

Values, beliefs and attitudes about reflective practice in Australian social work education and practice

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## **Abstract**

Reflective practice and critical reflection are considered crucial to learning and practicing social work. Based on qualitative analysis of interviews with Australian social work practitioners, students, and academics this article offers a description of the strong normative role reflective practice plays in contemporary social work practice. The research was conducted as part of a larger interpretive study into how reflective practice is understood in social work education and practice in Australia. The research found that reflective practice is considered as central to the development of practice wisdom, accountability and the development of self-awareness. The paper discusses the normative role of reflective practice plays for social worker agency. The paper also outlines the formative role social theory plays in the development of critical reflection.

*Keywords:* Reflective practice, critical reflection, social work values, social worker agency

## **Implications Statement**

- Reflective practice and critical reflection can be viewed as important but distinct capabilities in professional social work practice.
- Reflective practice is an important foundation for the emergence of practitioner agency.
- As critical reflection is more likely to develop in social workers who have had the opportunity to learn social theory it is important to ensure social theory is included in foundational social work curricula.

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The social work professional conversation about the role of reflection in practice, at least in the Australian context, began in the 1980s with the publication of Schon's (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner*. It was also part of the widespread take up of reflective practice within Australian higher education (Boud, Cohen, & Walker, 1993). The concept of reflective practice emerged into social work primarily in the mid-to-late 1990s (Boud & Knights, 1996; Fook, 1996a; Fook, 1996b; Fook, 1999; Gould & Taylor, 1996; Tyler, 1996). Over the course of the next decade, reflective practice in Australian social work was further adapted by Jan Fook and Fiona Gardner (2007) into a critical reflection model that combined Schon's (1983) *reflection-on-action* and *reflection-in-action* sequences with a structural and postmodern analysis from early work in the volume *Transforming social work practice: Postmodern critical perspectives* (Pease & Fook, 1999). Critical reflection has become synonymous with this model. Thus, by the 2000s models of reflective practice in the Australian context began to take a more critical social theory orientation and had moved away from an explicit focus on the use of self, or indeed notions of the self that might entail psychodynamic elements. This is a key contrast to models of relationship-based reflective practice models that incorporate psychodynamic understandings of the self (Ferguson, 2018; Ruch, 2002). This does not mean that there is no *use of self* in the predominant models of critical reflection in Australia; rather this aspect is less emphasised by adherents of this model as the models instead focus on social power dynamics, challenging assumptions and closing the gaps between espoused theory and action (Morley, 2008).

This history of the concept is important for understanding the relation between reflective practice and critical reflection with Australian social work specifically (Watts, 2019). Reflective practice is often seen as having been superseded by critical reflection, however, the terms are sometimes used interchangeably. This leads to confusion. In this paper reflective practice refers to the use of personal reflexivity in service to professional purposes (Watts, 2019) and critical reflection refers to the application of critical social theory as an orientation to thinking about practice and social conditions (Watts, 2019).

Somewhat in spite of the confusion about the terms, engagement in reflection has come to be seen as core to the development of effective practitioners (Ferguson, 2018; Watts, 2015). Moreover, reflective practice is also viewed as essential to forms of social work practice that are responsive, accountable and critical of the current conditions for service-users, social work professionals, agencies, and indeed, institutions (Fernando & Bennett, 2019; Morley, 2008). Reflection is also seen as essential to learning from experience, both in education settings and increasingly in workplaces and organisations (Gould, 2007; Hickson, 2011). Despite some criticism of the way in which reflective practice is taught in social work curricula (Newcomb, Burton, & Edwards, 2018; Ixer, 1999), various new practices of incorporating the use of self and self-awareness within a critical reflection framework are emerging (Blakemore & Agllias, 2019; Cleak & Zuchowski, 2019; Staempfli & Fairclough, 2018). With this, also comes the need to teach and assess the process of learning reflective practice and critical reflection.

Norrie, Hammond, D' Avray, Collington, and Fook (2012) suggest that while there is an enormous body of literature concerned with teaching reflective practice, it remains difficult to give an overview of teaching practices that foster and support the development of reflection and critical reflection in learners. Additionally, there is little clarity about reflection at both the theoretical and empirical levels, rather the very openness of the concept is seen as a positive aspect allowing for the development of discipline specific reflective practices (Van Beveren, Roets, Buysse, & Rutten, 2018). This article seeks to contribute to social work disciplinary understandings about the role reflective practice plays in the development of social worker agency. The main argument in this paper is that social work must address the research gap about reflective practice and critical reflection in order to foster effective pedagogies that support the development of reflective practices amongst students.

### **Understanding the role of reflective practice in teaching, learning and practice**

Eaton (2016, p. 161) states "teaching and learning how to be a reflective practitioner are challenging missions." As an educator, reflective practice assessments elicit the most uncertainty from students and remain the hardest assignments to assess (Eaton, 2016). As a result of my own experience

teaching reflective practice in various subject areas, I turned to the extant literature to try to consider what it was that made this the case, and found many different models, varying instruction methods and little conceptual consensus. There is agreement that reflective practice is *good* and that it is an essential capability for social workers that they should both acquire and practice (Cleak, Hawkins, Laughton, & Williams, 2014). Beyond this basic stance, there remains scant consensus on teaching and learning reflective practice in social work. There is, instead, a huge corpus of descriptions that signal the diversity of forms of reflective practice. In view of this, the scope of the literature review in this article has been limited to research on the experience of students learning reflective practice and, to that of educators, teaching reflective practice.

### *Diverse forms of reflective practice*

As a widely cited author in the area of reflective practice and critical reflection, Jan Fook was moved to acknowledge that these concepts, in addition to reflection and reflexivity, "can be theorised in so many different ways... [and] that the whole field can be vastly confusing" (Fook, 2012, p. 3). Fook and Gardner (2007) also acknowledge the complexity of describing reflective practice and critical reflection in a field that encompasses many different disciplines and different social theories. Nevertheless, they suggest that critical reflection is "a process (and theory) for unearthing individually held social assumptions in order to make changes in the social world" (Fook & Gardner, 2007, p. 14). This description of critical reflection accords with other descriptions of reflective practice in a systematic review undertaken by Van Beveren, et al., (2018).

Van Beveren et al., (2018, p. 1) examined empirical research across teacher education, social work and psychology, again finding that there was little conceptual agreement, and stating that "reflection is attributed diverse—and sometimes opposing—educational purposes". Van Beveren et al., (2018) identified three main dimensions present in accounts about teaching and learning reflective practice. These dimensions are *personal*, *interpersonal* and *socio-structural*. The personal dimension encompasses individual professional and personal development, agency, beliefs and attitudes. The *interpersonal level* included practical knowledge with a specific integration of the theory and

practice relevant to the discipline, building awareness and empathic understanding of others. Lastly, the *socio-structural* dimension incorporates practice improvement to serve professional ends, social transformation and reflection as a form of resistance to dominant practices (Van Beveren et al., 2018).

Van Beveren et al., (2018, p. 6) also discuss the tendency for studies included in their review to be explicitly value driven in their approach, and that, there were few studies that were critical of reflective practice or critical reflection *per se*. Moreover, the analysis in this systematic review demonstrated that all three disciplines showed a "preference for critical-emancipatory over technical-rational approaches to reflection" (Van Beveren et al., 2018, p. 6). Critical-emancipatory forms of reflection include questioning assumptions, situating reflection in relation to social structures and power dynamics, using reflection to "develop practices that are sensitive to cultural or socioeconomic differences" (Van Beveren et al., 2018, p. 6). In terms of dimensions critical-emancipatory sits within the *socio-structural* forms of reflection. Lastly, critical-emancipatory forms of reflective practice include an explicit use of critical theory that places a critique of ideology at the core of any analysis (Brookfield, 2009). The Fook and Gardner (2007) model accords with the socio-structural dimension and this model also explicitly contrasts critical-emancipatory reflection to technical-rational reflection. The Fook and Gardner model has been hugely influential in Australian social work (Eaton, 2016; Hickson, 2011, 2013; Morley, 2004).

Norrie et al., (2012, p. 573) found that there was little consensus about the best methods to teach the practice. Moreover, Norrie et al., (2012, p. 573) explain that there were differences in "how the teaching of reflection has been taken up and developed differently across the professions to support their separate legitimisation projects" In social work, learning critical reflection is often situated in subjects concerned with teaching social theory whereas reflective practice is more often taught in the area of skills teaching (Blakemore & Agllias, 2019). This difference may actually reflect confusion about concepts deployed in the area of reflective practice (Watts, 2019). Few empirical studies report on the experience of practitioners directly although Helen Hickson's research is a notable exception. Hickson's research included 35 practitioners and focused on their use of the Fook

and Gardner model of critical reflection for professional development (Hickson, 2011). Hickson (2013) also explored 1. The experience of practitioners' use of reflection and, 2. How they engage with reflection in their practice. Key findings from Hickson (2013) were that few practitioners felt that they had learnt critical reflection at university but instead many considered they had later developed reflective practice in relation to learning how to practice effectively. In sum, while reflective practice and critical reflection have been the focus of a huge literature most studies of reflective practice occurs within higher education settings and focus on students. This paper reports on a study that included the experience of three groups: social work practitioners, students and educators.

### **Method**

This research is part of a larger critical realist study with the aim of understanding the phenomena of reflective practice in Australian social work education (Watts, 2015). This article reports on the data and analysis from a series of qualitative interviews in the third stage of the study. The research question was: *How is reflective practice utilised in learning, teaching, and practicing social work?* The analysis of data from a previous stage had located three key subject-positions that played a role in the dispersion of reflective practice and critical reflection, within the Australian social work education scene from the early 1990s to the contemporary period (Watts, 2015). These subject positions were *practitioners*, *social work students* and *social work educators*. Other identity aspects, such as gender and ethnicity, were not considered relevant within this methodology. All educators in the sample also had experience in field education in social work. Semi-structured interviews with a convenience sample of social work practitioners (5); students (4) and educators (5) were conducted. Demographics for the three groups are included in table 1:

*Table 1: Demographics of participants*

Insert table 1 here

Ethics approval was obtained from Human Ethics Research Committee of Edith Cowan University. Practitioners were recruited via an email to a local agency network comprising 1200 subscribers. Students were recruited via an email to all students enrolled in the Bachelor of Social Work course at my home institution. Educators were recruited via an email to my networks. All participants received information letters and were asked to sign consent forms prior to participating in the interviews. Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions about their learning of, and engagement in, reflective practice. Interviews were transcribed verbatim by a transcription service and these files were returned to all participants for any amendment along with their final consent. Two practitioners and two educators made minor changes to their interview transcript. All fourteen participants consented for their interview to be included in the study.

A thematic analysis approach was chosen for this line of inquiry. As Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79) state there are many forms of thematic analysis but broadly speaking "[t]hematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data." Moreover, the conduct of thematic analysis worked well within the critical realist framework of the study where this line of inquiry was interested in the meaning-making of participants and where the assumption that "language reflects and enables us to articulate meaning and experience" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 85) was adopted. The data analysis included a process of familiarisation with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that entailed reading, listening to the audio and making notes of initial impressions and ideas. Secondly, a process of open coding as a first data reduction process (Kvale, 1996; Saldana, 2012) was undertaken, followed by a secondary analysis process that utilised the categories of values, attitudes and beliefs expressed by participants about reflective practice. Saldana suggests that this schema is " ... appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies , but particularly for those that explore cultural values, identity , intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions.. ." (Saldana, 2012, p. 111). This paper reports on this aspect of the analysis. Table 2 displays the process of thematic analysis undertaken with a sample for each category:



Insert figure 1 here

*Figure 1: Sample of analysis*

## **Findings**

The most striking observation to emerge from the analysis process was that participants' reasons for learning, teaching and utilising reflective practice were strongly normative. In other words, all participants talked about reflective practice as a *good* quality. Using the categories values, attitudes and beliefs to explore this, the analysis resulted in eight main themes. Themes are discussed below with quotes from participants to illustrate their meaning. Themes are represented in figure 2.

Insert figure 2 here

*Figure 2: Values, attitudes and beliefs about reflective practice*

## **Values**

*It's sorting out what your heart's feeling and what your brain's telling you! (Participant nine, practitioner).*

Three main themes with regard to values became evident through the analysis. These are *knowing yourself, empathy for others* and *honesty and integrity*. Participants considered reflective practice as the way they developed and maintained self-awareness as an individual and as a social worker. This self-awareness was in relation to energy levels, emotions and resilience particularly in the context of work that is emotionally challenging and taxing. As this participant suggests

*I find that [its] really important to be doing [reflection] within the interaction of the [encounter] – of the patient and the client themselves and sort of constantly checking back in to what's happening here? What am I feeling? How am I portraying that? What am I looking like outwardly? (Participant five, practitioner).*

Reflection as a route to self-awareness is also linked to one's own history and positioning, including the kinds of assumptions and attitudes that might be shaping the practice encounter:

*That whole issue of, who are they? Why am I having this reaction to this person? Is it them or is it actually something I'm bringing to the interaction? (Participant one, educator).*

Likewise, this reflection as self-awareness was related to the value of empathy for others. Being able to reflect on the circumstances of the other person was seen as important to having empathy or some notion of the experiences of others.

*Putting yourself in somebody else's shoes, that's also I think really important, it's one thing to*

*look back and think oh yeah, or say to somebody ,Well, why did you do that?' But it's alright then saying this happened in the past but you don't actually physically try and, imagine yourself in that position or try and feel how that would've felt...So reflecting but I think there has to be some sort of emotional thing going on in there (Participant seven, student).*

Additionally, the capacity to reflect was also linked to virtues such as honesty and integrity primarily based on social worker willingness to consider the impact of their own history, attitudes, beliefs and experiences in the conduct of their work. Indeed, the value placed on reflection is closely related to the long held idea of the need for social workers to consciously use themselves within their practice:

*...it probably makes social work different to other disciplines because I think it's essential to - for us to be able to recognise in ourselves and in others what's - what's a value judgement, what's not, what's evidence, what's not, how do we develop arguments which are critical and arguments which are convincing and that we feel okay about assessments ... that we [consider how we feel] about giving if we're not reflecting ... on how other forces and influences within ourselves and outside of ourselves actually impact those things (Participant four, practitioner).*

As this participant suggests, reflection:

*...expands my awareness and understanding. It really deepens my empathy and my willingness and openness to have empathy, and it gives me lots of surprises [and] it keeps me curious about my practice. I think it's why I'm still an enthusiastic social worker (Participant six, educator).*

### **Attitudes**

Two main themes emerged with regard to attitudes amongst participants. The first was that reflection delivered a way of being accountable for practice judgements and decisions.

*...I think [reflection] is essential – for us to be able to recognize in ourselves and others what's a value judgement... what is evidence, how do we develop arguments which are critical...and that we feel okay about giving...[because] every single assessment that we do...we have to be able to stand up and have some basis for the decision (Participant four, practitioner).*

The second main attitude centred on the way reflection links to the ability to learn from situations and mistakes:

*I think that reflective practice is thinking about what you 're actually doing or what you 've done and then learning from, not so much it doesn't always have to be mistakes but just learning from you've done or what you see other people doing and then building that into your knowledge (Participant seven, student).*

Participants also held that reflection was key to critical thinking about practice. For example in challenging the status quo for clients, using evidence for decisions, and seeing how things could be done differently. Participants contrasted routine practice with practice informed by reflection and how breaks in routine offer opportunities for considering situations differently:

*[It was) probably a couple of years ago just taking out a student and she - we went to a house and - it was the wrong address or something and then we sat there in the car and we talked about the implications of going to a wrong address and we probably talked for about 20 minutes on what that could mean and how that could unfold for the people there and the implications of leaving a [Government car] ... or all that stuff about what could happen just from simply going and doing something where somebody gave us the wrong address. And she was able to then go on and actually use that - the breakdown of all the things that could happen when you - bung in a load of policy and legal implications and social implications and family implications - around just one of those very simple things that [happen] ...(Participant four, practitioner).*

### **Beliefs**

In terms of the category of belief, three main themes were evident from the analysis. Beliefs in this schema relate to professional capacities and may also includes personal attitudes and values. In this way participants discussed reflective practice and critical reflection as a way of sharing practice wisdom, as key to their conception of professionalism. Participants also considered critical reflection as integrally linked to the discipline's construction of knowledge.

Practice wisdom is often contrasted with more scientifically derived knowledge and when participants discussed it there was a tendency to consider it as part of their intuition and as built from practice experiences. This may include work with clients but might also include all aspects of social work professional life:

*Q: Do you use reflection in your current role (Interviewer)*

*A: ...Yeah all day, every-day I think - it's very hard to separate out your work with your clients and your work with your colleagues or your - or other stakeholders that ... you have linkages with, but lately I have worked in ...Everything falling apart is either an opportunity for growth or a lost opportunity and history to be repeated (Participant three, practitioner)*

There was broad agreement amongst practitioners and educators, more so than students that the use of power and knowledge required on-going reflection. As one participant put it:

*...It's about a whole lot more ... including things like making links between knowledge and power and the ideology and deconstructing those notions and how they impact on the way we practice (Participant ten, educator).*

Lastly, a number of participants, particularly educators, commented on the difference between reflective practice and critical reflection suggesting that critical reflection incorporated a much greater level of social theory. Reflective practice was seen as primarily oriented to observing and learning from practice in relation to the use of self without the connection to wider social theorising:

*I think for me pivotal moments were when I worked at [University A]. . .that whole program*

*was firmly situated and grounded in critical social work theory and so really reconnecting with critical theory then had a significant impact on my ability to work with students... then after that to challenge those values, beliefs and assumptions to make you know well what was implicit in that, what was informing that. So I think just summarise what those significant moments being an educator grounded in critical theory that [it] prompted further reading and exploration of the literature around critical, not just reflection but critical reflection and I think that's the difference. There's lots of literature on reflective practice but for me it was [that] I want to go into critically reflective practice (Participant fourteen, educator)*

In sum, these eight themes illustrate the values, attitudes and beliefs about reflective practice for social work participants in this study. The next section considers these findings about reflective practice and critical reflection in relation to identity, agency and social theorising.

### **Discussion**

This study confirms that reflection for participants in this study is strongly associated with the personal and interpersonal dimensions discussed by Van Beveren et al. (2018). Recall that these dimensions included the development of personal awareness and agency, practical action and the development of empathic understanding. This demonstrates the strongly normative function reflection has for practitioners, students, and educators. The capacity to engage in reflection was considered central to developing both self-knowledge, for taking decisions and engaging in actions that can be accounted for. Reflective practice was thus synonymous with *good* practice. Moreover, the capacity to reflect and reason about our practice is related to our capacity for action; connected to the practical need for understanding and action arising from human necessitation (Korsgaard, 2009). Human necessitation refers to the "... ongoing struggle for integrity, the struggle for psychic unity, the struggle to be, in the face of psychic complexity, a single unified agent" (Korsgaard, 2009, p. 3). Korsgaard is not addressing human necessitation, or its role in developing agency, specifically for social work, but she does make a case about the role of reflection in the emergence of human normativity generally (Korsgaard, 1996) which is helpful.

In this formulation reflection can be perceived as part of an individual's practical identity (Korsgaard, 1996). Taking this idea up Laden (2001) outlines that practical identities have both a personal and social side. The personal side is that which situates us via our reciprocal relations with others—the partner of, the sister or brother of— all of which denote our particularity as individuals embedded in relationships specific to our circumstances. The social side is concerned with the way

in which we are positioned socially across a range of socially salient structures; these might be our membership in a profession such as social work, class, gender, ethnicity and culture for instance. The social is often characterised by a lack of reciprocity; we might be positioned in ways we do not choose for instance (Laden, 2001). Our practical identities, and our engagement in reflection is, therefore, key to taking decisions and initiating actions in our lives, and this extends into our professional lives. Ultimately this, for Korsgaard at least, points to the moral foundations of human reason and action—as values emerge from our identities as *beings* embedded in communities and social relationships. We reflect in order to contend with the need to take actions and also to consider the consequences of our actions. Thus reflection becomes intimately tied to one's self-constitution and agency (Korsgaard, 2009; see also Archer, 2000).

Consistent with the literature cited previously, this study found that critical reflection, as opposed to reflection *per se*, is more associated with structural analyses of professional knowledge and social conditions. This is the dimension of socio-structural reflection described as “relating one's practice to socio-political, ethical and cultural contexts and analyzing the structural power relations operating...” (Van Beveren et al., 2018, p. 9). This movement to critical reflection could be seen primarily amongst educator-participants. There are a number of reasons why that might be the case. First, educators are more likely to have undertaken advanced forms of study that often involve learning different epistemological stances to knowledge. Secondly, educators are expected to have a wide range of theoretical resources for explaining social phenomena in their teaching and research activities. Thirdly, educators are often actively engaged in using theoretical resources to make connections to practice for research and, in social work at least, practicum supervision and teaching. This particularity of educator experience is illustrated well by Fook (1996a) where she describes her own process of moving beyond reflection after a significant engagement with social theory. As Fook (1996a, p. 3) recalls “the breakthrough came when I began to encounter the writings of feminist post-structural theorists...[this] seemed to provide a theoretical connection [to] learning through experience”. Indeed, Fook's model would become known as a critical reflection model for social work precisely because it combines Schon's reflection-on-practice with specific forms of

social theory: critical, feminist and post-structuralist (Fook & Askeland, 2006; see also Hodgson & Watts, 2017). If the social work profession wishes to extend student engagement in critical reflection, beyond reflective practice, we need a curriculum capable of the kind of theoretical extensions enjoyed by educators. The findings here challenge the notion that a focus on practice is all that is needed for the development of skills in critical reflection, instead it is clear that foundational subjects in social theory and critical thinking also play a significant role in developing the ability of students to engage in systematic of *critical* reflection. Moreover, the links between social theory as a reflection on social conditions, and as a way to contribute to social transformation, are also laid bare as integral to the take up of the socio-cultural dimensions of reflection, as described by Van Beveren et al (2018).

### **Limitations**

This paper has presented an aspect of the analysis of the interview data and has focused specifically on exploring the participants values, attitudes and beliefs about reflective practice. Questions asked of participants focused primarily on reflective practice and did not specifically ask respondents to discuss the more contemporary term *critical reflection*. Participants were recruited on the basis of their subject position as practitioner, educator or student and this does not address other salient identity factors such as gender or ethnicity. Further research could address these limitations in addition to exploring the relationship between critical reflection and engagement in learning social theory more broadly.

### **Conclusion**

This study set out to better understand the way in which social work students, practitioners and educators utilise reflective practice in learning, teaching and practicing social work. The study identified that reflection on practice has a strong connection to the agency of social workers and that the ability to engage in reflection is considered to be widely normative. Being able to engage in reflection continues to be the hallmark of *good* social work practice. This is not surprising but it provides further support for a continued emphasis on the development of reflective skills within

social work education. This study lends strength to the idea that reflective practice and critical reflection constitute different operations of analysis and thinking. Learning and practicing critical reflection would be enhanced by student engagement in learning diverse forms of social theory that can be compared and contrasted. This would develop thinking skills that can be used to understand and contest the contemporary conditions within which social work operates. Without a curriculum capable of fostering this kind of critical thinking, practices of critical reflection may not achieve their emancipatory potential for social change.

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Table 1: Demographics of participants

|                                      | Practitioners   | Students (BSW)   | Educators   |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|---|
| Number of participants               | 5   | 4  | 5   |
| Gender                               | Female  | 3 female, 1 male   | Female  |
| Length of time in practice/educators | 2 new graduates; 3 with an average 7 years' experience. | Two already working in human services field.                       | Data not collected on length of time in practice or in Social work education. |
| Fields of practice                   | Health, justice, aged care and child protection.        | N/A  | N/A   |
| Year in course                       | N/A   | 2 first year students, 1 second year, 1 third year (pre-placement) | N/A   |
| Location                             | Western Australia.                                      | Western Australia.   | 1 x Qld; 1 x SA, 3 x WA.  |

Figure 1: Sample of analysis

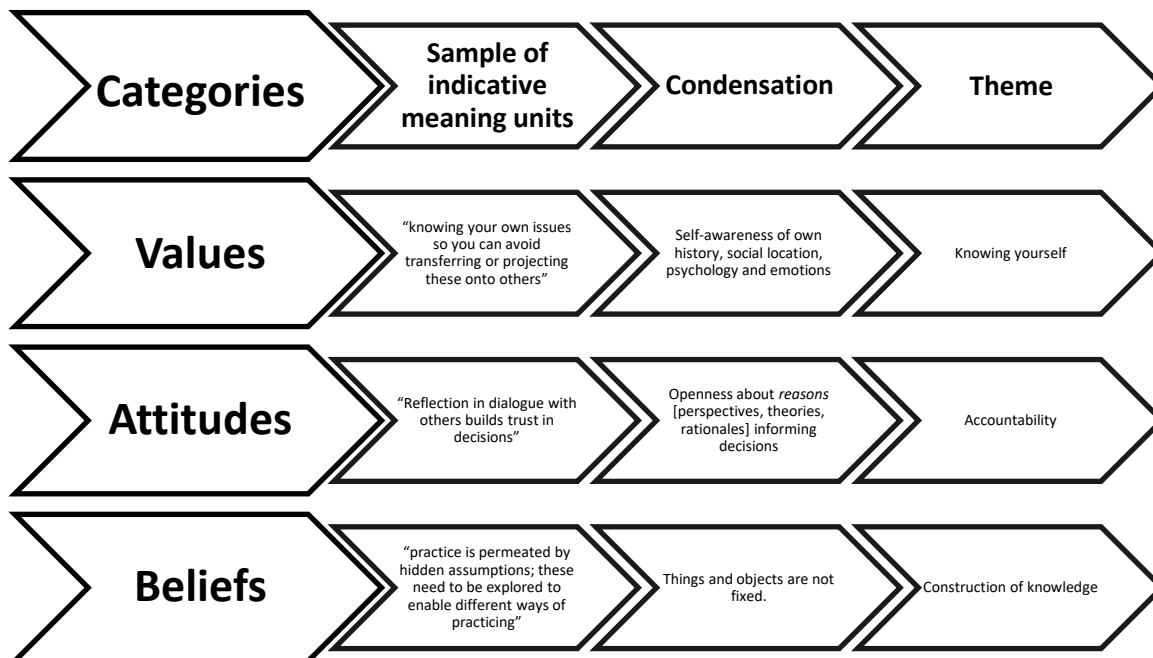


Figure 2: Values, attitudes and beliefs about reflective practice

