Chapter 2

Dimensions of Reflection

INTRODUCTION

As we noted in Chapter 1, the traditional approach to reflective practice is one that has a strong rational emphasis, with little or no attention paid to the emotional issues involved. This can be seen as a significant omission as professional practice clearly has a number of emotional issues to address. We also noted that the traditional approach has relatively little to say about the wider social and political sphere. This chapter therefore seeks to go some way towards rectifying these imbalances. Here we present reflective practice as a three-dimensional entity, the three dimensions being:

- *Cognitive:* understanding the importance of thinking in general and analysis and creativity in particular.
- *Affective:* appreciating how significant emotional concerns are in shaping practice and how dangerous it can be to fail to take account of them.
- *Values:* becoming aware of the moral-political factors that are ever-present in our work and which should not be neglected.

We shall address each of these in turn below.

Clutterbuck makes an interesting point when he explains that:

> Data becomes useful when it is organised into information. Information becomes useful when it can be reconstructed into knowledge, which implies some degree of understanding of how information can be applied. When knowledge can be extrapolated beyond one set of circumstances, with understanding of broad principles, and linked to other relevant knowledge, it becomes wisdom.
>
> (1998, p. 90)

Gilbert (2004) makes a similar point about wisdom in stating that, while knowledge involves knowing that a tomato is a fruit, it is wisdom that tells us not to put tomatoes into a fruit salad. In other words, wisdom involves linking pieces of knowledge together in a way that is meaningful and relevant to our practice concerns. The reflective practitioner, then, should be seen as not simply a knowledgeable, thinking practitioner, but rather as a *wise* practitioner. Part of that wisdom, we would argue, is being able to handle all three dimensions of practice: cognitive, affective and moral-political.

THE COGNITIVE DIMENSION: THE POWER OF THOUGHT

Mindfulness: the thinking practitioner

'Mindfulness' is a term commonly used in eastern thought to refer to a heightened level of thinking – going above everyday thought processes. It involves training the spotlight of our consciousness on what we see as the important issues, focusing clearly on the key elements of the situation. Moon shows that this is not a new idea:

> Dewey (1933) allies reflection with thinking and uses a number of terms for it. He describes it as 'the kind of thinking that consists in turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious thought'. Reflection is a chain of linked ideas that aims at a conclusion and is more than a stream of consciousness. The anticipated end to be reached determines the process of operations that lead to it. In this respect, the anticipated outcome could be said to coincide with the purpose of reflection.
>
> (1999, p. 12)

This is the type of thinking that we associate with reflective practice – deliberative thinking and more than just everyday thoughts. It is sometimes referred to as 'surfacing', which involves bringing things to the surface – in other words, making the implicit explicit. As such, it is an important part of reflective practice.

We can also link it to philosophical thinking (philosophy being the love or pursuit of wisdom) for, as Christenson points out: 'Philosophy is disciplined

critical reflection (about fundamental ideas) that spring from wonder' (2001, p. vii). 'Wonder', as a concept, then brings us back to mindfulness and indeed to wisdom. Christenson goes on to say:

> Wonder usually occurs not the first time we experience something but the first time we really see what we have looked at a thousand times but have never stopped to notice before. Wonder occurs experientially but can also occur conceptually, when we understand (or see that we do not understand) something in a new way. Wonder is the experience of the familiar as suddenly unfamiliar, the encounter with the usual in a way that suddenly makes it shockingly new and fresh.
>
> (2001, pp. 5–6)

Mindfulness can therefore be seen as the use of wonder to lead us to wisdom. It involves avoiding falling into the trap of thinking in tramlines, simply following routinized patterns of thought and thus standardized forms of practice. Relying on habit, routine and uncritical acceptance of the status quo is not a sound basis for reflective practice – quite the opposite. Reflective practice is, in part, intended as an antidote to these problems.

This question of habit, routine and uncritical acceptance is doubly important. This is because:

(i) It can prevent mindful thinking from developing; if we are engaged in 'tramline thinking'. It is very easy for our critical faculties to be turned off and the BOB problem to emerge. What we mean by the BOB problem is that, if we are not careful, our practice 'Bypasses Our Brain' – we go about our business in ways that do not involve thinking about the issues we face and working out how best to deal with them. We can easily fall into the trap of standardized, knee-jerk responses to situations that can get us, our organizations and the people we are seeking to help into serious difficulties. The BOB problem is therefore the equivalent of going onto automatic pilot, and that is clearly a dangerous step to take in the helping professions. It shows a distinct lack of respect for the people we serve, and therefore raises some significant values issues to which we shall return below. Tramline thinking and the BOB problem often arise when people are under high levels of pressure but, as we noted in Chapter 1, the busier we are, the more reflective we need to be.

(ii) It can act as a barrier to developing creative solutions and more effective ways of working. We shall examine below the importance of creativity as a feature of reflective practice, but for now we should note that habit and routine, if relied upon too much, can be highly counterproductive.

Practice focus 2.1

Marion was a nurse employed in a nursing home for older people. She found the work quite demanding, with quite a lot to do, but it was also rewarding and, for the most part, enjoyable work that she was called upon to do. However, one day, she found that, of the complement of five nurses due to be on duty, two were off sick and, due to a breakdown in communication, no arrangements had been made for relief cover. So, in effect, until the afternoon shift came on duty, there were three staff doing the work of five. Marion realized that, in the circumstances, she would need to roll her sleeves up and make the best of a bad situation. She was not pleased about what had happened, but she did not see it as an insurmountable problem.

However, at one point in the morning she realized that she had completed giving out the medications to the residents she was responsible for, but she was so flustered by all the work she had to do that she had carried out this task without concentrating on it. Looking back, she recognized that she must have done it on 'automatic pilot', and it dawned on her just how dangerous this was, as giving somebody the wrong medication, or the wrong dose of the right medication, could prove disastrous. This time nothing untoward came of this lapse in her concentration, but she felt very anxious and concerned about what could have happened as a result of her falling into the trap of relying on unthinking routines.

Analytical thinking

In its literal sense, analysis means breaking things down into their component parts. For example, a chemical analysis would identify what chemical elements are present in a particular substance and in what proportions. However, the term is often used in a broader sense than this to mean examining a situation to make sense of it. It is in this sense that it is an important component of reflective practice. It involves drawing out recurring themes and issues and recognizing patterns that help us form a meaningful picture of the situation. Analytical thinking can be facilitated by asking ourselves some important questions, not least the following:

- What type of situation am I dealing with here?
- What are the key issues I need to be aware of (in particular, are there any dangers)?
- What is happening? What processes are shaping what is happening?
- What do other people expect of me here? Is this consistent with my professional role and the specific duties of my job? If not, what negotiation needs to take place to remedy the situation?
- Do I have the information I need to act? If not, what do I need to find out and how?
- Who else needs to be involved? Who do I need to communicate with?
- What options are available in terms of dealing with this situation? How do I evaluate those options?
- Are there any values issues here I need to consider (for example, showing respect, maintaining confidentiality, valuing diversity)?

These questions are not intended as a prescriptive framework for practitioners to follow (that would not be consistent with the spirit of reflective practice), but rather as an indication of the types of question that can be helpful in enabling us to make sense of the situations we are dealing with and framing a well-informed, carefully considered response. What we want to encourage is an analytical approach to practice, in the sense that practitioners make the most of their mental capacities in dealing with the challenges involved in our work in the helping professions.

In this regard, Dewey's (1933) comments are helpful. He describes reflective thinking as:

> Active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and further conclusions to which it leads . . . it includes a conscious and voluntary effort to establish belief upon a firm basis of evidence and rationality.
>
> (cited in Moon, 1999, p. 12)

Of course, it would not be realistic to adopt an analytical approach to everything we do. What is necessary, then, is the ability to distinguish between those circumstances that can safely be dealt with in a routine way and those that need a more focused, analytical approach. Being able to distinguish between these two types of situations is in itself an analytical skill and one worth developing over time (it is also something that supervisors, mentors or coaches can play a useful role in helping to develop – see the discussion of these issues in Chapter 3).

Clearly we are dealing with some complex issues here. Doyle helps to cast some light on the situation when she argues that:

> Thinking theoretically without any form of reflection becomes rigidity of thought, which leads ultimately to unthinking intervention, whereas reflection without any sort of theoretical basis is woolly thinking, which also leads ultimately to unthinking intervention. Unthinking intervention becomes habitual intervention, which in turn leads to ineffective practice.
>
> (2006, p. 15)

As we saw in Chapter 1, theoretical understanding is important. However, as Doyle indicates, such understanding is no substitute for reflective analysis. What is needed, if we are to avoid unthinking, habitual and ineffective practice, is a foundation of theoretical knowledge that is then subjected to critical analysis (that is, the theoretical knowledge base provides the cloth, reflective analysis provides the tailoring).

Our powers of analysis can be helped by making use of what is referred to as 'dialectical' thinking. 'The dialectic' refers to the process of interacting forces producing a new outcome. For example, pressures towards change can encounter pressures to maintain the status quo, resulting in an outcome that is a blend of the old and the new – or to put it in technical terms: a thesis encounters an antithesis and the result is a synthesis. Going back to the point made earlier that analysis literally means breaking things down into their component parts, dialectical thinking involves linking them together to get a more holistic picture. Our thinking therefore needs to be analytical in the broader sense of enabling us to make sense of the overall picture, rather than in the narrower sense of simply breaking things down into their component parts. In other words, there needs to be a dialectical element to our thinking,

one that incorporates notions of change, conflict and interaction (that is, we are dealing with moving pictures and not snapshots). Such a dialectical approach is also useful in helping us build up the type of holistic picture that is needed for *critically* reflective practice.

The helping professions are a part of a complex, changing world, based on a mixture of consensus and conflict. We therefore have to make sure that our understanding is sufficiently sophisticated and dynamic to do it justice.

Creative thinking

Earlier we noted the significance of wonder, in the sense of being able to look at familiar situations in a new light. This is an important way of avoiding getting bogged down in routine, standardized ways of working that have limited effectiveness, that are demotivating (and thus a potential contributor to stress) and that act as barriers to learning and development. Wonder is a foundation for creative thinking, and creative thinking will stimulate and support wonder.

Griseri discusses similar issues:

> Ellen Langer talks of the negative effects of taking things for granted, which she calls 'mindlessness'. In contrast, she points out how creativity and greater understanding can often be stimulated by focusing on what one has always accepted and regarding it as no longer certain.
>
> (1998, p. 17)

Without creativity, we face a fate of getting stuck in a rut of routine practices that are likely to have limited effectiveness and also run the risk of communicating to the people we are trying to help an unintended (but none the less very powerful) message that they are not important, that they do not merit more than a standardized, unimaginative response. This is clearly not a sound foundation for working in the helping professions. As the saying goes: 'If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you always got.' In other words, an approach lacking in creativity will close off avenues for helping and make us largely ineffectual in making a real positive difference to people's lives.

In a similar vein, Hamer makes the important point that: 'If our own creativity is stifled, then it becomes difficult to foster the creativity in others that encourages them to pursue the kinds of lives they hope to have' (2006, p. ix). This means that, without creativity, any efforts geared towards empowerment will be significantly hampered. There is therefore an increased risk of creating dependency which, in turn, can lead to increased pressures on services and the professionals involved in providing and commissioning them, thus making everybody's life more difficult. This can then lead to a vicious circle in which people claim that, because of these pressures, they do not have time to be reflective; they must just 'get on with it'.

One common barrier to creativity is the stereotype that being creative means being artistic. If we look back over history, we can see that some of the most creative people in history have been scientists rather than artists, and so a lack of artistic skills should not be seen as an obstacle to creativity. Creativity involves being able to look at situations from different angles, not allowing the familiar and habitual to blind us to other opportunities or avenues for helping. To a large extent, creative thinking is an extension of analytical thinking.

We can also link creative thinking to critical thinking for, as Christenson comments:

> Any society that values creativity also needs to enable criticism. If we cannot question the way we are doing things and thinking about things at present, it will not occur to us that they could be thought of or done differently.
>
> (2001, p. 37)

We can now see a pattern here. Reflection involves thinking, and such thinking needs to be analytical, creative and critical – three types of thinking that support and reinforce each other.

THE AFFECTIVE DIMENSION: REFLECTING ON FEELINGS

Thinking is clearly important, but so too is feeling. We would be missing a significant dimension of our work if we were to neglect how crucial a role

emotions play in shaping the problems people face and their responses to them.

Benner, Hooper-Kyriakidis and Stannard (1999) illustrate how emotion is something we need to consider in addition to the rational aspects, and not instead of:

> Traditionally, emotion has been seen as opposed to cognition and rationality. But increasingly, it is recognized that emotions play a key role in perception and even act as a moral compass in learning and practice (Dreyfus, Dreyfus and Benner, 1996).
>
> (1999, p. 15)

Reflective practice therefore needs to incorporate an element of reflecting on the emotional foundations and implications of our work. To facilitate this we shall comment on five aspects of the emotional dimension, we begin by exploring the important, but often misunderstood distinction between empathy and sympathy.

Sympathy vs. empathy

Sympathy involves sharing someone's feelings. That is, if they are sad, we become sad. If they are disappointed, we become disappointed. Empathy, by contrast, is where we recognize someone's feelings but we do not necessarily share them. For example, we may see that someone is grieving but without necessarily grieving ourselves. While sympathy is an understandable response to many of the situations we encounter in the helping professions, empathy is what we should be aiming for. This is because sympathy can leave us ill-equipped for the range and intensity of emotions we are likely to encounter. We would quickly become worn down and therefore of very little use to anyone if we experienced the feelings we encounter in our work.

Empathy is a more realistic option. It involves being emotionally aware – sensitive to what people are going through – but without allowing the emotions to affect us. Pure empathy is, of course, not possible, as some situations will inevitably evoke an emotional response in us – we would not be human if this did not occur. However, what we should aim for is getting as close to empathy as we can.

Voice of experience 2.1

When I first became involved in counselling I found it very difficult indeed. I felt for every client and started to take on board the pain and confusion they were expressing to me. Steadily I could feel myself becoming overloaded with all the emotion. When I raised the issue with my supervisor she was very helpful and reminded me of the importance of empathy not sympathy. She made me realize that I had allowed myself to slip into a sympathetic way of working rather than an empathetic way. It was a tough job making the transition, but I recognized that I had to – I couldn't go on the way I was; it would have done me a lot of harm and would also have meant that I was less help to my clients.

Rhian, a counsellor at a GP surgery

In order to be able to rely on empathy rather than sympathy we need to be 'tuned in' to other people's emotions, able to recognize indicators of a person's emotional state (tone of voice and body language, for example). However, we also need to be 'tuned in' to our own emotional responses – aware of how the emotional aspects of a situation are affecting us. This is a form of self-awareness and, as such, an important part of reflective practice.

Emotional intelligence

Being tuned in to other people's feelings as well as our own is precisely what emotional intelligence is all about. The term 'emotional intelligence' has become quite a popular one in recent years, widely used in literature relating to management and business. Unfortunately, it is often used in a simplistic sense, showing a relatively superficial understanding of the complexities of emotional life. Despite this, however, the basic concept remains fundamentally a useful one.

Being 'emotionally intelligent' involves being able to 'read' other people's emotions – to be able to recognize the subtle cues in their language and behaviour that give us important messages about their emotional state. This then gives us a platform for deciding how best to respond. If we are clued in to the ways in which emotions are affecting people, we are in a stronger position to help them, as we will have a more insightful understanding of their circumstances. For example, if we know that someone is feeling disorientated because of significant changes taking place in their life, we will be able to

work out that they are likely to find it helpful if we are able to provide some sort of anchor or stability for them.

The other side of the emotional intelligence coin is being 'in touch' with our own feelings – that is, being able to appreciate what we are feeling and why we are feeling that way. For example, we may feel negative towards somebody because we are envious of something they have, but we may not fully realize that these feelings of envy are influencing our behaviour and attitudes towards that individual. This is another aspect of self-awareness, being able to recognize what feelings are currently affecting us and how significant they may be.

Emotional intelligence is not something we can develop overnight. It is something which, if we do not have it already, can take a long time to develop. However, its value to us in the helping professions certainly repays the time and effort required to maximize our potential in this area. If we are not sufficiently attuned to the emotional aspects of our work, then we run the risk of:

- Being insensitive to the needs of the people we are trying to help and thus decreasing the likelihood of success and increasing the chances of doing harm.
- Missing significant factors that may need to be addressed before we can make progress.
- Failing in our duty of self-care – that is, putting ourselves in situations that may be emotionally harmful to us (in dealing with people who have been traumatized, for example – see Warren, 2006).
- Failing to support colleagues by not recognizing any emotional issues that may be causing them difficulty.

So, regardless of the rather simplistic claims of some adherents of emotional intelligence, it is a concept that we need to take seriously.

Anxiety and uncertainty

Jobs that involve working with people inevitably involve a degree of uncertainty. This is because, while the social sciences have taught us about various common patterns of behaviour that enable us to make reasonable predictions about how people are likely to act and interact in certain circumstances, the

degree of uncertainty and unpredictability remains high. Working with people therefore involves working with uncertainty. As Moon puts it:

> the reflective practitioner with a self-image as a facilitator, for whom there is important recognition of the uncertainty of the professional situation, the knowledge base of the profession and, thereby, the problems that need to be resolved in practice, the reflective practitioner will cope with this uncertainty by putting the relationship with the client at the centre of practice with an attempt reflectively to develop negotiated and shared meanings and understandings as a joint process.
>
> (1999, pp. 62–3)

This is wise advice that we would support. It links well with the notion of partnership, an important concept we shall discuss in more detail below.

Linked to uncertainty is the issue of anxiety. A certain degree of anxiety is only to be expected and is not necessarily a problem – indeed, it can be helpful (for example, by keeping us alert and focused, keeping complacency at bay). However, too much anxiety can be debilitating, creating problems not only for ourselves, but also for our colleagues and for those we are seeking to help. It is therefore important that we manage to keep our anxiety within manageable limits. We can do this by:

- Recognizing that a degree of anxiety is normal and acceptable – if we feel bad about experiencing anxiety, we can develop a vicious circle in which our anxiety grows and grows, sapping our confidence.
- Trying to clarify what precisely we are afraid of – having this clarity can help us to manage our anxieties (see Thompson, 2006b).
- Identify the sources of support you can draw upon. The support of others can make a huge difference when it comes to keeping anxiety in check.

Dealing with our own anxiety is, of course, only half the battle. We also need to give careful consideration to the skills involved in supporting others through their anxiety. Developing our emotional intelligence, as discussed above, can be a good first step in that direction.

Grief

A common misunderstanding of grief is that it is primarily if not exclusively a reaction to bereavement – that is, a response to the death of someone close to us. The reality is that grief arises in response to any significant loss, regardless of whether death is involved: divorce or other relationship breakdown; redundancy or retirement; a child leaving home; an elderly person moving into a care home; becoming disabled; and so on. This means that grief is a much more common emotion than many people realize. It is often at the root of many of the problems we frequently encounter in the helping professions: depression; anger and aggression; self-harm; interpersonal conflicts; and so on.

One of the implications of this is that we need to be careful to make sure that we do not fall into the trap of failing to recognize grief and its effects. Even someone who is grieving may not realize that this is what is happening to them – they may not be able to make the connection between their experience of one or more losses and the way they are feeling. For example, someone who is grieving can have intense feelings of guilt, even though they have nothing to feel guilty about. Even where we recognize that such strong feelings of guilt are a normal response to a major loss, they can be very difficult to deal with. However, where the person concerned does not make this connection and recognize the feelings of guilt as part of a grief reaction, the feelings will be even more difficult to deal with – possibly leading to considerable distress.

And, of course, this does not only apply to the people we seek to help; we are not immune to such difficulties ourselves. If we are not sufficiently aware of the significance of grief as a reaction to any major loss, we may struggle to cope with our duties due to the emotional impact of our circumstances. Being able to understand what is happening to us when we go through an emotionally turbulent time can be very helpful, and so having a greater sensitivity to the prevalence and impact of grief on people's lives is a distinct advantage.

It is understandable that, given the emotional sensitivity and intensity involved in situations of loss and grief, some people will feel uncomfortable in dealing with the issues that arise and will perhaps seek to avoid engaging with them. However, while we can appreciate the temptation to do this, we can also see how dangerous such an approach can be, as it means that vitally important issues may not be addressed, significant avenues for helping may not be pursued and we may be giving a message that we do not care – just at a time when those affected perhaps need help and support more than ever. The self-awareness we earlier identified as an important part of reflective practice therefore needs to incorporate awareness of our own reactions to other people's grief – to make sure that we do not allow our own discomfort to predominate at the expense of the person or persons who need help.

Practice focus 2.2

Omar was surprised to encounter such an aggressive reaction when he went to visit the Leighton family. He had helped them make arrangements for Mrs Leighton's mother to be admitted to a residential home, as she could no longer cope in the community, even with extensive family and social services support. Throughout the process they had been polite and welcoming and had thanked him for his help and understanding. However, when he went to see them to sort out some of the final administrative details after the admission had taken place, their attitude had changed. They seemed very on edge and very different from how they had been before. Before he had had time to fill in the necessary details on the forms, they had become quite aggressive towards him, as if they were blaming him for the situation. He was very puzzled by this and started racking his brains to try and work out what he had done to upset or antagonize them. He felt very uncomfortable with this and it clearly knocked his confidence. He was so concerned that he raised the issue with his line manager in a supervision session. Fortunately, his line manager was someone who was quite tuned in to grief issues and was able to recognize the aggressive attitude as a feature of Mr and Mrs Leighton's grief reaction as a result of the major change in their life. Once Omar understood this he felt so much better, knowing that it wasn't his fault and now feeling much more confident about how to help them. He realized that this had been a valuable lesson for him to learn, but wished he had been able to learn it in a less painful way.

Gender, culture and emotion

Traditionally, emotion has been conceptualized as primarily a biological matter. It tends to be seen as a physiological reaction to life events. However, there is now a growing literature on the social aspects of emotion. For example, Williams argues that a useful starting point is:

> to see emotions as complex, multifaceted human compounds which arise, sociologically speaking, in a variety of sociorelational contexts, including fundamental processes of management, differentiation and change linking larger social structures with the emotional

> experiences and expressions of embodied individuals (Gordon 1990). This in turn suggests the need . . . to work 'both ways' so to speak, from the social shaping of emotions by social structure to the emotional shaping of social structure itself (ibid.).
>
> (2001, p. 1)

To this we can add the interrelationship between emotions and culture, rather than just structure, thus creating an even more complex picture. What this complexity tells us is that it is a mistake to see emotion simply as a biological response. While emotion no doubt has a biological dimension, it also has psychological and sociological dimensions. We therefore have to be very aware that emotional responses will be influenced to a large extent by such key factors as culture and gender.

In reflecting on the emotional dimension of our work, it is therefore essential that we take account of differences in cultural expression and interpretation of emotion and different gender experiences of emotion. These are very complex issues, and space does not permit a detailed analysis of what is involved. You are therefore advised to consult the *Guide to Further Learning* at the end of the book, where you will find suggestions for further reading around these very complex, but very important issues.

Voice of experience 2.2

I knew that dealing with the emotional side of my work would be difficult, but, until I started my formal training I hadn't realized how complex emotions are. For example, I had assumed that men and women grieve in the same way, so I was amazed to find that there is research to show that there are often significant gender differences in how people deal with their losses. It came as quite a surprise to me to learn that – and that was before we went on to look at how emotions operate in subtly different ways in different cultures! I could see that I would have my work cut out in making sense of it all.

Aoife, a hospice worker

THE VALUES DIMENSION: REFLECTING ON VALUES

Moss makes the point that: 'Without an awareness of values, our practice can become dangerous' (2007, p. 3). This is something with which we would

wholeheartedly concur. Values shape not only our thoughts and feelings, but also our actions. Therefore, if we are not aware of what values are influencing these three important dimensions of our practice, we are largely working in the dark – and that is something that is clearly not consistent with the philosophy of reflective practice.

Reflecting on values is therefore something we see as a crucial basis of high-quality professional practice. It involves asking ourselves such questions as:

- What are the values associated with my profession (as identified in codes of practice and other such official documentation)?
- What do these mean to me in practice?
- What are my personal values?
- What do these mean to me in practice?
- Are there any conflicts between these two sets of values?
- Are there any conflicts between these values and how I practise?
- How can I safeguard my personal and professional values if they are under threat in some way?

This is not an exhaustive list, but it should be enough to show that there are some very important issues relating to values that we ignore at our peril.

In the remainder of this chapter we explore some of the key issues that arise when it comes to reflecting on the values dimension of our work. We recognize that different professional groups will have different conceptions of their respective value bases and different priorities and emphases. We shall therefore concentrate on three sets of values issues that we see as applicable across the board in the helping professions, regardless of specific discipline background. These are: partnership, empowerment and equality and diversity.

Partnership

This is a term that has become widely used in the helping professions in recent years. There has been much written and spoken about the need to work in partnership. Ideas like 'joined-up thinking for joined-up working' have become established. However, what has been confusing is that:

(i) There has been insufficient discussion of what we actually mean by 'part-

nership' or how we are to put it into practice – the term has crept into our vocabulary, often without people having the opportunity to explore together its precise meaning and its implications (for example, we have been involved in running training courses on partnership in which it has become apparent that there is far more confusion about partnership than there is clarity).

(ii) The term is often used in two separate but related senses. It can refer to (a) multidisciplinary collaboration (how do different professional groups work together effectively to produce the best outcomes for the people we serve?); and (b) the nature of the working relationship between professional practitioners and the person(s) receiving help (how can we make sure that professional practice is about doing things *with* people, not *to* or *for* them?).

In terms of the relationship between worker and client/patient/service user, Schön provides a helpful picture in distinguishing between two types of 'contract' – that is, agreement about the basis of the working relationship:

Traditional Contract

I put myself into the professional's hands and, in doing this, I gain a sense of security based on faith.

I have the comfort of being in good hands. I need only comply with his [*sic*] advice and all will be well.

I am pleased to be served by the best person available.

Reflective Contract

I join with the professional in making sense of my case, and in doing this I gain a sense of increased involvement and action.

I can exercise some control over the situation. I am not wholly dependent on him; he is dependent on information and action that only I can undertake.

I am pleased to be able to test my judgements about his competence. I enjoy the excitement of discovery about his knowledge, about the phenomena of his practice, and about myself.

(Schön, 1983, p. 302)

This is a very telling passage as it shows a distinct move away from traditional 'we know best' models of professionalism, towards more reflective, partnership-based models in which we work together to find solutions, enable progress and so on. This is consistent with the emphasis on user involvement and citizen participation in health, welfare and related services in particular and with empowerment in general (see below). Partnership, in the sense of more egalitarian, inclusive and participatory approaches to working relationships with our clientele, is therefore entirely consistent with reflective practice.

Partnership and reflective practice are also compatible bedfellows at the broader level of partnership – that is, in relation to multidisciplinary collaboration. Being clear about what we are doing, why we are doing it, how we might work together, what might stand in the way of our working together and related matters are all bread and butter issues for multidisciplinary partnership, but they are also important features of reflective practice. There is, therefore, a strong linkage between partnership and multidisciplinary partnership.

Empowerment

Empowerment is another term that is now widely used, but not necessarily with a degree of understanding that matches the extent of its popularity as a concept. Our view of empowerment is that the helping professions are primarily about helping people to help themselves. That is, it is not about making people dependent – dependency should be a last resort and, even where it exists at all, it should be kept to a minimum, with the people concerned having as much control over their circumstances as possible. Empowerment, then, is about supporting people in having as much control over their lives and circumstances as they can. This involves identifying barriers at different levels – for example:

- **Personal.** This will include low self-esteem or confidence; fears and anxieties about failure (perhaps based on earlier negative experiences); and conflicting pressures.
- **Cultural.** Stereotypes that stigmatize and demean certain groups of people would be included among the factors that inhibit empowerment at a cultural level.

- **Structural.** Social structures (based on race, class and gender) can have the effect of excluding certain groups and individuals from opportunities to control their own destiny.

Being reflective puts us in a stronger position to be able to help people overcome (or at least minimize) these and related obstacles. A non-reflective approach, by contrast may prove to be very disempowering. For example, if we are rushing around unreflectively 'getting on with the job', without considering the implications of our actions in terms of whether we are contributing to or undermining empowerment, then we may actually be doing more harm than good (contributing to low levels of confidence; unwittingly relying on stereotypes; and perhaps also reinforcing structural inequalities).

Empowerment, then, can be seen as part of our emphasis on *critically* reflective practice, in the sense that uncritical, mindless practice based on habit and routine will fail to address the significant personal, social and political obstacles to progress that stand in the way of people gaining greater control over their lives. Critically reflective practice can be very empowering, whereas uncritical, unreflective practice can be dangerously disempowering and thus potentially quite oppressive – something that is clearly not appropriate in the helping professions.

Moon also links critically reflective practice with empowerment:

> criticality has been widely associated with reflective practice and is taken to be the main purpose for reflection (Smyth, 1989), but it can mean different things – a critical view of the content of an action . . . or of the self or of the context of the professional or profession. Smyth (1989) provides an example of the third of these and provides a set of guiding questions as a basis for reflection to empower and politicize professionals in teaching.
>
> (1999, p. 59)

The term 'politicize' used here is an important one. It does not mean converting someone to a particular political viewpoint or party position. Rather, it means helping people to appreciate that professional practice and the problems such practice seeks to address do not occur in a political vacuum. To have an adequate understanding of our professional world, we need to be able to appreciate the political aspects of that world – this is a fundamental part of critically reflective practice.

In Chapter 1, we discussed the importance of reflective practice having transformative potential – that is, that it can in certain circumstances free people up from restrictive and self-limiting understandings of the situation they find themselves in (or indeed of their lives as a whole). The work of Mezirow is again relevant here:

> Mezirow talks of people being trapped in their meaning perspective and unable to develop as people. He sees some of the mission of adult education as being to emancipate people from a self-imposed restrictive view of the world to one that is open to new ideas and the changes in their lives that these may imply. The possibility of a change in a person's life view is encompassed in the notion of transformation.
>
> (Moon, 1999, p. 109)

This passage refers to the empowering potential of adult education. However, we would see it as being equally applicable across the helping professions (that is, including, but not limited to, adult education). Much of what we do in our work will put us in a position where we can have some degree of influence over a person's worldview. If their perspective is a self-disempowering, self-limiting one, then we will need to give careful consideration to what part we may be able to play (large or small) in influencing that worldview in a more positive, self-enhancing direction.

Equality and social justice

A key part of the idea of critically reflective practice is a commitment to seeing the 'big picture', including the wider social and political aspects of the situations we are dealing with, and indeed of our professional roles more broadly. This, then, will include such issues a social justice and equality. It would not make sense to adopt a holistic approach that does not recognize the significance of discrimination and oppression in so many people's lives.

What, then, can reflective practice contribute to efforts to promote equality and social justice?

One important contribution relates to the role of reflective practice in questioning the familiar and looking beneath the surface of what is so often taken for granted. This use of 'wonder', as we referred to it earlier, is a vital part of understanding such processes as discrimination and the oppression to which they lead. This is because discrimination is not simply a matter of the overt use of prejudicial behaviour towards others. As we have known for some time, the reality is much more complex than this. Discrimination is often 'institutionalized' – that is, it is built into our working lives (and indeed personal lives) at both cultural and structural levels (if you are not familiar with this more complex understanding of discrimination, see the *Guide to Further Learning* at the end of the book.) Reflective practice helps us to become attuned to the subtle processes that can lead to people being excluded, marginalized, stigmatized or otherwise disadvantaged – through, for example, the use of discriminatory forms of language.

An example of such a subtle process would be a situation in which assessments relating to, say, women offenders, make detailed reference to whether or not they have children and what significance this may have, while assessments relating to male offenders make little or no reference to such matters. What is so important about this is that a non-reflective approach to such issues not only reflects the discriminatory assumptions that are prevalent in society, but also reinforces them. We therefore have to make sure that we have a well-informed approach to these issues, otherwise there is a significant danger that our efforts to help may not only fail to tackle problems of discrimination and the injustices these create, but they may also make matters worse – for example, by increasing the level or impact of the discrimination.

Furthermore, it needs to be recognized that the discrimination many people encounter (for example, in relation to race/ethnicity, gender, age, sexuality, disability, language or class) will often be not only an additional problem alongside the primary problem that has necessitated professional intervention, it may also be a cause (or at least causal factor) in that problem. For example, an older person who is depressed may be experiencing such depression in large part because of ageism and its tendency to demean older people, to devalue their contribution to society and to produce low levels of expectations in terms of what joy, pleasure, pride and satisfaction older people can reasonably anticipate.

Equality and social justice are important goals to pursue in the helping professions (we can hardly claim to be helping and caring if, at best, we ignore significant sources of discrimination in so many people's lives and, at worst, actually make the discrimination worse). However, they are also very complex and subtle issues. Trying to tackle them without a proper understanding of what is involved and without a sensitivity to the nuances that can be so significant is likely to be doomed to failure. What is needed, then, is a well-informed approach that is attuned to the subtleties and complexities involved – in other words, a critically reflective approach.

Practice focus 2.3

Rob used to work with a man who was overtly racist and had little or no respect for women, for gay people or indeed for any minority. He had a very closed mind and narrow, prejudicial perspective on such matters. In his current job, by contrast, he witnessed no such overt prejudice or discrimination, but this did not mean that discrimination was not taking place. He was part of a multidisciplinary team working with disabled adults. He personally had a strong commitment to disability equality, as did many of his colleagues. However, some colleagues, those he would describe as 'old school', while not overtly discriminatory, would often make some quite discriminatory assumptions. On one occasion, he was quite shocked to find that one of his colleagues had expressed doubt about a romantic relationship a disabled man had begun to form with a non-disabled woman. It became clear from the ensuing conversation that this colleague was assuming that a disabled person should not have expectations of finding love and romance. Rob thought this was a very patronizing attitude and out of touch with reality. His colleague was shocked to be criticized by Rob in this way, but at least it did make him begin to consider whether he was being fair in making such assumptions about disabled people's sexuality and what they could expect in terms of forming and sustaining relationships.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has built on the foundations laid in Chapter 1. It has tried to take forward our understanding of critically reflective practice by examining three key dimensions: the cognitive aspects related to thinking and understanding; the affective aspects related to how feelings play an important role; and the values aspects related to the moral-political context of professional practice. We hope that we have given a clear picture of just how important each of these areas is, and how dangerous and problematic it would be if we were to neglect them.