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Those who work in health, education and social care are faced with increasing challenges in the complexity of their practice and the context in which they operate. Critical reflection provides a theoretical approach to help understand these challenges as well as a process for engaging constructively with the dilemmas and issues that inevitably arise in professional practice. Essentially, critical reflection encourages practitioners to identify the underlying assumptions and values that influence their practice and to consider how they can act in line with their preferred assumptions and values. Being able to name these most deeply held values reminds practitioners of the underlying or fundamental reasons for their participation in this kind of practice. This, in itself, can be restoring and energizing as well as challenging and sometimes even painful. The sense of working from fundamental values reinforces the integrity inherent for practitioners in their practice or what they might name as the meaningful or spiritual dimension. Practitioners have affirmed that a critically reflective approach frequently grounded and centred them, taking them to a place where they were reminded of their sense of altruism and hope about their work. While this did not necessarily resolve the dilemmas of practice, it frequently enabled practitioners to engage more actively with them, seeing new perspectives and possibilities for change either for themselves or in their practice. Where change was not possible externally, practitioners suggest they generally became more able to manage living with the uncertainties and complexities of practice. This was both enabling and restoring, and paradoxically encouraged them to take greater care of themselves, partly so that they could be more effective practitioners.

The need for such a critically reflective approach is imperative in an environment of rapid social and economic change where organizations and practitioners are experiencing greater demands in a context of fewer resources; what Baker (2013, p. 126) in the United Kingdom refers to as the ‘current stringent and streamlined climate’. Uncertainty and the rate of change are increasing and these contribute to higher levels of conflict and ethical challenges both in organizations and in society generally. The
‘domination of practice by procedures and bureaucracy’ combined with greater service user complexity increases anxiety for practitioners (Ruch, 2005, p. 112). Given that practice usually happens within an organizational context and always within a societal context, a critically reflective approach enables practitioners to stand back from the immediate to consider the implications of the broader context and the connections to the underlying values of practice (Oliver and Keeping, 2010).

Funding pressures can also add weight to expectations of increased ‘interprofessional’ practice both within and between organizations. Such practice focuses on what tasks can be shared across professional disciplines to encourage collaborative practices. From a service-user perspective this can have advantages of more accessible and better coordinated service delivery. However, interprofessional practice can be confronting for practitioners who value their distinct professional identity and who struggle with differences in philosophy and language from other professions. The focus on efficiencies can also mean pressure to reduce practice to common competencies or measurable work tasks without the more nuanced intuitive judgements and processes of a holistic approach to professional practice (Sturgeon, 2010).

Paradoxically, increased financial stringency means practitioners often feel less able to access critical reflection at a time when they need it more. Practitioners exhausted by increasing workloads and pressures of accountability for time and resources, find it almost impossible to see how they can create time for reflection. Reflective processes where the focus is on learning from what hasn’t gone well can also feel dangerous in periods of redundancies and cuts. Organizations that have previously supported and possibly funded formal critical reflection processes may no longer see these as a priority. This book explores how practitioners can creatively generate their own structures or processes to support being critically reflective when their organizational context does not allow for or encourage this. Using critical reflection processes can enable practitioners to see the influence of the context more clearly rather than taking responsibility for what is beyond their capacity to change individually. Starting from a particular experience, practitioners can put into perspective what is happening in the broader context and its influence on them as well as identifying how their reaction to it is influenced by their own particular history and sense of self. From my own experience, I know that to share an issue in critical reflection can save time and energy, clarifying the influence of context, my reactions and my perspectives relatively quickly. Seeing the issue more clearly means I can then decide whether to do something differently, or whether I simply need to let it go. Either way, it has less power for sapping my energy.

It is clear that the expectation across professional disciplines is that some form of reflective practice or critical reflection will be part of student
education and of professional practice. What is meant by this varies considerably with some writers/practitioners using critical reflection, reflective practice and reflexivity interchangeably and others attributing different meanings to the same language. These differences will be explored in the first chapter. Critical reflection, as used in this book, is about the capacity to be reflective, to make explicit the connections between values and assumptions underlying emotions, thoughts and reactions. The critical aspect relates to connecting these assumptions and values to the broader social context in a way that encourages action and particularly socially just action.

Critical reflection, as defined here, is practiced by practitioners across a wide range of health, education and social care settings in many countries (Fook and Gardner, 2013). The theory and process provides a common language for practitioners across many disciplines to explore their practice and how to work together more effectively. Critical reflection is used by managers, those supervising students and staff, those researching and evaluating practice as well as practitioners and students. People using critical reflection come from an increasingly diverse range of areas of practice including mental health, counselling, palliative care, rehabilitation, acute care, community development, youth services, family and children’s services and aged care. While the experience of critical reflection may be influenced by the particular field of practice and the organizational context, it is clear from practitioners that the theory and processes are universally helpful (Fook and Gardner, 2013).

The title of this book is significant: being critically reflective is about an attitude to practice as well as the doing of critical reflection. Ideally, critical reflection permeates professional practice, influencing the stance taken to organizational life in general as well as to specific professional activities. The danger of some training about critical reflection is that it becomes solely a distinct activity that takes place in a formal forum such as supervision or in response to a particular event. In this book, I am suggesting that it is more helpful to generate an attitude or underlying perspective that is critically reflective. You could also argue that being critically reflective is an attitude to life in general, the desire to approach all aspects of life with the same spirit of enquiry; seeking to understand more deeply the underlying values and reactions to the everyday as well as to professional practice. Certainly, there are times when practitioners use critical reflection to make links between what is happening in their professional practice and in their personal lives. However, this book will focus primarily on using critical reflection in professional practice. As one practitioner wrote:

What stands out for me … using critical reflection is the inherent value of this process, journey, in supporting me in my everyday moments,
challenges and relationships. Specifically, how an experience, in reflection, can beg my attention, interrupt my focus and keep bugging me until I reflect on its message, meaning, asking: ‘what is this story I’m digesting, retelling, authoring about?’ It’s exhausting, magical, perplexing, freeing, inflating, deflating, true, rubbish, personal, public and funny. Maybe I’m all of these moods and contexts in the critical reflection process, so that it becomes not a thing that I ‘do’ but a way to ‘be’. (Hanlon, 2009)

I have come to suggest this way of thinking about critical reflection as a result of my own experience with it and it fits with a critically reflective approach for me to be explicit about this, to name ‘where I am coming from’. My own professional background is social work and when I started practicing as a social worker, the expectation to be reflective was more implicit than explicit. Social workers were expected to be aware of their own values and attitudes and how these might influence their practice, particularly in relation to work with individuals and families. This awareness was influenced by the greater emphasis on the psychodynamic approach prevalent at the time, which has also continued to influence my practice. I could certainly see in both my own practice and when I became a supervisor in the practice of others the need for constant self-awareness about how easily reactions are influenced by our own experience and values. I was also conscious, and social work training helped with this, of how community values and social expectations influenced me and those I worked with, both colleagues and service users. Having a variety of social work roles in government organizations, voluntary agencies and community-based settings reinforced my understanding of how the organizational context also impacted professional practice. Each of these settings came with its own set of understandings, assumptions and values both at informal and formal levels.

When I started teaching social work students in the mid-1990s, I was conscious that in teaching we needed to articulate these issues very clearly. We expected students to reflect on the assumptions, values and experiences that had influenced them to do social work, for example, but also how these experiences and values might influence them as workers. While there was significant agreement about the need for this aspect of professional training to be well developed, there were differences about how best to teach and particularly how to assess it. I was conscious too that for some of the students this was a particularly challenging area. For some, this was a new way of thinking about their approach to practice, something quite unexpected in what they had seen as a primarily academic course. For others the challenge was revealing what they saw as personal information that they were unsure would be accepted by their fellow students. This meant articulating more clearly the links between the personal and professional, the
need for awareness of values and attitudes, the desirability of constant reflection.

This was reinforced for me by being seconded to the Centre for Professional Development coordinated by Jan Fook in the early 2000s. Jan had already been developing a framework for critical reflection in teaching social work students and had started to use critical reflection in workshops with professionals. The Centre had funding for three years supported by La Trobe University and the State Government Department of Human Services in Victoria, Australia. Over the next four years we ran a significant number of workshops for professionals from primarily health and welfare disciplines but also from education and law. In the process we refined the two stage model of critical reflection and this is described in detail in Fook and Gardner (2007). We also edited a book with Sue White (White, Fook and Gardner, 2006) where contributors explored frameworks for understanding critical reflection and how critical reflection was used in professional learning, research and education. More recently we edited a book where practitioners have identified how they used or adapted the two stage model of critical reflection in their practice as well as in research and education (Fook and Gardner, 2013).

While I was at the Centre, I began to see that part of what was important to many practitioners about critical reflection was the clearer identification of what their practice meant to them. The values that were fundamental emerged in the course of critically reflecting about a particular experience. As these values emerged, practitioners were restored to a place of meaning and integrity. They were able to clarify what really mattered to them in terms of their practice, the values from which they wanted to operate. It became clearer for these practitioners where their values were in conflict with what they had felt or done. This sense of returning to what matters resonated for me with my interest in the spiritual, which can also be seen in terms of what matters, what gives meaning. As a result of this, I ran some workshops from the Centre called ‘Spirituality and Work’. These workshops were based on the theory and practice of critical reflection but in a more implicit way. The practitioners attending the spirituality workshops were primarily interested in engaging with issues of how to include spirituality in practice.

Soon after this, I returned to the Department of Social Work and Social Policy (at La Trobe University, based in Bendigo) and became involved in two research projects. One of these, the Pastoral Care Networks Project (Gardner and Nolan, 2009) provided training for practitioners and volunteers involved in palliative care and related services. The focus of the training was spirituality/pastoral care and the training, like the Spirituality and Work workshops, was based on the theory and practice of critical reflection being implicit rather than explicit. The training was primarily experiential,
encouraging participants to use specific experiences to explore their own sense of the spiritual, how this might vary from other people and how this might influence their practice. The training also provided input about the social and historical context of palliative care: how this has and continues to influence how we care for those who are dying, attitudes to religion and spirituality and the role of community. The second project, Health Promoting Palliative Care, (Gardner, Rumbold and Salau, 2009) used critical reflection in the evaluation of the Project and in running workshops on how to engage with issues of death and dying in local communities. This led to writing more specifically about ‘critical spirituality’ (Gardner, 2011).

At the same time, I continued to run critical reflection workshops and to facilitate critical reflection supervision groups, particularly in health settings and to see some people for individual supervision, again using critical reflection. This range of experiences prompted me to think about the differences between people who chose to use critical reflection from time to time, in a group or an individual supervision, as opposed to those who seem to ‘adopt’ critical reflection. For this second group of people critical reflection seemed to become an integral part of their practice rather than something they ‘did’. Having this attitude to critical reflection or rather than having this critically reflecting attitude to their practice meant that these practitioners tended to approach all of their practice from this perspective. There were clearly advantages in this for them. They were able to ask critically reflective questions during short encounters in passageways easily, to question their own actions or thoughts in the process of their work, rather than to question separate experiences in retrospect. This made me consider the value of encouraging practitioners to be critically reflective rather than only participating in specific critical reflection activities. This is not to say that such practitioners did not also find value in specific critical reflection activities such as individual or group supervision. They continued to appreciate how these reinforced their critically reflective attitude. They also acknowledged that there remained times when they needed another person’s perspective or questions, a formal critically reflective process when they were engaged with somebody else in order to disentangle their feelings, thoughts and assumptions.

This fits with my own experience of critical reflection. When I think about how engaged I have been with critically reflective processes, my sense is that this is an integral part of how I approach my practice. However, I can still find myself needing the formality of a critical reflection interaction with someone who is aware of the process, can ask appropriate questions and enable me to unearth the feelings, thoughts, assumptions and values that are influencing my reactions in a particular context. I now meet regularly with a colleague for mutual critical reflection sessions.
Much has been written about critical reflection and reflective practice in recent years, for particular disciplines such as nursing and social work and across disciplines. What then is distinctive about this book?

First, this book advocates *being* critically reflective as an attitude of mind as well as *doing* critical reflection. I am not suggesting a dichotomy here of *being* critically reflective versus *doing*; as I’ve suggested from my own and others experience, the aim is to combine both. It is probably more accurate to acknowledge that people will reflect in different ways at different times with strands of being and doing critical reflection intertwining over time at varying levels. People also differ in their preferences for how they reflect and when, and what suits their particular personalities and personal and professional histories (Hickson, 2013). For some people being critically reflective comes easily: some participants in workshops will say, this fits with how I am, I can see that I’ve always been actively reflective this helps me name and focus this, be more articulate about it. For others, critical reflection is quite different from their normal way of being, a typical comment might be this feels quite alien to me, I’m much more a task-oriented person, doing comes more naturally than reflecting on it.

However, there are clearly advantages in seeking to cultivate an attitude of *being* critical reflective rather than seeing this as purely a monthly event that happens at something like a supervision session. The implication is that if you are being critically reflective as a worker this will influence your practice with all those you work with – service users, communities as well as colleagues. Feedback from practitioners engaged in being critically reflective suggests that this is expressed in a variety of ways in their practice: the kinds of questions they ask, their preparedness to wait until something becomes clear or something new emerges, their willingness to ask about feelings, thoughts, values, what is ‘taken for granted’ as well as the influence of the broader context.

This attitude of being critically reflective also encourages an inclusive and holistic stance to practice. Critical reflection as defined here makes explicit the value of a holistic approach, in the sense of seeing oneself and others as social, emotional, mental, physical and spiritual beings influenced by and influencing their social context. This implies that practitioners will value all of who they are in contributing to practice and will similarly value the whole of those they are working with. It follows that this approach also enables practitioners to identify and articulate the spiritual, that is, what is meaningful for them, the fundamental values from which they either do operate or want to operate. Reconnecting with or unearthing these reminds practitioners what really matters to them, their preferred way of being in practice. This can restore or reinforce a sense of integrity about practice, central to practitioner satisfaction and sense of wellbeing even when resolution of specific
issues or ethical dilemmas is not possible. Such an approach contributes Freshwater (2011b, p. 107) suggests to ‘self-awareness, furthering development and providing a foothold towards the elusive concept of self-actualization, or perhaps more specifically, to understand and reach our personal potential in professional development’.

Second, this book offers a clearly articulated theoretical approach to being critically reflective, including how related theories can complement the key theories underlying critical reflection. The theoretical base for being critically reflective outlined here has three aspects.

First is the four key underlying key theories of critical reflection: reflective practice, reflexivity, postmodernism and critical social theory. There is considerable confusion in the literature about how to define ‘reflective practice’, ‘reflection’, ‘reflexivity’ and ‘critical reflection’ (Fook, White and Gardner, 2006). These differences and the definition of critical reflection used in this book are explored fully in Part I: Introducing Critical Reflection Theory and Processes, specifically in Chapter 1. Each of these four key theories has its own distinctive set of concepts and together these provide an integrated way of distinguishing the framework for being critically reflective advocated here. The combination of ideas using these four key theories essentially suggests that practice is always influenced by social context and complex interactions between the social context and all that each person brings to that, including their assumptions and values, which may be conscious or unconscious. Each of the theories and how they strengthen and/or complement each other is explored in Chapter 2.

Secondly, these key critical reflection theories can be complemented by other theories and some organizations use particular ones such as a strengths, narrative or psychodynamic approach. A variety of writers have also made such connections; Stedmon and Dallos (2009), for example, have chapters linking reflective practice to a range of other theories. I have chosen here to explore the use of two other relevant theories that have influenced me: psychodynamic thinking that brings a particular set of ideas for understanding the influence of what is unconscious and how this plays out in relationships. It also affirms the centrality of emotions and the influence of personal history. Partly, because of the emphasis in critical reflection on unearthing fundamental values and assumptions, I have also included current thinking about spirituality with its focus on what is meaningful, what really matters.

The third set of relevant theories relates to recognizing the influence of organizational and social contexts generally and particularly how individuals and organizations can learn and change. Professional practice generally takes place in organizations and it is crucial to understand how significantly this influences practice. Practitioners who are endeavouring to be critically
reflective often see their greatest challenge as the organization they work for as opposed to the service users they work with. Managing organizational concerns is often a major issue for practice, with practitioners feeling powerless to seek change. This is particularly so in a broader social, political and economic environment of unpredictability and often diminishing resources. This relates to such issues as the pressures of rapid change and related uncertainties, the siloed nature of organizational life related to narrowly defined funding and focuses on accountability and outcomes.

Useful theories then relate to understanding organizations as systems operating within and influenced by the current political and economic context with their own cultures, sets of assumptions and values. These assumptions and values may be implicit or explicit and will play out in ways that influence practice and how organizations and practitioners interact with their particular context. Of course there is a vast array of organizational structures, philosophies, expectations and formal and informal practices. What I am suggesting here is that it is useful to see organizations both as separate entities with their own particular structure and culture, as well seeing organizations as sets of people interacting in dynamic and ever changing ways. This combination allows for both standing back to see the organization distinctly while also understanding that organizations can also be understood as people who can actively seek change. Theories about organizational learning, including transformational learning, suggest unifying these perspectives helps generate more possibilities for change (Cranton and Taylor, 2012). This, in turn, is fostered by a critically reflective attitude to understanding organizational life – unearthing the assumptions underlying the organizational culture and to what degree these match the assumptions and values of practitioners. Critical reflection can also be used as a process to reflect on or ‘research’ or evaluate organizational practice as a form of organizational learning. In Part II: Critical Reflection in Organizations, ideas about the current context and related issues influencing organizations are explored (Chapter 4) and related theories of organizational life and learning and possibilities for change (Chapter 5).

Finally, what is distinctive about this book is generating ideas about how to apply being critical reflective in practice. The expectation is that reflecting and practicing are inextricably linked. Schön (1983, p. 280) identifies a perception that too much reflection will be immobilizing; rather he suggests:

in actual reflection-in-action … doing and thinking are complementary … Each feeds the other, and each sets boundaries for the other. It is the surprising result of action that triggers reflection and it is the production of a satisfactory move that brings reflection temporarily to a close.
What is necessary then is for individuals to find ways that help develop the capacity to be critically reflective – to reflect in action as well as after action. What I think can help here is suggesting a range of possible ways to do critical reflection. I want to emphasize here that these are only possibilities. I have suggested these because they are generally ones either I have used myself with individuals or groups or have known others who have used and evaluated them. However, practitioners find their own ways to be and do critical reflection adapting processes to suit their context and preferences. Some practitioners work in solo practice, some in private practice and others in a range of smaller and larger funded organizations. What is important is to find your own preferred ways of supporting a critically reflective stance.

Some organizations do actively encourage and support the use of critical reflection usually in individual or group supervision. Others don’t for a variety of reasons, philosophical, financial and/or resource related and it may well be that individuals need to generate their own ways of being critically reflective. Related to this I have suggested a new way of thinking about supervision that suggests practitioners can make active choices about how to meet their needs for support and education and particularly for developing and maintaining a critically reflective attitude to practice (Chapter 6). Traditional ways of thinking about supervision are identified: the combination of accountability, support and educational roles in a one-to-one relationship between a more senior staff member and a more junior one. Instead, thinking about supervision as how professional practice is effectively supported can lead to more flexible and creative arrangements. The aim here is to encourage practitioners to think more broadly about their own assumptions about how they are supervised and how they are supported to be critically reflective in their organization and what their preferences might be. It may be that there are ways of doing this that suit both the individual and the organization. If not, this way of thinking about supervision reinforces finding your own ways to be supported in being critically reflective, which may mean creatively seeking options within or outside the organizational context.

To address this, Chapter 3 will outline many ways of using critically reflective processes, in the hope of encouraging readers to find what suits them or to feel inspired to create their own forms of doing critical reflection. I have begun with the Fook and Gardner’s (2007) two-stage model for exploring specific experiences, setting out the approach in detail here, so that the key ideas are clear for those who will need to critically reflect on their own as well as those who may use critical reflection in a variety of ways with other people. The diagrams outlining the two stages suggest four possible steps with related possible questions. Stage One has three steps: (1) exploring the experience from your own perspective; (2) the perspective
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