

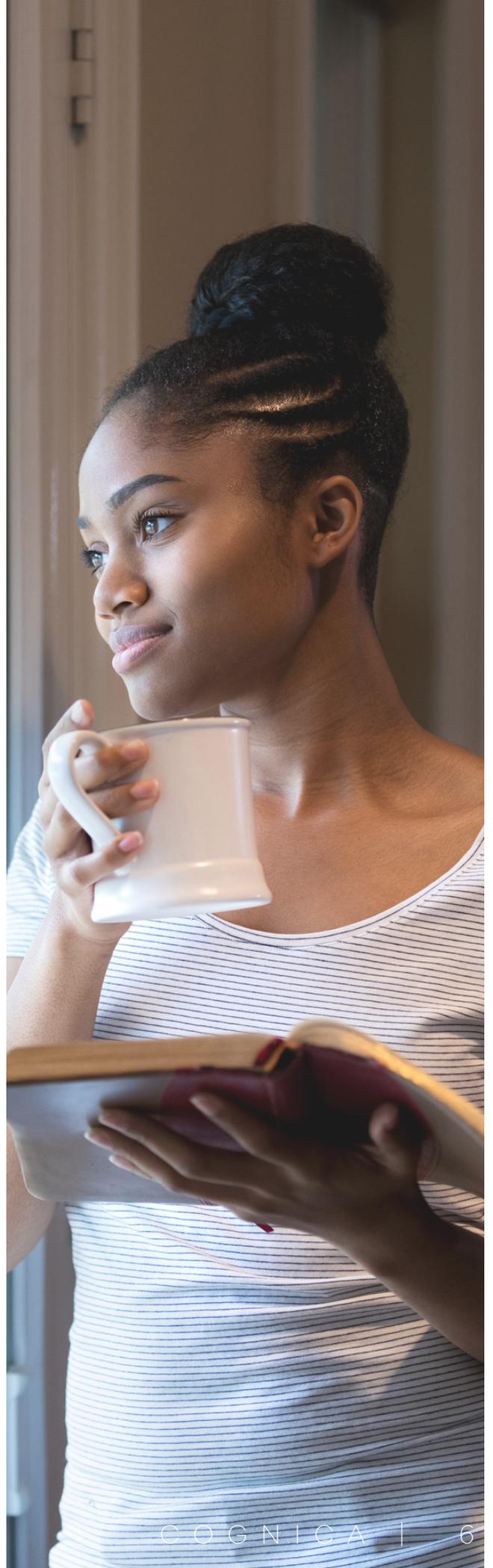
Therapeutic Reflections

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As fall ends and we prepare for the holidays, I find myself reflecting upon what I have achieved and what has dropped by the wayside. These past 12 months have brought me (and I am sure many of us) face to face with challenges both personal and professional in nature. How have I done? How do I determine this – do I sit in judgment of myself, or let in the positive and the negative equally, do I sift through the highlights and lowlights? Do I compare myself to the year before? Do we compare ourselves to other family members, colleagues, friends, or clients? Depending on what I do my perspective changes. In my reflections on my twelve past months, I notice myself physically, emotionally, and cognitively reacting in different ways as I reflect from these various perspectives.

These questions have brought me to reflect on reflection itself. On its purpose, its use in therapy, with my clients and with myself. These past months I consciously made the effort to question my thoughts and emotions and understanding of myself and those I interact with personally and professionally.



I have had a demanding year, as most of us have. I have worked a lot, tried a lot of new things, and challenged myself in many ways from a personal and professional perspective. I have spent a lot of time reflecting on meaning and how we make meaning. Meaning-making is defined by how we navigate our worlds, how we understand ourselves and others, learn and grow and adapt (McNamee, 2004; Gergen 2001, 2015). Meaning-making in life experience is built upon the role of systems in our understanding of self and those we interact with. From our family roots stem comes forth our interpretation, social perspective, cultural and emotional location, how we listen, hear, and interpret what is said, and how and when this varies (Dixon, & Chiang, 2019; McCorquodale & Kinsella, 2015; Stedmon & Dallos, 2009).

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As we work with clients, we help them co-create a new narrative and create more productive, balanced and open channels of communication with the world they live in. Hearing with new ears. To do this we as therapists, counsellors and or psychotherapists need to be reflective and reflexive; take a non-expert stance and create space for cross-cultural dialogues with clients (Dixon & Chiang, 2019, p.17), always moving forward to improve our understanding and that of the client. It is in this process that we learn and grow. The pandemic of the past two years has provided a wonderful opportunity to navigate new ways of reaching others and opening up communication for me with my clients and also with other practitioners. I would like to share some of that with you.

I did some reading and research over the past months, looking at meaning-making and reflectivity. I work with victims of criminal violence, and the BIPOC and LGBTQ+ communities and I felt a need to resource myself and deepen my learning on how these particular communities were affected by the pandemic and how I could better serve them. A quick google scholar search using Covid-19 and reflective practice in psychotherapy as query resulted in 25,900 results; 17,200 since 2021 – so I see there has been a lot of reflection going on around the world from many theoretical approaches – from teaching and supervising mental health students by using reflective processes to navigate teletherapy, self-care for clients and therapists through to the



impacts on the health care system and workplaces during the time of the pandemic, and more. These articles cover a range of topics on mental health issues, including a broad range of populations, settings, cultures, family backgrounds, and ages. Apparently, we have all needed to find a way to make meaning of our lives through reflection and our ongoing processing of this pandemic and what it has engendered in us and the world around us.

We have all heard, read or seen first-hand the effect of the Covid pandemic on families and couples and the balancing act of computer sharing (should we even have one) and work and education and daily life under one roof with the loss of steady support structures such as daycare, school or sports. It feels like cabin fever in colder climes – but all year long for two years and counting. How can we as therapists help our clients? I have found a road in that has worked for me. It has strengthened my practice and connected me to myself, my thoughts, family, friends, colleagues, and clients. I have deepened my use of reflective practice for my self-benefit and hopefully, for my clients.

I started with Schön (1987, 2017) and his idea of reflective practice and reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Schön defines reflective practice as the practice by which professionals become aware of their implicit knowledge base and learn from their experience. I believe this reflection as therapists typically encompasses our experiences on many levels: our self-awareness of bodily sensations and emotions and the attentional focus on memories, life experiences and cognitions, as well as our ethical, cultural and family system experiences.

Reflection in action is to reflect on behaviour as it happens, whereas Reflection on action is reflecting after the event, to review, analyze, and evaluate the situation/session. For many, this is referred to as our reflexive thought process (Curry, Epley, 2020; Dixon, Chiang 2019;

Finlay, 2017; Schön, 1987). Our awareness in the moment and upon the past moment with our clients and within ourselves; our reflective and reflexive practice is invaluable within our practice and for our clients' journeys (Retrieved From:

<https://web2.uvcs.uvic.ca/courses/csafety/mod2/resource.htm>).

As I sat with my own reactions to the situation I was living in and the reactions of those I serve, I found the words of McBride et al. (2020) ran through me: there is a need for patient and therapist to cohabit the space. The curiosity of my clients in asking how I was doing was becoming more prevalent – especially at the onset of health regulations. The questions have changed to incorporate levels of frustration, anxiety, and being fed up. These common themes within the client sessions point to and reflect some of my own thoughts on what they are going through and how those fit with my reality – and the intersectionality between us. This in-action reflection allows me to help them deepen their self-understanding. Triggers from isolation and solitude activate past traumas. Many clients downplay their situations: “can’t complain”, “could be worse”, or they don’t allow themselves the full range of positive feelings. Slowing down and embodying the emotions has helped clients give themselves permission to feel whatever that may be – happy sad etc (McBride et al. 2020). Slowing down, allowing in.

The term stop gap is seen as a way to allow ourselves to stop, take a risk and reimagine what we think we know; it’s a way of opening space and seeing with fresh eyes, curiosity and wondering what else is out there – outside of our familiar scripts and our safe spaces (Applebaum, 1995; Fels, 2 Kuhnke, 2021). This is how I have spent most of the past two years navigating the new world in which we live. Exploring things that I thought I knew from

different perspectives. I took steps to engage differently – I participated in two research projects – running a group for women suffering from depression using Drama Therapy, and a study with CCPA, the Canadian Association for Marriage and Family Therapy and the Vanier institute of the family entitled [COVID-19 IMPACTS: Family Therapists Survey](#). I started to engage in the world, to use this time to bring myself into the present moment, and encouraging my clients to consider life from a new perspective too. It requires a lot of listening from the inside and outside. Embedded in this idea are the concepts of reflectivity and reflexivity.

Our awareness in the moment and upon the past moment with our clients and within ourselves is key. Our reflective and reflexive practice is the cross-section of our social location and that of our clients. This brings me to intersectionality, that process by which an individual's exposure to the multiple, simultaneous and interactive effects of different types of social organization or oppression and most importantly, the experiences of power are felt by our clients and by us. As Gergen (2015) stated when can step outside of our comfort zone and the world as we know it and explore the world from the perspective of the values we wish to see and hold, then and only then can we begin to see what could be, opening the way for new opportunities, new practices, new forms of learning, new goals and outcomes.

As psychotherapists and counsellors, we are continually challenged to consider our place of reference our cultural and social location, and how that impacts or impedes our engagement and interaction with our clients; the more reflecting and exploration we entertain on our worldviews and the variety of worldviews the more adept we will be at navigating the multiple positions, reactions and needs for those we serve and how our response might aid us and them.



My above reflections have brought me peace and greater hope to bridge gaps and better serve as a psychotherapist using reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. It has helped me to slow down and be more aware of my own shortcomings and to let in the multitude of perspectives within myself and my clients. I see a need to continue creating space to widen dialogue around reflection/reflexivity and the area of social locality generating alternative ways of working with the plural views found in all of us.

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It's time to support Indigenous peoples' mental health and support their right to self-determination!