

# “On Becoming a Critically Reflexive Practitioner” Redux: What Does It Mean to Be Reflexive?

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First, I would like to thank the *Journal of Management Education* Editors and Associate Editors for selecting my article for the Lasting Impact Award—I am truly honored. To be offered the opportunity to write about how my thinking has evolved since 2004 is also a great opportunity. I am passionate about reflexivity—it plays through my teaching, research, writing, and life, and so to have colleagues who have also found the ideas interesting and useful is “gobsmacking” (to use British slang for “astounding”)!

Back in 2004, there was very little work around reflexivity in Organization and Management Studies; I came into the topic when completing my PhD, through work in sociology, anthropology, and philosophy. It struck me at the time that reflexivity was not an abstract social science concept, but had very real and important implications for leaders and managers in organizations. Over time, this belief has only strengthened. The plethora of corporate and leadership scandals I referred to in 2004 seem even more pronounced today: 14 employee suicides in 2010 at the Foxconn plant in China attributed to labor abuses; the avoidable deaths of babies and a mother at Furness Hospital in the United Kingdom between 2004 and 2011 and the alleged cover-up<sup>1</sup>; the 2015 Fundão Dam collapse in Minas Gerais, Brazil, that led to 19 deaths and a major environmental disaster, attributed to ongoing negligence by mining company officials.<sup>2</sup> . . . Such scandals are often linked to irresponsible decision making, poor workplace relationships, and—I believe—a lack of

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reflexivity on the part of managers. So what can reflexivity offer and what impact can we have as educators? I offer an update on the 2004 article and some ideas for going forward.

## Moving on From 2004 to 2016

One of my major ongoing interests is the relationship between reflexivity and ethics. I am now even more convinced that reflexivity offers a way of foregrounding our moral and ethical responsibility for people and for the world around us, and that an important question for students, educators, managers, and leaders to discuss is: *What does it mean to BE reflexive?*

In the original article, I defined critically reflexive practice as embracing “subjective understandings of reality as a basis for thinking more critically about the impact of our assumptions, values, and actions on others” (Cunliffe, 2004, p. 407). While this is still relevant, I now define reflexivity as follows:

Questioning what we, and others, might be taking for granted—what is being said and not said—and examining the impact this has or might have.

This means examining our own assumptions, decisions, actions, interactions, and the assumptions underpinning organizational policies and practices and the intended and potentially unintended impact. For example, for over a decade British banks offered payment protection insurance (PPI) designed to help customers repay loans and debts in the event of job loss, illness, and so on. This sounds like responsible customer service, yes? But managers also imposed high sales targets on staff to “encourage” them to sell PPI, and penalties were imposed if targets were not reached. Employees were therefore pressured into selling PPI insurance to customers who didn’t need it. No one addressed the morality or the impact of this profitable (for the bank) practice, and after a 2005-2006 Financial Services Authority investigation, a number of banks were fined and are now compensating many customers.<sup>3</sup> So reflexivity works at two levels—being *self-reflexive* about our own beliefs, values, and so on, and the nature of our relationships with others, what we say, and how we treat them (Cunliffe, 2014), and being *critically reflexive* about organizational practices, policies, social structures, and knowledge bases. Both self- and critical-reflexivity are important in working toward ethical, responsive, and responsible organizations.

I’ve also built on the original three questions (existential, relational, and praxis; Cunliffe, 2004, p. 408) I posed by refining the idea of leaders and managers as relational, reflexive, and moral practitioners (Cunliffe, 2009, 2014; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015). This was

heavily influenced by one of my own moments of “being struck” (Cunliffe, 2004, p. 410). Back in 1994, I read John Shotter’s book *Conversational Realities*. John wrote,

I shall take it that the basic practical moral problem in life is not what *to do* but [who] *to be* . . .” (Shotter, 1993, p. 118)<sup>4</sup>

As academics, managers, and students, we spend a lot of time focusing on *what to do*, the techniques, theories, models we can apply to be more effective and efficient. But what if we begin to think about *who to be*? If we can figure out what it means *to be* a good, ethical, moral person in a good, ethical, and just organization (Ricoeur, 1992), then *what to do* may look different. Engaging in this type of discussion involves being both self- and critical reflexivity. I believe these are important questions to discuss in leadership and management courses, and in organizations.

In thinking about what it means *to be* reflexive, I’ve moved more deeply from a subjectivist to an intersubjective ontology: a way of thinking about who we are in the world that is based on the belief that we are not separate individuals (entities) but we are always in relation with others—with particular persons, communities, history, culture, language, and so on. Much of the work we do in Organization and Management Studies is based on an objectivist ontology—a social world that exists out there independently from us that we can develop knowledge about: knowledge that is accurate, testable, and predictive (Cunliffe, 2011). We can then get practitioners to apply that knowledge (based on “rational” and “neutral” techniques, theories, and models), as a means of making themselves and their organizations more efficient and effective. A subjectivist ontology, as I outlined in the original article, is based on the assumptions that we shape our social and organizational worlds in our everyday conversations and actions. As educators we can help our students explore how language is constitutive and therefore important in shaping understanding, culture, strategy, and any other important aspect of being in an organization. But subjectivism still focuses on individuals and their multiple and diverse interpretations.

Intersubjectivity accepts that we are never wholly separate, that we are who we are because of our living and lived relationships with others. As Ricoeur (1992) says, self “implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other, that instead one passes into the other” (p. 3). The class activity (Cunliffe, 2004, pp. 415-417) is a nice illustration of intersubjectivity, but what I didn’t quite grasp at the time was that intersubjectivity is not just about two or more individuals interacting (their intertwined activities)—that I influence you and vice versa—but it is more

crucially about recognizing that we are always in relation *with* others—we influence each other in responsive and often tacit ways. I use “with” deliberately: relationship “to” implies a connection between separate entities or individuals, whereas “with” implies a more deeply embedded, embodied, and mutual relationship. From an intersubjective perspective, organizations are communities of people (not objective structures and systems) and *relationships are important!* Relational and reflexive leaders see people “not as objects to be manipulated but as human beings-in-relation with themselves” (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011, p. 1431). Holding intersubjective assumptions means focusing on the nature of our living relationships with others, not on relationship mechanisms or theories or language.

Embracing intersubjectivity, relationality, and reflexivity brings a moral responsibility to

- Think about “we” not “I” in our relationships and responsibility for the world around us
- Recognize the uniqueness of others
- Treat others with solicitude and respect
- Treat people as irreplaceable, not as a means to an end as we so often do in organizations
- Ask the question, “For what and to whom are we accountable?”, as members of business schools and other organizations
- Articulate the role and responsibility of organizations in the community

As one of the US Airport Federal Security Directors in our leadership study commented,

Respect . . . for whatever reason they are in the business they are in, it does not change the human being. You have to have that respect for each other. . . . I have my assistant for the security guards at the screening. He is a man with a heart. (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011, p. 1433)

In other words, he is not a man who is only concerned with following the rules and regulations, he is also respectful and considerate of people as they go through the security process. This is relationality.

For the purpose of writing this response, I checked citations of the 2004 article. Interestingly, they span business studies, education, communication, health and social work studies, public administration, and geography. The common thread is the need to think more critically and to act in ethical ways. I recall, going through the review process, that the reviewers perceived the article as a “critical management” piece, but the ideas have been developed by

both CMS and non-CMS scholars, and have been taken forward in relation to teaching, learning, research, and practice. For example, Broussine and Ahmad (2012) argue that reflexivity and a reflexive pedagogy are of particular importance to public sector managers as they deal with complex political and economic demands and constraints. They believe that as educators we need to facilitate democratic, dialogic, and interactive spaces for practitioners to become more reflexive—something I endeavor to do in my own teaching. Solitander, Fougère, Sobczak, and Herlin (2012) challenge us to be reflexive about our own practices as educators in relation to the Principles of Responsible Management Education. Eriksen (2012) has applied practical reflexivity in his MBA courses to help students become more “authentic” or self-aware, and Corlett (2012) examines the role of “being struck” and reflexivity in research conversations. Finally, More and Koning (2016)—a consultant and an academic—draw on the ideas of intersubjectivity, reflexivity, and relationality to explore the identity work and sensemaking of coaches. The need to be reflexive crosses disciplinary, occupational, and theory/practice boundaries.

### Going Forward . . .

In 2004, I offered three resources: a sense-making map (Cunliffe, 2004, Figure 1), a class activity, and reflexive journals. I still use journals because they are incredibly useful in terms of helping students understand the difference between reflection and reflexivity and how to *be* reflexive. Between 2006 and 2011, I taught the final capstone course, “Executive Leadership,” in a conventional U.S. Executive MBA program. I designed the course around the idea of leadership as a relational, reflexive, and moral practice (see Cunliffe, 2009, for an overview). The final assessment was a paper based on the journal format: *Self as Leader—A Critical and Self-Reflexive Assessment*. But I began the course by engaging students in debate around the key ontological question: “What is the nature of social and organizational realities and what does it mean to be human in the world?” Isn’t this an essential question for any leader to address? For if I see the world as an objectivist then I’m managing structures, systems, and human assets or resources. If I see the world from a subjectivist perspective, I manage people with different interpretations of situations, and I am careful about the language I use because it shapes “realities.” If I believe in intersubjectivity, then I am *care-ful* about relationships with people—who are human beings—and skillfully attuned and responsive to what is happening around me.

Reflexivity also has implications for how we teach ethics. From an intersubjective perspective, ethics are both institutional and interpersonal (Ricoeur, 1992) because they are not just about having codes of practice,

training, ethical procedures in place. Ethics is also about how we relate with and treat others every day. Critical-reflexivity enables us to examine the potentially unintended ethical consequences of institutional policies and practices (as in the PPI example), while self-reflexivity draws attention to interpersonal ethics and our relationships with others (see Cunliffe, 2014, for a more detailed explanation).

Being reflexive has additional implications for me. I teach research philosophy and qualitative research methods to postgraduate students, where understanding reflexivity and what it means to be reflexive are also central issues. A critically reflexive researcher questions the assumptions underpinning knowledge claims and how they influence research design, research practice, theory generation, and how we write our research accounts (Cunliffe, 2011). A self-reflexive researcher examines the nature of her/his relationship with research participants, “How our presence influences and/or changes people and practices and how their presence influences us—intentionally or otherwise” (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013, p. 365). Reflexive research can reveal complexities and richer descriptions.

To answer the question I began with, “What does it mean to *be* reflexive?”, *being* reflexive is about having “a heart,” it is not a technique but a way of being in relation with others that brings with it moral and ethical considerations. It requires us to be solicitous and respectful of differences. Being reflexive doesn’t give us definitive answers to problems but highlights the need to engage in critical questioning and deeper debate around taken-for-granted issues that have potential moral and ethical implications: A reflexive debate I believe we should be engaging in as academics, researchers, students, leaders, and managers.

## Notes

1. See <http://www.bbc.com/news/health-31699607>
2. See <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-29/bhp-samarco-dam-collapse-brazil-linked-to-ramping-up-production/7201022>
3. See <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2011/may/05/how-ppi-scandal-unfolded>
4. I have changed the original “what” to “who.”

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