

“What is a reflection-in-action?”

In this chapter, I explore in detail the complex notion of reflection-in-action (RIA). First, I refer to authors who have done much work in clarifying this notion. I begin with authors such as Vygotsky, Bruner and Shotter who define the complex transition from thoughts to language and from implicit to explicit knowledge. Secondly, I define practical knowledge and the notion of tacit knowledge according to Polanyi's work (1966). I develop the central argument of Schön (1983) and RIA. I present Schön's four categories of RIA and provide clinical examples and possible applications of Schön's work. Finally, I present multiple definitions of reflective processes and RIA. To conclude this chapter, I explore RIA's effects on the therapist and on the client and its possible development. In approaching the definition of RIA, I introduce the reader to its numerous attributes and show how RIA can enhance the quality of work of a psychotherapist.

How does a therapist put his experience of the session, his RIA, into words? The underlying question of RIA is to understand how language brings thoughts and experience into awareness. Vygotsky (1986) discusses what he calls a shift between inner and outer talk. Vygotsky is one of the first to introduce the notion of meta-cognition (Vygotsky 1962, 1966, 1986). Vygotsky (1986) believes thoughts are formed in language. He sees language as a generative process:

“The relation of thought to words is not a thing but a process, a continual movement back and forth from thought to word and from word to thought. (...) Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them. Every thought tends to connect something with something else, to establish a relation between things. Every thought moves, grows and develops, fulfills a function, solves a problem” (p. 218).

Vygotsky continues: “The connection between thought and word, however, is neither performed nor constant. It emerges in the course of development and itself evolves” (p. 255). Vygotsky's ideas are crucial to my research. He highlights that language and thoughts are a process in constant development and a co-construction. RIA is a process, not a thing. RIA comes into existence with the language. Language is essential to RIA. Language makes the thought exist. Every thought, as Vygotsky states, is in relationship with another thought. Thought does not come out of a vacuum. Thought always evolves in a context. Therefore, thought both depends upon and influences its context. Shotter (1993) discusses Vygotsky's ideas:

“As Vygotsky (1986) sees it, rather than issuing mechanically, from an already well-formed and orderly cognition at the center of our being, the expression of a thought or an intention, such as the saying of a sentence or the doing of a deed, first originates in a person's vague and unordered sense of the situation they are in (...). In other words, speakers are sensitive to the very act of speaking, to the kind of “links” - between themselves, their listeners and their circumstances - that they must construct as they speak” (p. 43).

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Shotter (1993) highlights Vygotsky's idea about the importance of the utterance of words. Unspoken words do not have meaning. Meaning emerges from a context: "Unformulated in words, a thought-seed remains vague and provides only the possibility of having a meaning" (p. 44). Without the support of words, thoughts do not have the same strength. Thoughts become alive through language. Bruner (1986) echoes Vygotsky. He demonstrates the role of culture in shaping our thoughts and our language: "People have reasons for their actions and these reasons are contextualized and particularized" (p. 83). The works of Vygotsky (1962, 1966, 1986) Shotter (1993) and Bruner (1986) are important to comprehend the process of reflection-in-action. These authors clarify the connection between thoughts, language, and the cultural aspect of language.

The notion of tacit knowledge as created by Polanyi (1966) is crucial to my subject. With RIA, there is always an allusion to the tacit, the "not-yet-said" (Anderson & Goolishian, 1991b) or the untellable. Polanyi questions and redefines the complexity of human knowledge by addressing tacit knowledge: "I shall reconsider human knowledge by starting from the fact that we know more than we can tell" (p. 6). To illustrate his point, Polanyi uses the recognition of faces. For example, I cannot tell in many details why I recognize my friends' faces among thousands of other faces. Yet, in a microsecond, I can make sense of all these details and bring them to the meaning: "This is Sophie". The process is mostly tacit. The theory of Gestalt demonstrates well this global understanding that transcends the articulation of the constitutive details. The explanation of the details does not account for the whole. Only a part of the tacit knowledge cannot be put into words (the whole is greater than the sum of the parts).

For my purpose, I could classify knowing in two categories: a practical knowing (knowing how) and a cumulative (knowing what). Both knowings are important to refine the definition of RIA. Polanyi (1966) refers to the German distinction between "können" and "wissen" to further explain this difference. Neither in English, nor in French does this subtle and crucial distinction in the use of the verb exist. "Wissen" refers to the cumulative knowing (knowing what), or intellectual knowing. "Können" refers to the practical knowing (knowing how). "Können" refers to a tacit form of knowledge. For example, swimming is a form of everyday knowing, in the sense of "können". If I am aware, when swimming, of all the moves I would probably drown. Yet, when I learned, I had to master separately balance, equilibrium, breathing and control of movement. I probably would not swim very successfully if I were fully aware of all of the sub-learning experiences involved in swimming. Once I know (kann) how to swim I can daydream or pay attention to the landscape around me. "Können" is used with actions that have become automatism, such as walking, speaking, running, swimming or driving. Much "können" become automatic and we have little interest in tearing apart its different components, unless we want to convey this knowing to somebody else. Teaching "können" knowledge requires that we take it apart into its different components.

RIA refers to a procedural and practical knowing: the knowing "how". To perform RIA a broad knowledge of the field of psychotherapy is necessary. This knowledge ("wissen") becomes integrated into the knowing "how", thus creating a skilled practitioner. Explaining the "können" or reflecting upon one's practice is essential in teaching therapists their work and how to develop competency. Therapists in training need to be aware of how expert therapists make sense of a practical situation and how they operate in the midst of a session (können). RIA also strengthens the skilled therapist and is essential to maintaining

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his own skills. These two forms of knowing (können and wissen) are usually interrelated. Polanyi (1966) refers to the diagnostic ability of the clinician to show how these two modes of knowing are interrelated “a knowledge which intimately combines skillful testing with expert observation” (p. 7). “