

COMMENTARY

Reflection in I-O psychology: Herding sheep

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Modelling a process of reflection and reflexivity, Hyland (2023) has demonstrated a means by which I-O psychology can better produce innovative solutions for complex, multicausal, adaptive problems. Reflection and reflexivity call for identification of biases, assumptions, evaluation of Outcome, and adjustment of action. We agree that philosophy of science provides a systematic framework and that the challenge to consider what future we envision is timely. Nearly 50 years ago, Kerr's (1975) now classic article pointed out the folly of rewarding A while hoping for B. If, as a discipline and profession, we are to realize the potential of I-O psychology to address complex human issues then perhaps this is the time to do something other than more of A. We agree that reflection and reflexivity are fit for that purpose and need to be embedded in curricula. As educators and practitioners, our experience is that it not only can be incorporated into academic and professional preparation, but that doing so pays dividends.

A common theme in the literature on critical reflection and reflexivity is uncovering assumptions: both those upon which we act but of which we are unaware and assumptions to which we subscribe but have not critically examined and simply accepted as some “given truth.” For example, in Argyris's (1977) double-loop learning, one might seek not only to identify what went wrong (e.g., well-being program systematically excluded junior staff on the assumption that well-being interventions were most relevant to those in danger of burnout after several years of service) that led to an undesirable outcome (e.g., increased turnover), but also how you came to be in that situation in the first place (e.g., well-being program instituted to remedy negative impact of poorly implemented restructure, which challenged the “given truth” that the organization was well run.) In Checkland's (1981) systemic approach to the process of inquiry, a similarly useful perspective was developed through his experiences in heavy industry and the realization of the inapplicability of theoretical assumptions of simple, closed systems. This resulted in a framework for ongoing dynamic response in the problem and utilized partnership with stakeholders.

Hyland notes that though many other professions and even sectors of psychology have engaged with both reflection and reflexivity; I-O psychology has not. This despite the skill of reflection appearing in the *Revised Competency Benchmarks in Professional Psychology* (APA, 2012) and in the core competencies required of all registered psychologists in Aotearoa New Zealand (New Zealand Psychologists Board, 2018). Hyland notes it not being part of the I-O curriculum in the U.S., and similarly, it is not typically addressed in professional preparation programs in either Australia or New Zealand. It is certainly not in I-O programs in which the emphasis is typically on research methods and our empirically derived, if quite narrowly applicable, knowledge base. Some therapeutically oriented programs both within and more often outside psychology, in which students are being trained to engage with clients individually or in small therapeutic

groups, do address reflection to some degree. This is often in relation to the concept of self as instrument and potentially as something that might occur in supervision. In our experience however, this does not generally occur in training for a career in research or in I-O professional practice. It almost seems as if our stubborn privileging of the positivistic, or more “radically” postpositivistic perspective, renders the designer of the research or the doggedly empirical I-O practitioner to be above considerations of the potential influence of their own perceptual and interpretational filters. We agree with Hyland that we persist with this at the peril of our own irrelevance.

One author of this commentary first systematically used reflection in I-O research in order to solve a problem that unhappily emerged in doctoral research (Kennedy, 1996). The research documented a year-long intervention in a small NGO that though previously successful had become highly dysfunctional. The intended methodologies could not be used, and a novel solution was required. Checkland’s systemic approach to the process of inquiry and other thinking from reflective practice, especially Argyris (1977) and Schön (1987), was critical to designing both the successful intervention work and the research. The experienced utility of that reflective work simultaneously in research and practice prompted introduction of this skill in senior undergraduate and honors teaching and research training, including I-O students. Although many students initially found the main assigned task of keeping a reflective log tiresome, over the course of a semester with regular feedback, attitude and engagement shifted as students experienced the benefit.

Reflection for students often focuses on thinking about thinking, whereas internship brings the addition of client work and further reflection opportunities. Together, all three authors have taught critical reflection as a vital skill for a wide range of psychology interns, including those in I-O roles. Although learning the skills of critical reflection comes easily to some students, for the majority it is a challenging task that is fundamentally different from what they have come to experience as “normal” academic expectations and typically, contrary to their experience of the culture and behavioural norms of I-O psychology internship settings. Often therefore, the first task is to address the mental resistance to the very idea of doing one’s own thinking about what is being observed, experienced, and applied, in addition to the more familiar analysing and synthesizing of theory and research. This then needs to be expanded into the sometimes delicate work of supporting students to identify and confront their own assumptions and biases. Together, we have successfully incorporated teaching the development of reflective skills with intern psychologists, including those specializing in I-O psychology.

In our experience, learning the skill of critical reflection requires scaffolding, with layering of direct teaching, engagement with suitable literature (e.g., Schön, 1987), modelling, and individual feedback delivered with patience and encouragement. Students who have specialized in I-O psychology and reached internship are well-trained in positivistic, hypothetico-deductive, straight-jacketed academic thinking, and engaging with a critical reflective mindset is both disconcerting and difficult. This is not to say that analytical thinking is without value; indeed, we must not throw out any babies with bathwater, but it is not sufficient for safe, ethical, and competent practice. On the contrary, students with a clear grasp of basics in the field such as experimental psychology and systems thinking prove capable of outstanding reflective thinking once they grasp the intent and see for themselves how to process material in a different way and how fundamental critical reflection is for integrating all of the practice competencies linked to theory and evidence.

It has been our experience, including collectively over 200 interns, that an effective way of teaching reflection is having students make weekly entries in a reflective log and then teaching for mastery by successive approximation. By this we mean, encourage students to let go of perfectionistic tendencies to produce an “A+ reflection” on the first try and just begin; to begin with a willingness to be initially inexpert and an expectation to improve over time, reaching a level of competence, if not mastery, by graduation. Often the beginning looks like a description or diary entry; students may find it helpful to try out different models such as Gibbs reflective cycle

(Gibbs, 1988) or the three stage approach (Bannigan & Moores, 2009) to find one that is a good fit for them and their particular work. It is important for teachers/supervisors to provide feedback regularly, focused on the process of reflection as distinct from the content and identifying a “next step” in deepening reflection. This is resource intensive at the beginning but becomes less so as students begin to develop more reflective skill. For some interns, brief video consultations appear to be a more efficacious route of input than is written feedback, and this should be accommodated as the skill is developed differently by every individual.

It is perhaps important to note that the instructors need, themselves, to be skilled in reflection and skilled in seeing how to help students find their own way to think reflectively. An additional caveat is that the climate for trust in the teaching context will have a critical bearing on the authenticity of reflection. For example, the I-O intern who fears being belittled for not having their game face confidently expressed will write what they believe their instructor expects and thus fail to explore either areas for improvement or discover unexpected areas of strength. However, with diligent effort and regular use the skill of reflection brings appreciation for its efficacy, and we often hear from alumni that they have continued making regular entries in their reflective log in their first or early years of practice and/or that they write entries when they encounter a novel, challenging situation.

We offer two recent examples of intern psychologists in I-O roles below.

1. The psychologist intern in a large government institution was given charge of developing a program that taught standardized observation and reporting of behavior to employee groups. The program goals were well researched and based on sound principles. However, the psychologist intern-led training sessions were often characterized by repetitious rote instruction and, unsurprisingly, participant responses that lacked thoughtful insight. Reflection on observed video of the sessions, along with consideration of the purpose and goals of the trainings in comparison with what was being accomplished, resulted in changes of approach. The shift of approach incorporated a much more reflexive response to participants, modelling the skill that was being taught and bringing greater engagement and deeper learning.
2. A psychologist intern in a large customer service institution was given charge of opening a new service site with the physical plant designed quite differently than other sites from which employees would be transferring. The design was based on research and evidence for best practice in customer service. However, the employees were not involved in the creation of the customer-facing design. Nor were the employees involved in the planning of the employee areas that were designed, even though these were quite significantly smaller and curtailed in comparison to previously used physical plants. Through discussion of the project plan, reflection was encouraged on the effects of the new design on the employees rather than only on the customers. This had not been considered by either the I-O psychologist intern nor by others of the project leaders. The reflection brought about a much more employee-inclusive component to the process and perhaps a more successful transition to use of the new service site model.

It may be that the field of I-O psychology is in a stage of developmental process that requires broader perspective taking in order to then engage again in further refinements. Societal focus on diversity and culture in this time of the Fourth Industrial Revolution brings challenges that have perhaps not been fully considered since Wundt’s writings of the *Völkerpsychologie* (Wong, 2009). It may be time to circle back around to his considerations of community, culture, sociology, religion, linguistics, physiology, and philosophy as being multiple threads of psychology. With our quest for knowledge over the years in each of these areas since then, we are now in a new position of organizing our thinking to benefit those with whom we work. However, like Wundt, we cannot do this without significant, ongoing, and critical reflection on the problems at hand. This is most

especially true in I-O psychology where these multiple threads intersect in ever-more-complex patterns with globally based organizations drawing employees and customers from all over the world to share in concerted efforts.

The examples above required such reflection. Because the intern psychologists involved had been regularly engaged in reflective exercise, they were willing and able to access and utilize this thinking when supervision posed questions requiring this level of thinking. In Example A, the organization's employees were accustomed to acting rapidly and authoritatively, making judgment calls that were seldom questioned. Learning to conduct an assessment informed by their observations that could be described within a frame that brought similar conclusions from others, requiring a pause in the workflow for reflective consideration. Though the intern psychologist identified that initially the results of the training did not quite meet expectations of the outcomes hoped for, it was not until careful reflection of the employee's general practice had occurred in context with the training that useful instructive connections could be made. In the new context, a shift in approach could successfully be made to better present the information and elicit the employee's participative thinking and learning.

In Example B, the intern psychologist had also constructed a very good plan for the organizational change that was planned, with support from the literature, well within the context of the organizational values for providing best customer service and excellent resources for informing and influencing employees. However, the organizational values were assumed to supersede and override the established employee culture, which flourished in a setting that provided both individual workspace and space for socializing with one another. Assessment of the effects on employee culture within a curtailed employee space had not occurred to the project leaders as an important consideration. When this was questioned in supervision, the intern psychologist was able to readily complete substantive reflection upon the dichotomy of organizational philosophy being applied to customer and employee, and to follow up in appropriate ways to avoid what might have developed into a significant difficulty.

Ironically, over the last 30 years, research on teaching reflection would not rate among the most publishable research in I-O psychology. The funding model that has prevailed in our sector of professional training has not always rewarded research, and university ethics committees have become highly sensitized to research proposals in which current students are the population of interest. We need to unlock these mutually negatively reinforcing priorities of editorial panels, funders, and ethics committees, and turn the focus of some of our very considerable research expertise to reflexive analysis and to investigating best practice in reflection in I-O psychology and its teaching.

To return to Hyland's reference to Isaiah and sheep going astray, in Aotearoa New Zealand, our very many sheep of the woolly variety are typically herded over the hills by very energetic sheep dogs. Without each other, the sheep are vulnerable. But to be an effective flock, each must retain its own autonomy. The herding dogs must work simultaneously in obedience to their master, cooperation with each other, and with sufficient independent mindedness to solve the endlessly novel problems presented by the sheep, each intent on pleasing itself or mindlessly ending up trapped in a gully. And of course, without the sheep, the herding dog has no job. Perhaps as both discipline and profession, we are in a Kuhnian "crisis" phase, ripe for revolution and the emergence of a new paradigm (Kuhn, 1970) to produce innovative ways of improving complex, dynamic problematic situations.

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