) of course point out how critical reflection teaches the skill of divergence: “opening ourselves up to the ideas of others, especially when these provide a new angle of vision”. This skill of divergence is a necessary underpinning in making changes in the way relationships are practiced.

In summary then, I think there are several main points we need to reiterate in order to further develop our understanding of critical reflection. These articulate some more ways in which personal and social realms are integrated in experience. Critical reflection therefore needs to incorporate:

i. an understanding of the importance of personal experience to provide a meaningful framework for disparate assumptions. “A meaningful framework” is understood here in a fairly specific sense as providing connections between apparently unrelated assumptions so that their relative importance can be understood. This process also functions to help people decide what assumptions are of fundamental importance to them. This effectively extends our understanding of the role of personal experience in critically reflective learning. In this sense not only is critical reflection a process of learning from experience (Boud et al, 1985), but it is also a process which may depend on experience for deeper learning at the assumptive level.

ii. an understanding of the remaking of power as personal (in addition to the remaking of the “personal as political”). This includes an understanding of how professional knowledge is used politically in one’s own experience. The “politics of personal experience” is therefore important: particularly in identity-making (personal and professional); re the role of emotions in preserving personal ideologies; and in the broader recognition and incorporation of the role of emotion.

iii. The foregoing point also involves a more complex understanding of emotion as an integral part of experience and therefore with personal, cultural, social and political aspects, with particular implications for the making of professional identities and practices.

iv. A more complex understanding of how personal and social experiences are integrated, and indeed necessary for meaningful action in the collective realm:
   a. personal experience may need to be recognised and validated in order to effect broader collective/social changes from this reflection (Fook, 2004a)
b. an important part of personal empowerment may involve a sense of reflexivity and agency (Fook, 2004a)– this enables both the motivation, vision and energy for collective actions

c. a view that the “personal” and “social”, rather than being different realms, are simply different perspectives. One way of looking at personal experience is simply as a microcosm of the social, and that in fact, for individuals, the social realm cannot be meaningfully understood except through the prism of personal experience.

In reworking a theory of critical reflection, I would now articulate critical reflection as involving the ability to understand the social dimensions and political functions of experience and meaning making, and the ability to apply this understanding in working in social contexts. Let us compare this with a quote from Argyris and Schon (1996, p. xxii) regarding organisational learning. This may be seen as learning about “the political conditions under which individuals can function as agents of organisational action”. From my perspective then, what the above concept of critical reflection allows, is to add a sense of the internalised and personally experienced political conditions. What personal meaning is made by individuals, of the political conditions in their organisation? And how can the understanding of this be used to make changes in organisational practices?

**Model for practice review to be used in organisations**

Before concluding, I want to briefly posit what a model for a critical reflection process within an organisation might look like, based on the above theorisation. I have based this on the generic process outlined earlier, but modified for a more explicitly organisational focus. I have included possibilities for individual, group/team and organisational level work here, as often the organisational level of work is mediated at group or team levels.

1. Identify one “crucial (or critical) incident”. A crucial incident is simply something which happened which is/was important, depending on the purpose of the critical reflection process (eg. for review, for learning). For instance, the incident identified may be a “mistake” as identified by the individual worker (or by managers, or by team members, or by service users). It may be for use by the individual: in self-supervision/review; in one-to-one supervision/review; in peer supervision/review). Or an incident may be identified by a team, to be used in team/group supervision/review. A crucial incident may even be one identified by a team, but be experienced as different incidents, from different perspectives, by different players in the team. This could be used for both individual and collective reflection. If conducted systematically at regular intervals, the purposes of review and learning are much better integrated, than if conducted on a “one-off” basis.
If the process is being used for both review and learning, then the criteria for how a mistake comes for review are important. To maximise learning, it is important that the process for deciding what is raised for review is as participatory as possible. I.e. at the very least that there is some systematic way of identifying them and therefore a way which indicates “no blame” (this stance is in line with current thinking about learning from error (Dekker, 2002)). For example, what is raised might be identified as those situations about which a complaint was made (by service user)? Those identified as not fitting within current bureaucratic guidelines? Those which team feels could have been handled better? Identified by management/identified by peers?

ii. use process of critical reflection to unearth main assumptions:
   - for individuals
   - for group/team
   - for organisation

iii. identify which assumptions relate to organisation/system and how these interact with individual and group/team assumptions. What makes these meaningful for individuals, groups and the organisation? What is the role of emotions and personal experiences? What are the political functions of these? How are professional identities and practices connected? How does the “political” become personal and vice versa?

iv. identify what fundamental assumptions are important (at individual, group and organisational levels, and how they are connected)

v. identify what needs to change (at individual, group and organisational levels) in the earlier identified assumptions to make these congruent

vi. identify what practical changes (in individual, group and organisational practice) need to happen to support the change in assumptions

In conclusion, I have made an argument for revisiting the idea of the “critical” in critical reflection, both to clarify its meaning, but also to examine it for potential contribution towards more collective approaches to reflection in workplace learning. After summarising our established understandings of critical approaches to reflection, I place emphasis on the idea of “individual in social context”, and use this as a basis to analyse the critical reflection change process for some postgraduate students. I conclude that our understanding of the critical aspect of reflection may need to be more complex to incorporate the many different ways in which personal and social realms are integrated in personal experience, in particular how the “political is made personal”, and how contexts are internalised and personal meaning is made of them through experience. In short, I advocate an additional better developed understanding of the individual in social context
as an approach to critical reflection, as opposed to a singular focus on more collective forms of reflection. This has particular implications regarding the way professional identities and practices are made, and the way the role of emotions is understood and used. I end by positing a model for a process of critical reflection in the workplace based upon this more developed idea of critical reflection.

REFERENCES


