



CRITICAL REFLECTION ON PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT

A reflective account on becoming reflexive: the 7 Cs of caring conversations as a framework for reflexive questioning

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Abstract

Context: Some uncertainty surrounds both the definition and the application of reflexivity in participatory research and practice development. There is scope for further exploration of what reflexivity might look like in practice, and how the researcher/practice developer and participants might be involved. This paper does this in the context of a study that is using appreciative inquiry to explore the experience of inspection in care homes.

Aims: I will explore my personal journey into the use of a relational constructionist approach to reflexivity and suggest that the 7 Cs of caring conversations provide a useful framework to inform reflexive practice. The 7 Cs will be used as a framework for the telling of this story.

Implications for practice:

- Relational reflexivity has the potential to create the space for all those involved in research/practice development initiatives to voice their thoughts and feelings about the initiative and their involvement in it
- The 7 Cs of caring conversations can provide a framework for developing questions that may serve as a starting point for cultivating reflexive practice

Keywords: Reflexivity, caring conversations, reflexive dialogue, relational constructionism, practice development, participatory research, authenticity criteria

Introduction

Appreciative inquiry is described as both a theory and a method, and as akin to the principles of practice development. It is concerned with transformation and organisational improvement (Trajkovski et al., 2013). Both appreciative inquiry and practice development emphasise collaboration and the gathering of people around shared values (Bushe, 1999) and purpose (Manley et al., 2014).

Representatives from all stakeholder groups involved in the care home inspection process were invited to participate in the study. Their involvement in the practice of reflexivity will be discussed in this paper. The role of reflexivity within qualitative research has been described as being concerned with:

- Enhancing rigour through improving data reliability (Jootun et al., 2009)
- Increasing trustworthiness by examining the impact of intersubjective elements of data collection and analysis (Finlay, 2002)

- Achieving the emancipatory aims of research within the critical paradigm (McCabe and Holmes, 2009)

Finlay (2002, p 532) described reflexivity as ‘thoughtful, conscious, self-awareness’ and as encompassing ‘continual evaluation of subjective responses, intersubjective dynamics, and the research process itself’. This definition prompted questions for me around how to distinguish between self-reflection and reflexivity; this discussion will detail my grappling with this question, with the concept of reflexivity and more particularly with its use in this research study. The 7 Cs of caring conversations (Dewar, 2011) are integral to this study and will provide the framework through which I will story-tell my reflexive voyage thus far. The 7 Cs are:

- Connecting emotionally
- Considering other perspectives
- (Being) Curious
- Collaborating
- Compromising
- (Being) Courageous
- Celebrating

I will write about reflexivity from a relational constructionist perspective, which shares with practice development a concern for transformation within organisations. The story will begin with an account of my feelings concerning reflexivity and how these feelings have evolved through the study.

Connecting emotionally *How do I feel about being reflexive? What do these feelings evoke for me?*

When starting out as a researcher in this study, the idea of reflexive practice held considerable appeal. It felt intriguing and energising while also holding something of the recognisable. I equated reflexivity with self-reflection – a solitary activity carrying with it a sense of familiarity that was comforting. When offered an understanding of reflexivity as being an activity that involved others – research participants – I became aware that this understanding brought with it a sense of excitement and of trepidation. The excitement was in relation to new possibilities, and a sense of this being a coherent way to approach reflexivity in what was a collaborative study. Alongside this was nervousness around moving to an expanded understanding that involved more than self-reflection, and a concern that in the absence of established criteria for determining effective reflexivity, I wouldn't know if we were getting it ‘right’. The following paragraphs will offer a brief outline of this expanded understanding of reflexivity from the relational constructionist perspective, and how it relates to practice development.

Considering other/s perspectives *What other perspectives are there about the concept of reflexivity?*

The ‘what it is’, the ‘why and how to do it’ in relation to reflexivity are all somewhat contested and in need of further elaboration (Dowling, 2006; Pillow, 2010). Their definitions may be heavily influenced by the personal biography and research paradigm within which the writer/researcher is operating (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). As outlined above, my previous understanding of reflexivity was of its being a personal pursuit of the researcher, with a primary purpose of revealing assumptions and biases. A description of a continuum bookended by reflection at one end and reflexivity at the other offered by Finlay (2002) was helpful in understanding the multiple perspectives and approaches that are encompassed by the concept of reflexivity. I found it particularly interesting to note what I interpreted to be different prioritisations or foci within the various understandings of reflexivity; these included ‘data’, ‘researcher’ and ‘participants’. In some descriptions the priority appeared to be about preserving data on the influence of the researcher, in others it appeared to be about the researcher offering a full account of their beliefs and bias, and elsewhere reflexivity became an exploration of the participants’ experience.

Reflexivity and reflexive processes have been referenced in practice development in a number of areas, including among others: reflexive journal writing (Barry and O’Callaghan, 2008), the reflexive

journey towards a new paradigmatic synthesis (McCormack and Titchen, 2006) and reflexive-relating – honest and transparent relating (Trede and Titchen, 2012). When considering the varying perspectives, an understanding of reflexivity within the meta-theory of relational constructionism grabbed my attention, as the purpose of inquiry within relational constructionism is not to describe an existing reality but to open dialogue on future possibilities (Hosking, 2005). Relational constructionism has been positioned as a 'social science perspective', sitting within the broader paradigm of social constructionism, with its particular emphasis being a focus on language-based relational processes (Hosking, 2011). It holds a relational ontology that contends that it is only possible to know ourselves and another through relationship (Cunliffe, 2008). Emancipatory practice development is described as being situated within the critical paradigm, where the focus is on bringing about long-lasting change through the development of individuals and cultures (McCormack and Titchen, 2006). Critical relational constructionism is described as being interested in 'appreciation and openness' (Hosking, 2007). This appreciation and openness is of relevance to practice development as it is focused on the relational realities that are particular and unique to each interaction or context. Reflexivity from this relational constructionist perspective, which for the purposes of this paper I will term 'relational reflexivity', is viewed as an ongoing process carried out in dialogue.

This relational reflexivity approach explores how participation in research includes all those involved and creates curiosity about what new discoveries/possibilities arise through such involvement. Reflexive dialogues are proposed as the means by which 'relational responsibility' can be explored, with suggested themes including research identities, power within research relationships, and the valuing of all voices and alternative views (Hosking and Pluut, 2010). McCormack et al. (2006) discuss key methods that should be evidenced in practice development projects, including allowing opportunities for feedback, developing shared ownership and facilitating critical reflection. I would suggest that reflexive dialogues have the potential to address these recommended methods. I was attracted to the idea of reflexivity being a shared practice with the participants, who are also referred to as 'co-inquirers' in this study, as I felt that this would enhance the collaborative nature of the study while also being a means by which I could be held accountable to those involved. Hosking and Pluut (2010) speak about reflexivity from the relational rather than personal perspective, so surfacing of the individual researchers' beliefs and bias is not raised. I questioned this within myself and recognised that there is value to this self-reflective work and that it can be done by the individual as a precursor to engaging in relational reflexivity. Reflective journals then became a place to unearth assumptions and biases, with the caveat that I understood them to be thoughts, and that it would only be through relationships with others that I could establish if they were true in my interactions. An example of this was my concern in relation to the observational component of the research, described below, where I would be observing interactions between care home managers and inspectors during inspection visits.

Story from practice 1

My assumption was that my presence would be a source of unease for participants (co-inquirers), so I reflected on what I thought I could do to relieve some of the discomfort. On dialoguing with the participants it became apparent that my perceptions of what would be difficult for them were misplaced, and there was an opportunity for us to share what we would value in relation to the observation experience

While I felt a real resonance with Hosking and Pluut's (2010) view of reflexivity as being rooted in dialogue, a number of questions, particularly with respect to its practical application, began to surface and these are outlined in the coming paragraphs.

Being curious *What questions might I ask of myself or others (including the literature) that might help inform my understanding of reflexivity?*

The questions I began to ask were in relation to addressing quality concerns through the use of

the relational constructionist approach and the very practical how of 'doing' reflexivity. A primary attraction for me of the relational constructionist approach to reflexivity was that attention focuses on the relationships and the idea that shared dialogue could provide a forum for co-inquirers' contribution and opinion on the quality dimension of the study. Hosking and Pluut (2010) state that the purpose of relational reflexivity as they describe it is to move away from issues of validity and rigour (regarding the quality of truth claims) into the world of local ethical and practical-use concerns for those involved in the inquiry process. I then questioned how the link between relational reflexivity and quality could be expanded on, and this led to a consideration of the authenticity criteria (Nolan et al., 2003) as potentially offering a significant contribution to this question. The application of quality criteria will be further expanded on under the 'collaborating' banner.

Through striving to familiarise myself with the concepts of relational constructionism I noted that the nature of the question I was asking altered somewhat. What began as a desire for a reflexivity 'how to do' list evolved into a desire for an opening up of dialogue on the 'how' of reflexivity. This was framed by a growing awareness that in 'doing' reflexivity and 'being' reflexive there was and would continue to be a need to stay curious, that it was a process of 'becoming reflexive' that would most likely take time. As previously mentioned, I looked to the 7 Cs of caring conversations and the authenticity criteria to address the desire to open up dialogue. The use of these frameworks in the context of relational reflexivity will be further explored in the next paragraph.

Collaborating *What existing frameworks could help inform an understanding of how to practise reflexivity?*

The authenticity criteria (Nolan et al., 2003) were developed as a framework for assessing the quality of participatory, constructivist research by a research centre (ÄldreVäst Sjuhärad, in Sweden), which focused on the care of older people and their carers. They represent a reframing of the authenticity criteria originally proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1989). The criteria of the framework include equal access, enhanced awareness of the position of self and others, and encouraging action by providing the rationale and incentive for change and the means by which to achieve it.

The proposal is that this framework helps to inform practice and decision-making during the entirety of a research study (Nolan et al., 2003); relational reflexivity is also seen as being relevant to all stages of a research/practice development project. The criteria above correspond with concerns around who holds/exercises power and the issue of roles/identities, which are matters of key relevance in relational reflexivity. An example of how the authenticity criteria influenced decision-making in the early stages of the study is outlined below.

Story from practice 2

Originally I was planning that the study would involve care home managers and inspectors, but through dialogue with the supervisory team and wider consultation it became clear that for this study to meet the 'equal access' criteria, it was crucial that it be reconfigured. The study was redesigned to include residents, relatives and staff so that the voice of all stakeholders involved in the inspection process could be heard. Reflexive dialogues, with peers, the supervisory team and co-inquirers served as a setting in which to check the extent to which these quality criteria were being met in the study

While I found the authenticity criteria and relational reflexivity to be helpful in signposting an approach to reflexivity, I was left wondering how they might be brought to life in the context of the study. This led me to considering incorporating the 7 Cs of caring conversations (Dewar, 2011). These were developed through research, including 240 hours of observation, on an acute ward for older people as a framework to guide and enhance compassionate care. The framework has been found to be applicable in other settings where human interactions are important, such as interactions with patients

and families, leadership developments and activities within a transformational learning context, such as action learning (Dewar and Nolan, 2013; Dewar and Sharp, 2013). The ongoing research study is using an appreciative inquiry approach to consider, in collaboration with all those involved in inspection, the experience of inspection in care homes, and relationships and relational capacity are key aspects in the context of inspection (Etienne, 2012) and of particular significance to this study. The 7 Cs framework has informed my own engagement with the research co-inquirers during interviews, group discussions and observation. I have experienced it as a practical guide in my interactions with others in terms of increasing my awareness of self, the power of language and what helps to build connections between people. The focus will now move to the idea of compromise, with an example of how this was practised in the study.

Compromising *What ideas has it been helpful to let go of?*

Using an appreciative approach in the study highlighted to me the potential of (well-crafted) questions to bring about deeper knowing and transformation. I have experienced these perceptive questions first-hand and this led me to wonder if there were certain questions that could open up dialogue around issues of power, participation and purpose in research. The example below illustrates how letting go of one idea made room for a positive alternative.

Story from practice 3

I had hoped that in early group discussions with co-inquirers we would co-create questions and develop a routine whereby we dialogued around some of the questions at the end of each of our discussions. However, as I was meeting with co-inquirers during the recruitment phase, it became apparent that the nature of the study was sometimes difficult to explain on paper or in a one-to-one context – it was through involvement in the study that understanding would come. And so, through these conversations I realised it may be impractical to expect people to develop questions with regard to participation when new to both the concept of reflexivity and to the study itself. We moved to a plan whereby I was supported by the supervisory team in drafting the initial reflexivity questions, with the hope that over time these questions will be revised and reshaped by the co-inquirers

The paper will now move to presenting the questions, inspired by the authenticity criteria and 7 Cs of caring conversations, for use in reflexive dialogues.

Being courageous *What helps in being courageous?*

Alongside my passion for the potential of questions was an awareness of my inexperience in the world of research and academia. I was concerned that creating a framework of questions would suggest that I thought myself knowledgeable with regard to reflexivity. What helped were celebratory conversations with supervisors and peers related to taking risks. The idea to frame the questions for reflexivity under the 7 Cs framework was valuable both in terms of developing the questions but also for giving a sense that the questions were not exposed on their own but were supported and buffered by the framework. The list of questions for reflexive dialogues is listed in Table 1, below. I am viewing this list as a starting point, an open platform from which further discussion can lead to the questions being reshaped.

Table 1: The 7 Cs of caring conversations for reflexivity in research	
The 7 Cs	Questions for reflexive dialogues
Being courageous	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What might help us to feel able to take a risk? • What question is begging to be asked? • What story is longing to be told?
Connecting emotionally	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When did I experience strong emotion? • What if I told others how I was feeling? • How do I feel about being in the group? • How would I like to feel?
Being curious	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What caught our attention? • Where might it be leading us? • When were we most energised? • Who would we like to hear more from? • What assumptions or contradictions have come to light?
Collaborating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With whom do I feel heard? • Who brings out the best in me? • What might help us to come together more? • What ideas/actions would we like to build on? • How do we want to be involved?
Considering other perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How might I express myself in a way that is considerate of others? • How can we ensure that those who aren't present still feel included? • What alternative views might we explore?
Compromising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What would we like to let go of today? • What promises feel possible?
Celebrating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do we value? • What do we do well? • What mistakes might we like to celebrate? • What new ideas would we like to bring forward in to the future?

We now move to the final C – celebrating, where the story ends for now with a brief description of questions used in practice.

Celebrating *What aspects of our reflexive practice would we like to celebrate?*

We have been using this questions framework at the end of our group discussions between care home managers and inspectors to reflect on our time together. ‘Considering other perspectives’ and ‘celebrating’ have been the most popular headings around which people have spoken in terms of their involvement with the group. These have been voiced mainly with respect to how ‘novel’ it is to be sharing a discussion space that is different to their usual working context. Taking some time to reflect on questions related to what there is to celebrate (with respect to our time together) appears further to enhance the celebration. We are in the early days of the use of the questions and my reflections on their use are that we may be able to develop other questions together that may have stronger resonance for the co-inquirers, and the opportunity to test and try these out is also something worth celebrating.

Conclusion

This voyage with relational reflexivity has brought me into unfamiliar waters. I remain enthusiastic about times of self-reflection and also see that it is through dialogue with others that new and fruitful insights can occur. The 7 Cs provide a valuable framework for the development of reflexive questions, exploring the experience of participation for all involved in research and practice development initiatives.

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