



Organizing practices of reflection: A practice-based study

Management Learning

1–16

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DOI: 10.1177/1350507610391592

mlq.sagepub.com



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Abstract

This article extends debates of how organizing practices of reflexivity and collective mindfulness are encouraged and sustained for learning, critique and change. We present, in a practice-based study, a fourfold framework of anticipatory, deliberative, organizing and critically reflexive practices. Our empirical study illustrates how these multiple forms of reflexive practice can support and co-shape one another so that knowing what to do next emerges in the midst of practice. Our analysis demonstrates the value of going beyond the optical metaphor of reflection to that of critical reflexivity and the metaphor of diffraction. This approach extends understandings of reflective practice in ways that foreground entanglement, co-production and the relational qualities of practice. Diffraction encourages managers and practitioners to not only reflect on what has been done but to also map the effects of their practices and interventions. This orientation assists them to notice the impact of their actions and better understand the complexities of organized reflection-in-action.

Keywords

diffraction, mindfulness, organizing, practice-based, relational, reflection, reflexivity

Introduction

A manager of a counselling organization, in conversation with a young woman, is discussing whether she wants to join a therapeutic group programme offered for survivors of child sexual assault. During the intake interview, the manager notices the young woman looks uncomfortable and keeps glancing at the door. The manager interrupts the flow of the interaction, focuses on what is happening in the moment, slows down the conversation and together they explore the young

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woman's feeling of being trapped sitting face-to-face, with the manager between her and the door. They negotiate to sit side-by-side facing the door and the conversation continues.

How did this manager know what to do in this situation? Indeed how does a manager drawing on a wide range of organizational practices know how to proceed? How is it that in the midst of the flux of practice, practitioners know what to do next? How do different facets of reflection and reflexivity interrelate and co-shape each other so that knowing how to go on emerges?

Reflection and its relation to learning and the production of practice has been a focus of attention and a recurring theme in organization and management learning (see for example, Cope, 2003; Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2004; Jordan, 2010; Jordan, et al., 2009; Korthagen, 2005; Reynolds and Vince, 2004; Vince, 2002; Yanow and Tsoukas, 2009). Recently, several articles have argued that while there is valuable work exploring how organizations can encourage reflection-*on*-action, less is known about how organizations can foster reflection-*in*-action (Jordan, et al., 2009; Yanow and Tsoukas, 2009).

In this article, we take up the call by Jordan et al. (2009) for empirical studies that examine how different forms of reflection and mindfulness interact to support and/or restrain reflection-*in*-action. The purpose of this article is, therefore, to explore through a practice-based study, specifically how different facets of mindfulness and critical reflexivity interrelate and co-shape each other in an organizational setting, so that knowing what to do next emerges.

To better understand how in-the-moment reflexivity, such as that described in the opening scenario, may be encouraged and sustained in an organization, we present a study of an Australian non-government counselling organization, the West Street Centre. Because West Street practitioners aim to make a difference in the lives of women and children who have experienced child sexual assault and are committed to practising social justice in their communities, they grapple with how to create a critical stance that attends in the moment to the effects generated by their work. As such, West Street is an organization saturated in reflexive practice and thus the site affords a heightened opportunity to amplify the dynamics of reflexivity and the production of practice that may arguably be shared more broadly among other professional practices.

We adopt a relational perspective (Barad, 2007; Butler, 1993; Haraway, 2008) for this practice-based study. This approach challenges the representationist view of knowledge which is formed by the 'knower' (person) who represents 'what is known' (things) cognitively by converting experiences into 'internal' mental models of an 'external' world (Rouse, 2002; Yanow and Tsoukas, 2009). Rather than standing on the outside as observers as representationalism implies, a relational approach emphasizes that organizational learning and knowing come from direct material engagement *with* the world of which we are part. For this reason, a relational approach is useful for investigating how practitioners in the midst of practice know how to go on—the intended purpose of reflection-*in*-action.

Such an approach reconfigures reflexivity as situated, engaged, relational, material-discursive *practices*. From this focus on practice, we present our fourfold framework of anticipative, deliberative, organizing and critically reflexive practices developed from the analysis of the West Street data. This analysis demonstrates the value of going beyond the optical metaphor of *reflection* to that of critical reflexivity and the metaphor of *diffraction*. Diffraction, as defined by Haraway (2004: 70), is a 'mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection or reproduction. A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where the *effects* of difference appear'. The focus shifts from managers and practitioners reflecting back on what has been done to a focus on mapping what effects are produced through different actions. Such an orientation can assist managers to notice the consequences of their actions and highlight collective organizing practices.

It is this focus on the effects of practices that leads us to distinguish multiple forms of reflexive practice that support the in-the-moment, embodied judgements that are made as practitioners decide what to do next. Our study, thereby aims to contribute to the literature that explores organized reflection-in-action.

The article is organized as follows. We begin by critically reviewing the tensions in the literature of reflection and elaborate how the concepts of intra-action and diffraction are useful for working within a relational ontology to reconfigure understandings of organizing processes of critical reflexivity. Next, we describe the field site and how its organizational context shapes both its situated practices and our methods of inquiry. We then unpack how reflective, reflexive and diffractive practices interrelate at the West Street Centre so that knowing what to do next emerges. We conclude by discussing more generally the value of extending reflection in ways that emphasize diffraction and critical reflexivity for management and organization learning.

Tensions in reflective practice

The tensions in the concept of reflection are well recognized in recent literature (Bradbury, et al., 2010). Reflection is traditionally defined as the image produced by the action of a mirror or other polished surface (Onions, 1965: 1686). The metaphor of reflection implies mirroring, and looking back, with some detachment and distance from outside. As such, reflection assumes an objective reality that we can separate and distance ourselves from and think about (Cunliffe and Jun, 2005). However, in the organization and management learning literature, reflection has complex meanings that are not limited to the language of optical metaphors. Reflection is also described as an engagement with the self that involves careful thought in which people 'recapture their experience, think about it, mull over it and evaluate it' (Boud, et al., 1985: 19). Yet, despite differing conceptions of reflection, most approaches to reflective practice are based on a representational view of knowledge.

The relationship between reflection and practice has been explored most influentially by way of Donald Schön's (1983, 1987) reflective practitioner, who exhibits knowing-in-action, reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Although reflection-on-action is useful for mulling over routine action disrupted by surprises and tackling the problems arising from the unexpected, it is less adequate for describing the nature of the engagements between people in the 'hot' action of practice where the pressure for quick judgement is immediate (Beckett, 1996).

The looking-back or ex-post orientation in the metaphor of reflection is in tension with the anticipatory character of working out how to go on in the midst of practice (Beckett and Hager, 2002; Yanow and Tsoukas, 2009). Eraut (1995: 9) points to the need to 'recognise the significance of the time dimension: a rapid intuitive process is not the same as a slower, more deliberate process'. The focused attention of practitioners increases their awareness of the costs of distraction their awareness of the costs of distraction (Weick, 2006: 1727):

they pay more attention to what is happening here and now; they see the liabilities of swift thinking when they slow down to register finer distinctions and see how much is missed and distorted in the interest of speed.

Reflection-in-action may therefore be better understood through integrating it with the concept of 'mindfulness' (Jordan et al., 2009). Weick's work on mindfulness and heedful interrelations offers a useful lens for exploring how practitioners know what to do next in the midst of practice (Weick and Roberts, 1993; Weick, et al., 1999). Mindfulness described by Langer (2000: 220) is 'a

flexible state of mind in which we are actively engaged in the present, noticing new things and sensitive to context'. Mindfulness is therefore distinguishable from the 'in-the-moment' response to surprise/disturbance outlined in Yanow and Tsoukas's (2009) phenomenological account of reflection-in-action and from the anticipative action described by Beckett (1996).

The complexity and tensions in reflective practice are evident in recent critical work which claims that the focus on the individual reflective practitioner has obscured the relevance of organizational culture and socio-political contexts in reflective work (Jordan, 2010). These scholars have re-contextualized reflection as a *collective organizing process* (Boud, et al., 2006; Jordan, 2010; Reynolds and Vince, 2004; Vince, 2002). Similarly, Weick's work (Weick et al., 1999) with high reliability organizations reconfigures mindfulness as collective. Such mindfulness is distinguishable in interactions as well as the organizational level routines and rules for organizing mindfulness (Jordan et al., 2009). In this collective sense, such organizing processes are 'productive' (Boud et al., 2006) and open up reflection as future-oriented. Critical reflection as an organizing process facilitates the collective capacity to question assumptions, render power relations visible and contribute to more democratic ways of managing and organizing (Reynolds and Vince, 2004; Vince, 2002).

Although reflection and reflexivity are often used interchangeably, there have been increasing distinctions drawn between reflective and reflexive practice. For instance, Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith (2004) suggest reflexivity goes well beyond reflecting cognitively on an event or a situation to solve a problem; it is a dialogical and relational activity that unsettles practices and can lead to learning *in* experience at the team and organizational level. Reflexivity provides a 'basis for examining taken for granted assumptions, who may be excluded or marginalized by policy and practice and the responsibility for ethical action at the organizational and societal levels' (Cunliffe and Jun, 2005: 228). Despite the apparent differences between the concepts of reflection and reflexivity, both conceptions share an underpinning 'ontology of separateness' (Orlikowski, 2010: 134). Such an ontology assumes the world is made up of individuals and things with inherent boundaries and properties which relate or interact with each other (Barad, 2007).

Introducing intra-action and diffraction

While an ontology of separateness and a representational view of knowledge have been pervasive in organization and management studies, in more recent times scholars have been working within a relational ontology and performative epistemology (Iedema, 2007; Orlikowski, 2010; Suchman, 2007). Such an approach suggests individuals, words and things are not onto logically separate and separable but co-emerge, are mutually constituting and entangled in practice from the start (Iedema, 2007). Thus, a detached, 'from the outside' conception of reflection is rendered problematic, as we are always already in the action.

This 'entanglement in practice' (Orlikowski, 2010) perspective is well expressed in Barad's use of *intra-action*. She substitutes the notion of interaction with intra-action in order to stress that the human and other-than-human actors in a relationship should not be seen as distinct entities but as entangled agencies that establish each other as well as being created themselves.

Thus, 'the boundaries that constitute things as separate and different are treated not as pre-given, but as enacted and practices of boundary-making and the enactment of difference are inevitably political' (Suchman, 2005: 6). Working within a relational ontology thereby shifts the attention of reflexivity from thinking back on the components of practice—actors, experience, tools, and activity—to articulating the relationalities, patterns, exclusions and boundaries created by intra-actions making up complex communities. In insisting on a dynamic, material view of

knowing, knowing as a way of engaging with the world, a relational approach foregrounds the body, the emotions and the ethical and political dimensions of knowledge-making practices. Such an approach, thereby, highlights the need for critical and self-reflexive participation in the production of such practices in order to take responsibility for the fact that the world becomes differently through different practices. (Cunliffe and Jun, 2005; Rouse, 2002).

To understand such engagement, Tanesini (1999) argues we must find ways to reflexively study the patterns created by intra-actions. In response, we draw on Haraway’s (1997) metaphor of diffraction and Barad’s (2007) method of diffractive analysis, to propose *diffraction* as a useful optical metaphor and tool for working within a relational ontology to extend understandings of critical reflexive practice in organizations.

Like reflection, diffraction is also a physical phenomenon. When light is diffracted, it bends and light waves overlap creating alternating patterns of light and dark lines. Diffraction produces the spectacular colours and rings sometimes seen around the moon. These rings cannot be attributed to the moon or the clouds but are produced through the intra-action of the moon and the clouds.¹ As a metaphor, diffraction, thereby, speaks to entanglements, relationalities, co-production and the effects of intra-actions. In this way, diffraction offers guidance for what Boud (2010: 36) argues is a key challenge, to ‘develop new ways of thinking about reflection that recognises the complexities and the relational qualities of practice’. As ‘a direct material engagement as part of the world in its differential becoming’ (Barad, 2007: 89), the diffractive metaphor is well suited to a relational and performative approach to reflexivity.

Diffractive practices afford opportunities to attend to and critically evaluate the effects of differences, interferences and exclusions generated by an organization’s work. Diffraction is thereby a way of understanding the organization from within practice, accounting and taking responsibility for what becomes in organizational practices. What is particularly useful about diffraction is that it encourages practitioners to map the effects or consequences of their practices and interventions. Diffraction moves from identifying what was present and contained within an interaction to analysing intra-actions as a process of producing differences. By way of illustration, we contrast examples of questions guided by reflective practice and diffractive practice in Table 1.

In these questions, analysis shifts from concerns related to meaning to questions of production—what effects are produced in the entangled relations. Whereas reflective practice has traditionally regarded surprises as exceptions, diffraction pushes us to emphasize the unexpected, the surprises produced in relationships.

Working within a relational ontology and employing the notions of intra-action and diffraction reconfigures both reflection and reflexivity to disclose partiality and situatedness, not overview

Table 1. Contrast between reflective and diffractive questions

Reflective questions	Diffractive questions
What did we do?	What are the effects or consequences of our interventions?
How did we do it?	What are the effects of differences generated by our practice?
What would we do differently?	Where do these practices appear to be moving?
What does this experience mean?	When and what differed from the expected?
How can we explain it?	If we were to do ... what differences might our stakeholders notice?
	What impact might ... have on the broader communities with/ in which we are entangled?

at a distance. Thus a limitation of the diffraction metaphor is that it is not useful for providing an overview, a summary or synthesizing understandings into a unified perspective. Rather diffractive practices encourage a participatory and situated stance towards knowing-in-practice and ongoing attention to justification, responsibility, accountability and rigorous critique (Rouse, 2002).

Fieldwork site and methods

The West Street Centre is a small, non-government, not-for-profit organization, located in an industrial centre on the southeast coast of Australia, providing services to women and children who have experienced sexual assault in their childhood. The work of the West Street Centre includes individual counselling, therapeutic group programmes, court preparation, support and advocacy, community education and preventative strategies designed to influence the attitudinal, behavioural and structural changes needed within society to end sexual violence and improve responses to victims/survivors (West St documentation, 2007).

The West Street Centre works within a feminist framework, viewing sexual assault as a violation of human rights and as a criminal offence against the individual and society. It recognizes child sexual assault as a betrayal of trust and an abuse of power (West St documentation, 2007). Narrative therapies (for example, Bird, 2004; White, 2007) and work on complex trauma (Herman, 1997) are dominant influences on their approach to counselling and therapeutic groupwork.

As part of a larger collaborative project, this study is not only the work of the two authors but is being co-constructed and co-produced in relationships and actions (Greenwood and Levin, 1998) within a community of practice. Informed by Gherardi (2006) who argues that examining situated actions in ongoing practices can make knowledge observable, this study was negotiated with the West Street workers and focused on their work practices during a *capacity-building project* with local counsellors beyond the West Street Centre. Specifically, this two-year project provided free international training to local counsellors with monthly consultations to practise the approach learnt in the training and continue learning together as a network. Through this process, West Street hopes to influence and support other counsellors to adopt practices that are particularly helpful in working with the possible effects and impacts of childhood sexual assault.

We used multiple interpretive methods within a participatory action research framework (Treleaven, 2006) to trace the impact of organizing processes of critical reflexivity on practice. We incorporated within these cycles multiple modes of collecting data:

- written ethnographic accounts of observations of supervision, training sessions, learning/consultation network sessions, team meetings and informal collegiate exchanges;
- DVDs of counselling practices taped for learning and professional development purposes with the permission of the clients and practitioners involved;
- transcripts of a reflexive practice called prismatic dialogue in which practitioners review issues and situations arising in their counselling practice with their clinical supervisor to extend and improve practice;
- transcripts of reflexive discussions with practitioners conducted after each of our observations;
- participation in workplace lunches, morning and afternoon teas;
- documentation by West Street describing and theorizing their approach to practice; and
- training materials for the capacity-building project and learning network.

The principles of open-endedness, dialogue, explicitness, reciprocity and self-reflexivity offered guidance for this study. Feedback and sensemaking with the West Street practitioners of observations, transcripts and conclusions were an important part of the research process and co-theorizing integral to our analysis. Through such engagement we endeavoured to develop an appreciation of the social context, values and local ways of organizing counselling and group work practice at West Street.

However, with the observational data we encountered the methodological difficulty of 'seeing' and interpreting in-the-moment reflection practices that are largely embedded in actions, fleeting and not always visible to the observer. This limitation was partially addressed by the data being collected in iterative cycles. We were able to check our observations and the reflexive discussion transcripts with the practitioners, thereby learning more about the often non-verbal reflexive processes we had witnessed. Thus, iterative action research cycles of participant observation combined with verbal and written accounts enabled us to develop a less partial view of the intra-actions of reflexivity and practice and its emergent quality at the West Street Centre.

These observations however, due to the nature of the highly personal work, confidentiality and ethical considerations, were never conducted directly in a counselling session with a client. Rather, our discussions with West Street negotiated an ethical yet situated way of observing critical organizing reflexive practices such as prismatic dialogues and DVDs of sessions, discussed below.

Reflexivity and practice at the West Street Centre

In the following sections, we highlight West Street's multiple reflective, diffractive and reflexive practices through the intersecting and co-shaping threads of analysis brought together in our fourfold, practice-based framework: first, the anticipative practices of reflection made in the flux of practice, when the action is 'hot' and counsellors reflect in the midst of practising; second, deliberative practices involving mindful attention and heedful action in the flow of practice; third, the organizing practices of reflection and diffraction enacted as the staff of the organization collectively share and scrutinize their knowing and 'not knowing' in practice; fourth, the practices of critical reflexivity of all involved in the organization, negotiating within power relations, coming together to create a place where women can speak publicly about issues of sexual violence and enact the West Street Centre community.

Anticipatory practices of reflection

West Street counsellors, through their practices, attend in the moment to the personal, the emotional, the cultural, the political, the spiritual and the social. The intra-action between counsellor and client involves constant negotiating and making judgements around what issues to centralize and what threads to follow. In Lucia's words, 'you don't have a script'. Observing a supervision session with a counsellor and her supervisor, we noted that the reflective process was forward looking. It involved developing interpretations in the midst of the emerging intra-actions, making judgements in-the-moment of what to do next, trying things out, and then only when it was done, did the 'rightness' of the judgement become apparent.

This field observation of 'forward-feeding' (Beckett and Hager, 2002) as anticipatory listening that characterizes reflection in the flux of practice was later confirmed by the practitioner, Lucia: 'it helps me to move forward to listen to myself whilst I'm saying things'. In contrast to some of the accounts of professional practice (for example, Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 2005; Eraut, 1995), West Street counsellors are aware of reflecting in the midst of 'hot' action without interrupting it. Such

in-the-moment reflective practice is not only future orientated; it is anticipatory as the practitioner ‘holds’ themes, threads, feelings, the spoken, the partially spoken, and the emotional quality of the emergent conversation while attending and responding in the intense flux of practice. This anticipatory practice of reflection is not pre-planned or prior to action but part of the action. But what might assist these practitioners to hold the themes, to make these context-specific embedded judgements about what may work best in a particular circumstance?

All of the practitioners we have observed at the West Street Centre constantly take ‘notes’ in the midst of practice. This note-taking supports rather than distracts the practitioner from the intense focus in the moment that therapeutic conversations entail. Repeatedly we observed: the practitioner would pause, for an instant, she would look down at the notes, and seemed to be making split-second judgements, making choices about what to centralize, where to guide the emerging conversation. These ‘notes’ are not case notes, a formal record. They are personal, idiosyncratic and vary greatly in form from counsellor to counsellor. For example, some of the notes we saw resemble diagrams, with circles, arrows and with lines drawn over for emphasis. Another counsellor’s version appears as ‘scruffy scribbles’ of statements written randomly on the page. The personal notes assist the counsellor, as reflective observer, to grapple in the moment with the complexity of the unfolding conversation.

Improvisation in the midst of practice is implicit in the following conversation:

- Liz: If you’re doing good therapeutic work, yes you get kind of more and more experience, but the reality is that you are living in a place of uncertainty.
- Lucia: That’s the thing about not having a script...
- Liz: Yeah the creativity of it. So, yes, you are [flying by the seat of your pants] but it’s a certain version of flying.

What appears to onlookers as ‘flying by the seat of your pants’ is the situated judgement about what to do next in the co-emergent, unfolding process. Such an illustration is explained by Yanow and Tsoukas (2009: 8) conceptually as ‘based upon a repertoire that has been rehearsed—practiced—over time. Making the judgment about what to bring into play *in this moment...* is the improvisatory action of bricolage, of at-hand selectivity’. Holistic embedded judgements, responding in the midst of ‘hot’ action, requires an intense focus in the moment—but how can we better understand what is involved?

Deliberative practices of mindfulness

In our observations of practices in a supervision session, we noted:

Clare had a particularly calm, self-contained manner... a considered approach; especially in relation to the way she used language... Clare was sensitive to what was happening in the present moment. She was deeply attentive to what Liz was doing and saying. She noticed small shifts in Liz’s posture, her body language and in the tone of her voice ... a nonjudgmental witnessing... I had the sense that together, through their dialogue and exploration, Liz and Clare were negotiating the making of meaning.

We see this as in-the-moment mindfulness where practitioners hone their attention, focus on what is happening here and now, and slow down the conversation to discover connections and distinctions with others (Weick, 2006: 1727). The practitioner appears in the present moment to be totally available, offering her attention, engaging in the conversation with alertness and care, what Weick

and Roberts (1993) term 'heed'. We observed this mindfulness as more than cognitive attention; there was a depth to the listening; a listening that involves the body, the emotions, the mind, and the will. 'Our job is to notice,' commented one of the practitioners. This skilful knowing-in-action involves acting with compassion and always in relation to what's happening in the moment, always being in 'the continuous present' (Bird, 2004), as the trainer explained during the capacity-building training:

Jaq: It's about pace, slowing down the pace, constantly negotiating, it is not about right or wrong but about negotiating, offering. People experience the offering even if they don't take it up.

Using the continuous present tense that characterizes much of the practitioners' language, here Jaq shows how slowing down and being mindful in the present situation affords negotiating between client and counsellor the offer to consider the new questions and their possibilities.

In addition to this slowing down, knowing what to do next in the midst of practice seems to rest on an emptying of the mind. As Yanow and Tsoukas (2009: 18) argue, reflection-in-action requires 'willingness to be visibly and publicly not-knowing' which they link to a permeability of the self. Discussing reflection in the midst of her practice, Lucia demonstrates this willingness to be publicly 'not knowing':

Lucia: I'm monitoring myself as to what am I staying curious about and where am I going with it and how am I saying it. If I've said it and it's come out wrong, that's okay, I can change it. I can say 'hang on a second I haven't got that question right' and I can ask it again. It makes me feel looser.

The West Street Centre workers write about 'not knowing' in therapy (West St documentation, 2005:3). It relates to their feminist philosophy, their commitment to declining the expert role and a realization that although much experience can be shared, there will always be some experience that cannot. It acknowledges situated knowledge, the standpoint and specific embodiment of the knower (Haraway, 2004). This 'not knowing' involves a deep respect for situated experiential knowing, encourages a wondering curiosity in the practitioner and is coherent with the journeying, emergent character of practice at West Street.

'Not knowing' involves a stance of wondering, of expansion, of partial perspective and of being uncertain. 'Having an empty mind' and 'feeling looser' are integral to understanding how listening is limited by a busy mind, by psychological theories and categories as we observed and noted the trainer highlighting:

Jaq: To be able to listen as you speak, to listen to how you are languaging... to think back, to move forward as you are doing the work is important... I think I can do that because I don't have a busy mind, I don't carry lots of theories in my head, my mind is not busy.

In this way mindfulness involves a process of undoing, of undoing preconceptions, the undoing of subjectivity (Somerville, 2007). The practices of slowing down the conversation, the 'not knowing' and 'the undoing' combine to enable the moment-to-moment awareness and the skilful use of attention, as a practitioner explained in a reflexive discussion:

Liz: When you come across secrecy 200 times, then you start to think you do know everything about it and what people are going to present and that's a danger. It's a pitfall. So I think the slowing down aspect of the negotiation and unfolding helps.

Mindfulness, the offering and skilful use of attention is not easy. It requires, energy, intensity, passion and is hard work (Weick, 2006). But how are both anticipatory practices of reflection and the deliberative practices of mindfulness sustained and supported at the West Street Centre?

Organizing practices of reflection and diffraction

The West Street Centre deliberately designs its organizing processes of review and embeds them in organizational routines, as they are crucial to their knowing-in-practice. These routines of reflection and diffraction are not fixed but are mutually constitutive of changing contexts and practices. Paradoxically, they encourage disruption, doubt and uncertainty as they enable the organization and its workers to approach their experience with questions and curiosity rather than answers and stability (Jordan, 2010). So rather than being opposites, routines and surprise are bound together in organizing diffractive practices at West Street. For example, in the following comments, the practitioner discusses how she uses the routine of informally discussing her experience of a counselling session with other practitioners, immediately after the session:

Sharon: There are many times for me where I feel I fall short of being able to link things and join things up in a session... and the difference that makes. One thing that I do—that's one of the things that I would often talk about afterwards where I feel like I've left something out and what difference that might make for the client.

Sharon enlists the assistance of colleagues to attend to connections, differences and their possible effects, paying particular attention to what she may have excluded. The diffractive practice is speculative, focusing on omissions, on the dark patterns, on the effects of difference and the movement they may have created for clients.

There is a wide range of reflective and diffractive routines layered in the organizing practices of the West Street Centre. These organizing processes of reflection (Vince, 2002) and diffraction are distributed both in time and space and include: informal discussions with other team members immediately after a session, team co-supervision processes, collective supervision processes of the West Street team with a supervisor who is external to the organization, six-monthly reviews with each client, their counsellor and another team member, and the learning/reflecting processes of the monthly consultations with the network of local counsellors. The organization has monthly management committee meetings where organizing and work practices are discussed and reviewed. Finally, they have regular organization level, reflexive evaluation processes that involve the women who use or have used the service, the counsellors and the management committee members coming together as the West Street Centre community.

The organizing processes that help secure these multiple forms of reflexive practice include: a flat organizational structure with a management committee elected from the membership of the organization; mentoring in and rotation of all job roles including the position of manager; the legitimacy of admitting mistakes and asking for help; and routines that encourage questioning and critique of each other's practices.

The processes of collective reflection on counselling practice emphasize reviewing the actual work, not just talking about the client and the work, as the trainer reiterated:

Jaq: How you describe what you do is different to what you actually do. So we need to review the actual work with others [colleagues, clinical supervisor]. We tape it, use reflecting-teams. Other people notice what you're drawn to and what you're not drawn to.

These diffractive practices comprise a team of practitioners observing counselling sessions (*in vivo* or on DVD) to *notice* patterns in what is included and excluded from mattering. The reflecting-team (White, 2000) tracks and documents the effects of the therapeutic conversation and then discusses their observations, reactions and questions together with the client and the counsellor. This collective organizing process is diffractive, designed to produce multiple perspectives that ‘interfere’ with the one-on-one therapeutic relationship to produce new possibilities for the client, the counsellor and the reflecting-team members.

Another reflection-on-practice process that we observed is termed prismatic dialogue (Bird, 2006). Experiential and embodied as well as cognitive, prismatic dialogues are designed to engage practitioners at the edge of their knowing and bring forth their imaginative resources. As the name prismatic dialogue suggests, this practice does not aim to mirror or look back but to refract and diffract in order to encourage embodied understanding of the effects, possibilities and impossibilities created from intra-actions.

One of the researchers observing this prismatic dialogue commented in her field notes:

I really felt the emotional power of this practice. I had a bodily response to the conversation... I trembled inside, my throat felt full; my eyes brimmed.

Prismatic dialogue highlights the importance of the body and emotions in reflective practice. In this way, prismatic dialogue is more akin to role-play than most supervision practices as it does not involve talking about or evaluating the counsellors’ work or their clients. Instead, the body is harnessed as ‘a finely tuned detector, a detector of narrative diffraction patterns’ (Law, 2000: 27) that enables the practitioner to feel the question, to glimpse what it might be like for the person they are working with to receive certain questions.

This capability is clearly illustrated in a prismatic dialogue we observed when Liz was exploring the experiences of a 16-year-old young woman she had been counselling. When Liz became visibly rattled, her body tense and alert, the trainer Jaq, stopped the prismatic dialogue. She then asked Liz if she was all right, deliberately slowed the conversation down and focused on what was going on in the moment, before negotiating the resumption the prismatic dialogue. Commenting on this prismatic dialogue in a subsequent reflexive discussion, Liz elaborated:

Liz: I think that one of the typical things that happens is that you really engage with the client’s experience of how you’re working with them and you also engage with your own reactions to that as well... A very embodied kind of experience that I had and that’s really useful information... I think the embodied knowing informs all of my practice actually. When I work with the experience of fear, often the women’s experiences of fear in the room—we don’t know what we don’t know and I don’t have life experiences of that level of fear. So for me I’m actually having to take an imaginative leap into somebody else’s experience of fear.

In this prismatic dialogue, we see not only the embodied experiential nature of the diffractive practice, but Liz’s awareness of ‘not knowing’, the process of ‘undoing’ and the power of the practice to engage her emotions and imagination as a resource in the emerging process. The prismatic dialogue is thereby an analytical, sensory and imaginative practical technology. It is bound up in what Haraway (1997) terms imaginative connection and practical coalition that demands self-critical situatedness and embodiment. As a diffractive practice, prismatic dialogue goes beyond reflecting on one’s practices by suggesting it is the counsellor’s responsibility to diffract, to detect through the body the possible effects created by their interventions in such a way that new understandings of these practices emerge.

Critical reflexive practices

At the West Street Centre, reflexivity is a critical approach to practice and organizing that questions how knowledge claims are generated and, further, how power relations influence these processes. In the DVDs and transcripts, it is possible to discern processes of intra-action with an emphasis on micro-practices, especially in how the practitioners speak. The practitioners consistently raise and interrogate power relations constituted in their intra-actions with individuals, groups and communities:

Liz: The negotiation of power is such a core [issue] because power and disempowerment around child sexual assault work and the effects, are such a foundational aspect of the recovery process for individuals.

Sharon: For me I see those [how you negotiate a power relationship and how you work collaboratively] as two kinds of really fundamental parts of [our] practices, I think they are of particular value when you're working with someone who's had experiences of being totally disempowered through an abusive situation. So they become really critical skills because otherwise you're so easily invited into pathologizing the person and it becomes their fault as well in a whole range of very subtle and awful ways.

Here Liz and Sharon show how reflexivity at West Street is threefold: critical reflexivity (Cunliffe and Jun, 2005) by looking outward to the social, political and cultural context and the discourses that saturate child sexual abuse; self-reflexivity (Cunliffe and Jun, 2005) whereby the counsellors make distinctions in their own practices and challenge their ways of being; and relational reflexivity (D'Cruz, et al., 2006) where the importance of power relations is recognized as counsellors and clients negotiate meaning together within therapeutic conversations.

Critical reflexive practices at West Street are organizational not just because they are collective but because they also encourage organizational structures, roles, practices and power relations to come under public scrutiny (Raelin, 2001). Evaluation of its services by clients and former clients has been redesigned into processes such as the West Street community evaluation days with the intention of enabling a greater sharing of power to build a stronger sense of community amongst all involved with the Centre.

Critical reflexivity, future-oriented and undertaken collectively by the West Street workers, generated their capacity-building project with practising counsellors in their region. In turn, the capacity-building project not only organized service provision to meet increasing demand but also made West Street practices more visible to other counselling organizations in the region:

By engaging with this [type of project] we create the possibility of exposing, unpacking and deconstructing power relations [to the local trainee counsellors]. In doing so, we make power relations more visible and are in more of a position to challenge these relations if they do not fit with our values (West St documentation, 2007: 5).

Thus, for West Street, the enactment of ethical practices is dependent on their willingness and capacity to publicly engage in collective, reflexive, ongoing, dialogic processes (Nyhan, 2006). Organizing reflexive practices such as the capacity-building project encourage an attitude of inquiry and legitimize the willingness of being 'not knowing' in the presence of others. They sustain and enable the anticipative practices of reflection and deliberative practices of mindfulness discussed earlier. Critical reflexive practices are thereby integral to the organizational architecture that supports practitioners' ability to make judgements, be mindful and responsive in the midst of unfolding, co-emergent action.

Recognition of the co-emergent character of practice also means that reflexivity at West Street is about 'responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming' (Barad, 2007: 393) of which they are part. Thus, reflexive practices are ethical matters that support the possibility of ongoing responsiveness to the entanglements of self and other (Haraway, 1997, 2008). For the West Street counsellors, self, critical and relational reflexivity are essential capabilities in their intentions to ensure their practices and ways of organizing are congruent with their theoretical, political and ethical commitments.

Conclusion

Employing our practice-based framework of reflexive practice, the opening scenario of the manager and client in this article may now be analysed to illustrate how organizing practices of critical reflexivity and mindfulness intra-act to enable the context-sensitive, embodied judgements that are made and re-made in the flux of practice. The manager's actions show that knowing what to do next depends upon sensitivity to small changes and interferences and a willingness to improvise in the midst of an unfolding conversation. These practices are anticipatory in character. Such anticipatory practices of reflection require the manager to work with an attitude of inquiry and openness to change her actions in the midst of the 'routine' intake process. The manager hones her skilful use of attention, focuses on what is happening here and now, and slows down the conversation to explore connections, disturbances and the effects of practices with the young woman. In short, the manager enacts deliberative practices of mindfulness.

However, the manager's responsiveness to the young woman's experience is not entirely improvised. It may have been 'rehearsed' in an organizing practice of diffraction, such as a prismatic dialogue, where the manager uses her body as an instrument, to feel the possible effects, interferences and disturbances created by different ways of arranging physical space. Such practices may prepare the manager to recognize how small details can make profound differences and to imagine new ways of positioning themselves that increase the possibility of the young woman feeling more comfortable.

The manager's emergent response performs respect across the boundary of vulnerability and asymmetrical power relations. Her willingness to negotiate in-the-moment with the young woman and take account of her own part in what becomes in the intake interview rests upon critical reflexivity. Critical reflexive practices demonstrably encourage the stance of inquiry and support the responsiveness to the entanglements of self and other evident in the manager's actions.

Our research has explored reflexive practice within the context of the West Street Centre. Accordingly, we do not claim that the depictions of specific reflexive practices are necessarily generalizable to other counselling organizations or organizations from other fields. However, there are implications from this practice-based study that may contribute to managing, learning and improvement of practices within organizations, particularly in relation to building the capacity of organizations to engage routinely in collective practices of reflection, diffraction and critical reflexivity. For example, the shift from managers and practitioners reflecting back on what has been done to mapping the effects of differences created may encourage organizations to account for and be responsible for the consequences of their interventions, for what becomes from their organizational practices. A perspective of relationality and entanglement, employing the notions of intra-action and diffraction may therefore be particularly valuable going forward as organizations confront the need to develop practices that are economically, socially and environmentally sustainable.

The three contributions of this article to organizing practices of reflection are an elaboration of a relational approach, the deployment of Haraway's (1997) metaphor of diffraction into an organizational context and a fourfold, practice-based framework of organized reflection-in-action.

First, the relational approach and practice-based study enables us to reconfigure reflexive practice as a direct, material engagement within practice, rather than looking back with some distance as a representational conception of reflection implies. Our relational approach to the data and analysis demonstrates critical reflexive practices are a bundle of intertwined collaborative, analytic, imaginative and political practices that are critical to taking responsibility for the fact that the world becomes differently through different practices. Further, we suggest a relational approach that rejects the assumption of separateness offers a particularly useful conceptual lens for research that focuses on the role of material artefacts in enabling or inhibiting reflective and reflexive practice in organizations. This area of research is currently underdeveloped and under-theorized (Jordan, 2010).

Second, we propose diffraction as a useful metaphor for extending reflective and reflexive practice in ways that foreground entanglement, co-production and the relational qualities of practice. Diffraction is a powerful reminder that reflective practice can be directed other than back on itself, it can spread outwards, bend around corners and can be other than self-referential. Diffractive practices at the West Street Centre such as prismatic dialogue and reflecting-teams illustrate how reflexive practice is not individualistic, going on in the mind of a reflective practitioner. Rather, they are collective organizing practices in which the body is a finely honed instrument that senses and performs patterns of interference (Law, 2000). Crucially, diffraction attends to the effects of differences, how they matter and for whom. As such, diffraction is a particularly useful tool of analysis for better understanding the politics and complexities of reflection in practice.

Third, the practice-based study enables us to distinguish multiple forms of reflexive practice across time and space which we brought together in our fourfold framework of anticipatory, deliberative, organizing and critical reflexive practices. Organizing practices of reflection, diffraction and reflexivity are embedded in organizational routines and processes that encourage questioning and critique, not just in moments of surprise and breakdown, but as an everyday aspect of ongoing practice. Thus, routines and surprise are bound together in organizing reflective and diffractive practices. Our practice-based study illustrates how these multiple forms of reflexive practice can strengthen and co-shape one another so that knowing how to go on emerges.

The relational, practice-based approach adopted in this article illuminates some of the challenges of organized reflexivity and mindfulness. To sustain a reflexive organization, passion, caring, commitment and courage threaded through doubt, modesty, partiality and ongoing self/other critique are most certainly required (Schneider, 2002). A relational approach encourages managers and practitioners to ask: What are the organizing conditions that produce places of illumination where the diffraction patterns are coherent—where practitioners are able to be responsive, mindful in the midst of action and will know what to do next? And what are the conditions that produce dark places, where the diffraction patterns cancel each other out – where practitioners are confounded and cannot make the next move? Diffraction is a rich metaphor for investigating such intra-actions and complexities, thereby expanding organizational understandings of reflexive practice to foreground the emergent, relational and political character of practice.

Note

1. Other examples of the physical phenomenon of diffraction include ocean waves pushing through a gap in a breakwater. The waves diffract as they emerge from the gap in the shape of concentric half circles. The spectrum of colours that can be seen on the surface of a CD is realized through diffraction, as is the swirl of colour in a soap bubble. For a detailed and fascinating explication of the phenomenon of diffraction, see Barad (2007).

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the Australian Research Council (ARC) for funding for this project, 'Maximizing the contribution of NGOs in a new planning framework for community service provision' through the Industry Linkage Grant KLP 0562569 with the Industry partner, Illawarra Forum Inc. In particular, we acknowledge the contributions to our understandings of reflective and reflexive practices made by the West Street workers, Annette Hodgins, Michelle Fraser, Sue Leicester and Nanziatina Calore. We would also like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for valuable feedback on earlier versions of this article.

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