Reflective Spaces in Organisations: the Change Agent's Perspective

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Abstract

In contemporary organisations, people face increasing levels of ambiguity, complexity, and rapid change. To respond to these challenges collectively, organisations can create reflective spaces, structured opportunities for individuals and groups to make sense of their situations in order to act on them. While previous research has explored the value of reflective spaces, much remains theoretical or based on functional case studies. This study contributes to the field by drawing on the narrative accounts of change agents who host such spaces, examining the patterns in their self-interpretations and an overall analysis through a system psychodynamic lens. The findings indicate that participants experience reflective spaces as transitional environments that help manage the anxiety of organisational change. The role of the change agent emerged as critical, particularly their capacity for negative capability, or the ability to hold uncertainty without premature resolution. The study also identified a tendency for reflective spaces to emphasise individual transformation, sometimes at the expense of addressing broader systemic or structural issues. Overall, the research highlights the complexity involved in hosting reflective spaces, which often mirrors the complexity of the issues they aim to address. Future research could expand the participant base and explore alternative hypotheses to further develop understanding of reflective spaces through the perspectives of those who create and sustain them.

Keywords: reflective spaces, reflexivity, negative capability, system psychodynamics, participatory narrative inquiry

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1 Introduction

1.1 Ambiguity, Learning, and Reflection

While ambiguity has long characterised organisational life, it has become more explicitly acknowledged in response to the complexity of contemporary environments. In organisational contexts, ambiguity often surfaces through competing interpretations, overlapping roles, and uncertainty in decision-making. When it happens, established processes and past decisions cannot be readily replicated, requiring organisations to learn new ways of responding.

What kinds of spaces are appropriate for engaging with the ambiguous and complex reality of organisations? According to Boud et al. (2006), current challenges cannot be addressed through standardised instruction or conventional training sessions. Instead, learning emerges when individuals within organisations are confronted with "unfamiliar and complex problems for which there is no single solution." In such cases, the authors advocate for reflective spaces, where learning is deeply embedded in experience, allowing people to challenge assumptions, engage in practical experimentation, and co-develop new modes of operating.

This study looks at reflective spaces as enablers so organisations can respond to present-day challenges. Given that the term can refer to a wide range of practices, it is important to clarify the type of reflective space under consideration. A key distinction lies between critical and technical reflection. As Reynolds (1998) argues, critical reflection is inherently contextual. It involves questioning existing structures, treating reflection as a collective, political, and adaptive endeavour. In contrast to more instrumental or individualised approaches, reflective spaces in organisations are used to make sense of experiences and to inform adjusted choices for the future (Vince, 2002). More than a space for conceptual sense-making or learning, the reflective spaces examined here are seen as intentional interventions aimed at shaping future action.

Both engaging in reflection and creating spaces for it are complex processes, and embracing this complexity is integral to what reflective practice can offer. As Cressey et al. (2006) puts it, "reflection is a discursive way of creating a space for focusing on problematic situations and of holding them for consideration without premature rush to judgement." To create a reflective space is, in effect, to create an opportunity for

sustaining a reflective stance within the organisation.

1.2 Research Aims and Objectives

What unfolds in organisations when reflective spaces with these characteristics are introduced? How are they experienced by those who create and participate in them?

This thesis examines the development of reflective space theory and practice, highlighting key assumptions that continue to shape discourse in organisational development. These include the presumed readiness and role of the change agent, the tendency to privilege the individual subject over socially and politically co-constructed experience, and the framing of reflection as primarily retrospective, rather than as a means of attending to emergent processes in the present.

This study adopts a systems psychodynamic perspective to explore the impact of creating and hosting reflective spaces in organisations. It investigates the individual and organisational dynamics triggered when reflective spaces are introduced, particularly the anxieties, defences, and unconscious processes that emerge in response to ambiguity and change (Krantz, 2006). Reflection, in this context, is treated as an emergent and collective activity rather than a linear or rational exercise.

Reflective spaces are understood here as generative rather than merely instrumental (Boud et al., 2006). They are particularly relevant in navigating ambiguous situations that necessitate change, either in response to external shifts or as catalysts for internal transformation. Drawing on systems psychodynamic theory, this thesis explores the individual and collective processes of relating to such spaces through the lived experiences of the change agents who create and engage with them. It considers how these spaces act as containers for transitional processes, and investigates the emotional, relational, and unconscious dynamics that are activated when these spaces are introduced.

The aim is to explore the insights and patterns that emerge from the experiential accounts of change agents engaged in this work. By working with lived experience through a narrative-based ethnographic approach, this study foregrounds the practitioner's perspective to complement existing theoretical and case-based literature on reflective spaces.

2 Literature Review

This literature review explores the foundations of reflective spaces in organisations, tracing their origins and examining their role as containers for individual and collective transitions. It explores the role and readiness of the change agent who creates and sustains these spaces, with particular attention to their stance and capacity for negative capability. Finally, the review examines the distinction made in the literature between reflection and reflexivity, highlighting the latter's implications for creating critically and ethically grounded spaces.

2.1 Reflective Spaces in Organisations

The concept of reflective spaces in organisations can be traced back to the work of educational philosopher John Dewey, who argued that reflection is central to learning. As Dewey famously noted, we do not learn from experience alone, but from reflecting on that experience (Dewey, 1938). This was later developed in the organisational context by Donald Schön in 'The Reflective Practitioner' (Schön, 1983), where he introduced the concepts of "reflection-in-action", reflecting in real-time while acting, and "reflection-on-action", which involves reflecting retrospectively on past actions.

Building on his collaboration with Chris Argyris on organisational learning (Argyris and Schön, 1978), Schön's work contributed to a broader recognition in the following decade where reflection and learning were recognised as fundamental aspects of work and organisational life. This recognition is evident in concepts such as the 'learning organisation' (Senge, 1990), 'learning cycles' (Kolb, 2014), and 'lifelong learning' (Field, 2006).

Following the foundations of reflection and learning being rooted in educational theory, early organisational learning frameworks tended to emphasise individual learning and personal agency. In contrast, this study considers reflective spaces as a collective endeavour, a situated practice within the organisational context, where individuals engage with one another through their roles, histories, and authority relations.

This collective view of reflective spaces is strongly informed by Vince's work, which positions reflection not merely as a tool for individual learning, but as a social and emotional process that takes place within organisational contexts. Vince (2002) argues that

reflection is inherently political and relational, shaped by the emotional dynamics and authority structures that influence what can be said, felt, or thought in organisational life. This framing makes systems psychodynamics a particularly valuable lens for this study, as it allows for the exploration of unconscious processes, group-level anxieties, and social defences that are often activated in reflective spaces, especially when they contain ambiguity.

2.2 Internal Transition in Reflective Spaces

Going beyond the individualistic view of reflective spaces does not imply not looking at what constitutes the individual and what frames their interaction in the complex relational processes that are established in any space within the organisation.

Looking at the individual also does not make us talk about mindsets or learning styles. Rather, it explores the human in relation to others and their environment beyond the rational and the conscious. It also can shed some light into the boundaries between an organisation and its members, when we talk about task, roles, and eventually the power dynamics intrinsic to human relating.

The individual perpetually contributes to the social milieu at various levels (e.g., team, organisation, society). For conversational spaces that we are in, many internal processes surface through our interactions: how we deal with emotions that arise, how much we are able (or not) to contain anxiety, and the acts of unconsciously projecting our inner perceptions into the world.

In a reflective space, although the primary objective is not to change the individual per se, it makes a difference if we recognise the way individuals engage with the world:

- That individuals do not engage purely cognitively. We engage with the world from our emotional state and within our "encompassing biological, psychological, and cultural context" (Varela et al., 2017). Pay attention to how emotions and mood, for example, show up in individuals, are vital contextual data that impact the complex relations at play.

- That individuals carry unconscious dynamics such as fears, anxieties and defence mechanisms, and they can play an important role in what is at hand. To recognise such movements allows for emotional containment and the creation of safe

transitional spaces. (Bion, 2003; Winnicott, 1989; Lyth, 1988)

To recognise individuals as being constructed but also constructing our social reality allows for understanding the barriers to break the security of the status quo, or the possible loss of status, authority, etc. Reflective spaces, aimed for dealing or inducing change, will necessarily also deal with individuals processing and internalising the new situation.

We can look at reflective spaces as offering a holding environment akin to the developmental conditions in which individuals learn to tolerate frustration, ambiguity, and emotional complexity. Using the term 'holding environment', psychoanalyst D. Winnicott argued that the child's development requires an "environmental provision which enables the infant to live and develop" (Winnicott, 2016). This concept can be transposed to the organisational domain, inviting us to consider what kind of environment enables organisations to change and transition to a new adaptive state.

In the words of William Bridges, who coined the distinction between situational change and internal transition: "Transition is the inner psychological process that people go through as they internalize and come to terms with the new situation that the change brings about" (Bridges, 1991).

It is common sense to adapt structure, strategy, and processes to situational changes such as mergers, digitalisation, or the rise of AI. What is less common—and often an afterthought—is how to support the psychological transitions these changes demand. As Bridges (1991) argues, it is not the change itself, but the inner process of transition that determines the success of any transformation. Change efforts may struggle to take hold without attending to this internal journey. Reflective spaces can play an important role here, serving as spaces of actualisation by helping individuals make sense of the changing world and deepening their awareness of their relationship to it.

When we consider both change and transition, we are not only creating a space to make sense or induce change, but also allowing for a new stable coherence that can sustain the organisation in a different state. Spaces of reflection support this coherence by inviting for public declarations of intent, where communicative action "influence both the environment and also the speaker" (Kets de Vries and Balazs, 1998).

While we maintain a perspective on reflection beyond solely individual responsibility or personal transformation, we still acknowledge the importance of individual

transition. However, this is understood within a broader framework that sees "the individual inseparable from history and context, shaping and being shaped by the discursive practices which comprise life and work within communities and the workplace" (Vince and Reynolds, 2009).

2.3 Social Transition in Reflective Spaces

Reflective spaces in organisations can then work as a social transition, providing a safe-enough environment so members can safely explore uncertain and anxiety-inducing topics without reverting to defence mechanisms. "In such environments, people feel safe enough to allow themselves to experience distressing thoughts and emotions without the need to defensively shut them down." (Kahn, 2001)

When looking at transition as social, we can look at Bridges' model (Bridges, 1991) as a frame to situate reflective spaces in a process of transition. Bridges brings the concept of the neutral zone, the liminal, "in-between state", "full of uncertainty and confusion" (W. Bridges and Mitchell, 2000), in which an ending transitions to a new beginning.

> "Going through an in-between time when the old is gone but the new isn't fully operational. We call this time the 'neutral zone': it's when the critical psychological realignments and repatternings take place." (Bridges, 1991, p. 23)

Reflective spaces can function as "neutral zones" of liminality and identity reformation within organisations. These spaces are relational environments where collective maps and scripts emerge through interaction and shared meaning-making. This socially embedded process of identity formation aligns with George Herbert Mead's (1934) theory of the social self, where identity emerges through engagement with the generalised other, the internalised perspectives of the wider social world. From this perspective, identity reformation is not merely an internal psychological shift that influences the social, but also its inverse: the social constitution of the self. Change, whether in personal or collective identity, is thus not an isolated event but one that becomes meaningful through ongoing social interaction and reflective engagement within the group context.

Reflective spaces not only support such social transitions; they provide the conditions under which the self and social identities are actively co-constructed.

Likewise, when we talk about defences that emerge from the anxiety of change and ambiguity present at reflective spaces, we look at the social and group aspects. Beyond individual defence mechanisms, groups and organisations also develop social defences in the form of structures, processes and rituals that protect them from anxiety, especially in moments of change and uncertainty. Such defences often operate unconsciously at the collective level, and function to "prevent the experience of anxiety or to reduce its level to one which can be tolerated" (Menzies, 1960).

Reflective spaces can serve a dual purpose in relation to these social defences:

- They may consciously introduce a constructive social defence, a safe container, drawing on Bion's (1962) concept of containment, in which generative dialogue can unfold, and where ambiguity is held and explored through collective reflection;
- They can also create conditions for examining and reshaping existing social defences, making it possible to challenge habitual avoidance patterns and support the emergence of more adaptive organisational dynamics.

The presence of reflective spaces in organisations constitutes a collective intervention aimed at making sense of organising in relational and contextual terms. Through this process, it becomes possible to surface and reshape invitations, affordances and constraints embedded in organisational life that influence how people think, act, and relate.

The spaces and interventions are built to influence social dynamics, including social defences, rather than to suppress them. In our case, we are approaching social defences not as the cause of the organisation's dysfunctions but as its symptoms (Jaques, 1995). Reflective spaces, therefore, do not need to identify and remove defences, but can focus on what the symptoms reveal about organising dynamics and how we can influence them to support more adaptive functioning.

One of such symptoms surface on the emotions and mood present in organisations. Reflective spaces can be containers of the emotional labour needed for processing change and anxiety. In these spaces, containment becomes a social act, not just an intrapsychic

one. The same applies for cognitive processing where reflective spaces can support the articulation of systemic anxieties that otherwise would act below the surface. The work of the practitioner is to "emphasize the continuing need for framing new forms and processes of 'containment'—shared practices of reflective thinking" (Huffington et al., 2018). To bring it to the surface means that the articulated anxiety or other emotions can be worked through rather than being outsourced and repressed.

When we talk about "worked through", we are referring to the concept originated by Freud, in which reflective spaces can work as a place to not only articulate defences, but also to process them by breaking the cycle of "repeat(ing) the repressed material as a present experience." (Freud, 1914). Freud talks about the patient repeating its symptoms, in our case here the defences in their individual and collective form.

This concept is translated to group and organisational settings by acknowledging that any change in the status quo can release anxiety and "that addressing this anxiety in the context of an overall process of the management of change can make for a more effective organization" (Obholzer and Roberts, 2019). Long (2006b) talks about the dynamic paradox of change and stability, where social defences and mechanisms allow for a stable system while also preventing the task of change.

We consider reflective spaces in organisations as a container to such changes, allowing for stability while working through social transition to a future coherent and stable system. Here we bring back the relevance of a system phychodynamic lens: when exploring socioanalytic methods, Long (2019) say that they are "aimed at the same goal: creating reflective spaces in groups and organisations."

2.4 Hosting with Negative Capability

In addition to the individual and social transitions that can occur within reflective spaces, it is important to consider the role and authority of those who host or significantly influence these spaces, the change agents themselves. A key aspect is how these individuals perceive and enact their role, task, and boundaries, and the extent to which they can sustain and invite the kind of critical reflection this study seeks to explore.

A dominant tendency in organisational life is the high value placed on solutions and convergence toward clear answers. There is a strong emphasis on organising, explaining, diagnosing root causes, and identifying actionable next steps. In dominant lead-

ership discourse, effective leaders are often defined as those who take decisive action despite uncertainty (P. F. Simpson et al., 2002). Consultants and facilitators are likewise expected to "instruct, or help to solve problems" (Lawlor and Sher, 2021), typically by diagnosing problems and recommending targeted interventions.

As we have been exploring, those are not the outcomes a reflective space is looking for. With organisational challenges loosely defined in advance and more complex, there is an increasing need for change agents who have the ability to hold ambiguity and invite others to sit in reflection, to ponder hypotheses and possibilities, and only after that to make choices and decisions. This stance of the change agent is informed by the system psychodynamic concept of 'negative capability'.

The roots of negative capability lie in the arts. The term was coined by the English poet John Keats, who, in defending the arts embracing experience rather than rational explanation, described it as the capacity to remain "capable of being in uncertainties" (Keats, 1895).

Psychodynamic theory extended Keats's poetic insight into the realm of human relations and group dynamics. One of the most influential contributions comes from Wilfred Bion, who explored the ability to hold a reflective space and stay in the present rather than the tendency to justify the past and plan the future. In his 'Notes on Memory and Desire', Bion proposes that the analyst (or by analogy, the change agent) "is concerned neither with what has happened nor with what is going to happen, but with what is happening" (Bion, 1967).

Many authors have built on Keats and Bion to bring up their understanding of negative capability, some retaining a poetic feel: "the ability to delight in doubt and revel in uncertainty without feeling compelled to rationalise half-knowledge or to reach for facts" (Saggurthi and Thakur, 2016), where others in the language of systems psychodynamics and management: "indicates the capacity to live with and to tolerate ambiguity and paradox, (...), to engage in a non-defensive way with change, resisting the impulse merely to react to the pressures inherent in risk-taking" (French, 2001).

The absence of negative capability has tangible consequences in organisational life. The current extreme focus on performance, usually accompanied by a tendency of control and the need for quick closure, inhibits reflection and does not tolerate ambiguity. This produces what Alvesson and Spicer (2012) call "functional stupidity", where em-

ployees might feel the need to know or at least pretend to know, so it "discourages difficult questions from organizational members, request for substantive reasons and broader justification for actions" (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). Though not always catastrophic, such dynamics are clear obstacles to organisational learning and creativity.

For reflective spaces to be generative, the change agent must model negative capability and invite opportunities where uncertainty and ambiguity are psychologically safe and intellectually valued. This creates the preconditions for emergence and transformative insight.

2.5 Reflective and Reflexive

> "In reflecting we will be thinking and feeling deeply about something, possibly our own experience, whilst in becoming reflexive we are bringing that reflection back to ourselves and may be changed by it." (Mowles, 2015, p. 60)

Initially, I found myself using the terms reflective and reflexive interchangeably. However, further exploration revealed important conceptual differences. This confusion highlighted the need to clarify the distinction between the two terms and to situate them within the context of this investigation.

To reflect individually is to bring the world into oneself and make sense and re-evaluate both this world and ourselves acting in it. "Reflection involves reliving and rerendering" (Bolton and Delderfield, 2018). As a collective, it is a practice of making sense together of the common reality, revisiting experiences in light of our self-analysis and of others. We are working here on reflective spaces that are deliberate, created to explore events or environments to act on them.

Reflexivity is the movement of taking ourselves out to the social world in order to examine "our attitudes, thought processes, values, assumptions, prejudices, and habitual actions" (Bolton and Delderfield, 2018) . In reflexive mode, the individual examines their internal conversations, emotions, moods, and their coherence. Personal reflexivity allows the self to translate themselves to the social world and practice recognising what conscious and unconscious aspects of our internal world shapes how we interact with it.

When looking at reflective spaces in organisations, the question is how reflexivity connects to it. According to Thompson and Pascal (2012), "a well-developed approach

to reflective practice would incorporate both these elements", and they consider reflexivity essential to a critical reflective space, where we examine the coherence of actions critically, incorporating values and ethics.

When we explore the individual dimension of reflective spaces, we are taking into account the examination of oneself and how one shows up in the collective. Reflective spaces can serve as a container to allow observing the self, including surfacing of individual unconscious processes. In doing so, it acknowledges repressed emotions and thoughts (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2019) that otherwise would not manifest in the social world. Exploring those processes frequently mirrors that individual's social milieu, acting as a manifestation of power and political relations (Fotaki et al., 2012).

In conclusion, reflective spaces in organisations can improve with reflexivity. Without reflexive engagement, there is a risk of losing vital dimensions of individual awareness, such as power relations and ethical dilemmas that might otherwise remain concealed. Whether reflection alone is sufficient remains an open question, but we can identify its limitations without reflexivity.

3 Methodology

A substantial body of research explores reflective spaces in organisations, including scholars who adopt a system psychodynamics perspective. While some focus on theorising the function and purpose of these spaces (e.g., Krantz, 2010; Long, 2018), others present case-based insights situated within single organisations or specific sectors (e.g., Lunkka et al., 2022).

In contrast, this study draws on practical experience from a broader group of practitioners — including internal change agents, consultants, and facilitators — to explore how they create and participate in reflective spaces, how they make sense of these experiences, and what patterns emerge from their narratives.

The choice of research method recognises that both the act of collective reflection and the act of creating such spaces in organisations are complex ventures. They are enacted in the liminal space between individual dynamics and collective organisational life, all of which are constrained and enabled by natural and social factors.

For complex topics like these, research is best approached through an "interpretive,

historical, language-sensitive, local, open and nonauthoritive understanding of the subject matter" (Alvesson, 1996). It acknowledges that all data collected is a response from the researcher's intervention and what is collected does not speak by itself, it requires interpretation. "Everything said is said by someone." (Maturana and Varela, 1992)

Recognising that everyone brings their own experiences, beliefs and perceptions while conducting interventions means acknowledging that "biases can lead to selective interpretations, where certain aspects of a text or event are emphasized while others are downplayed or ignored." (Denzin, 1994)

One way of addressing some of the present bias is for the researcher to engage in self-reflection and reflexivity (see Closing Reflexivity). Another, that will determine our methodological choice, is to invite participants of the study to share their own experiences and interpret their own accounts.

3.1 Participatory Narrative Inquiry

Participatory Narrative Inquiry (PNI) is an approach that "draws from a range of multidisciplinary research techniques" (Colla and Kurtz, 2024), most notably from narrative inquiry and participatory action research.

Narrative inquiry is a methodology for understanding lived experience (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). It involves listening to how participants narrate their stories, which are embedded within the full context shaped by their personal histories and social realities. Rooted in the interpretive understanding, it treats participants' accounts of their experiences as primary sources of data.

Participatory Action Research positions participants as co-researchers who engage in all process stages, from planning to reflection. It emphasises moments of collective, self-reflective inquiry that enable participants to "understand and improve upon the practices in which they participate" (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005).

The research approach of PNI means that we listen to narratives of how people experience and interpret the world, and use those narratives to collectively identify patterns and generate new interpretations. In our inquiry, we are not trying to prove how the world is, but rather see the patterns of how people experience it. Seeing patterns allow for more comprehensive and novel interpretations, decisions, and further actions.

In the words of Kurtz (2014), who set the foundations of Participatory Narrative

Inquiry, “we use stories to build maps of the world we experience so we can make decisions about how to act”, and “participatory narrative inquiry supports a view of stories as data, as a means of collecting and analyzing that data, and as a framework for interpreting and theorizing experience.” (Colla and Kurtz, 2024)

This approach to research also allows for the already explored complexity of individual interpretations, social forces, power dynamics, and political dimensions. To reject a purely authoritative stance will result in having no models of reality, but it allows for novel conversations and new emerging interpretations.

3.2 PNI Research Process

The processual core of PNI rests on three key elements: engaging with narratives of personal experience; initiating inquiry that can generate new possibilities for action; and enabling participation, where individuals interpret their own narrative accounts. PNI has three essential phases: collection, sense-making, and return (Kurtz, 2014).

Collection & Working with Stories

Our primary data source are the change-maker’s narrative accounts of how they experience reflective spaces in organisations. We are working with a simple survey containing an eliciting question, a space for the participant to give a title or hashtag so we can reference the story later, and the questions of self-interpretation that we will comment on later.

The chosen eliciting question was: “In your role within organisations or teams, tell me about an experience in which you were directly or indirectly involved in a space aimed at reflection. What happened? Who was involved? What feelings and expressions were used?”

The question focuses on asking for lived experiences as opposed to asking for the participant’s opinions about them. The intent is to put the inquiry’s attention towards the story, not the teller. The same will work for the interpretative questions following, we want to “keep people engaged in interpretation and don’t allow them to wander over into opinion” (Kurtz, 2014).

Accordingly, this study gathers personal and context-rich accounts from professionals involved in creating or facilitating reflective spaces. These accounts are grounded in

lived experience, rather than abstract opinion, and are treated as subjective yet meaningful representations of participants' engagement with reflective practice. The diversity of inputs are viewed collectively, and these narratives constitute a pool of data from which themes and dynamics can be identified, interpreted, and analysed.

Data Self-interpretation transition to Sense-Making

For our engagement survey, by self-interpretation we mean that after the participant shares their experience, they are invited to individually reflect and interpret that experience with questions about their emotional tone, factors that influenced the experience, etc.

Those questions work as signifiers, forms through which meaning can be communicated, and the guiding categories or dimensions that structure self-interpretation. "In micro-narrative research, that structure is made visible to the research subjects and they self-interpret their material within that structure to create a form of distributed ethnography." (Snowden, 2010)

When participants interpret their own data, the risk of researcher interpretive bias is reduced. However, the selection of signifiers, i.e., the choice of structure, still reflects the influence of the researcher or consultant's perspective. As with all qualitative research, there is no such thing as 'no bias', but transparency about these design choices and reflexivity in the research process can help mitigate their impact and enhance the study's credibility (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

In our case, the study draws from previous research that identified factors enabling effective facilitation of reflective practice (Marshall et al., 2022; Marshall et al., 2021). The factors and classifications were used both as material to our theoretical review and as indications for some of the self-interpreting questions.

Marshall et al (2022), for example, identify through the analysis of data the themes:

- Building relationships through a relational reflective process
- Reflecting with more experienced people and facilitators
- A safe, supportive, and blame-free environment
- Facilitator qualities

- Clarifying roles and expectations
- Helping learners understand reflection and encouraging dialogue
- Mirroring and being student-centred
- Embracing differing perspectives to help practitioners see beyond themselves

They have been adapted and compose one of the questions on the survey study (see Appendix A).

Acknowledging the interpretive nature of our role, we identified and selected recurring patterns within the data. We then added researcher-generated observations and questions to these patterns before re-engaging participants during the final phase.

Return & Making Collective Sense

In PNI, the sense-making process begins during the initial narrative elicitation, as participants self-interpret their narrative accounts. The cycle is completed when these narratives are anonymously returned to the group for collective reflection and analysis. This second layer of shared interpretation is central to PNI, distinguishing it from approaches such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which prioritise detailed exploration of individual experience. In contrast, PNI "focuses more on shared sense-making of patterns across individual stories" (Colla and Kurtz, 2024).

This phase is at the heart of the process and directly relate to reflective spaces and the ability to host them.

> "The implication for practice is that interventions in relation to a task may be informed more by the sense-making and the knowledge that arise out of the interaction rather than on the basis of preconception and pre-planning." (P. Simpson and French, 2006, p. 1)

Return is thus a means of collectively exploring patterns and identifying potential actions that may emerge from them. In our study, we explored these patterns but did not progress into exploring actions. Instead, we facilitated a meta-level reflection on the emerging theme during a conference with organisational change-makers. I hosted a workshop where participants were invited to share their own experiences of hosting

reflective spaces. They were briefly presented with initial observations from the narrative data, and we followed up with a dialogue exploring participants' interpretations and reflections.

3.3 Sample and Data Collection

Data collection for this study occurred through two primary methods:

1. An online survey (see Appendix A), which was distributed to change agents within my professional network with an invitation for them to share it further with colleagues and peers;
2. An in-person workshop conducted during a conference attended by consultants, academics, and facilitators working in the field of organisational development.

The survey had a total of 25 responses, with the following participant characteristics:

- A balanced gender distribution, comprising 10 men and 15 women;
- A predominantly Europe-based sample (15 respondents), with additional representation from other global regions;
- Diverse application sectors, with participants working primarily in the private sector (11 respondents), as well as in government agencies, multilateral organisations, and NGOs.

The workshop was an open session titled after the research study. Approximately 15 participants attended and were informed that the session would contribute to this thesis research. No formal demographic data were collected during the workshop; instead, the data consisted of the researcher's notes capturing participants' verbal accounts, reflections, and interpretations shared during the session.

3.4 Methodological Limitations

As with any qualitative and narrative-based approach, this study carries specific methodological limitations that shape how its findings can be interpreted and applied to other

contexts. While steps were taken to mitigate potential biases, it is important to acknowledge the inherent boundaries of the research design, particularly concerning selection bias, self-reporting, and lack of triangulation.

Selection bias

Participants were recruited from the researcher's professional network and extended through referrals within that circle. As a result, the sample primarily consisted of external consultants and facilitators. This introduces a selection bias, as the participants do not represent the broader population of change agents involved in creating reflective spaces. Even within the subgroup of external practitioners, the findings should not be considered generalisable, as the sample reflects a specific professional and relational context rather than a cross-section of the field.

Self-reporting

A known limitation of narrative research is its reliance on self-reported experience, which may be influenced by participants' desire to present themselves favourably, their ability to remember facts, or their own personal biases embedded in their narrative. However, in PNI, subjectivity is not a limitation to be eliminated, but a foundational premise of the data. The aim is not to test factual accuracy, but to surface the shared interpretations of people's experiences of reflective spaces. Additionally, anonymity and the pattern-based approach reduce the prominence of individual bias by shifting focus to recurring themes across multiple narratives.

Triangulation

In qualitative research that engages with interpretative and complex data, the use of multiple methods or perspectives is recommended to reduce bias and enhance the credibility of findings. In this study, a double interpretative process was involved: patterns and excerpts from the anonymous survey were reinterpreted in the context of a group workshop. While this layered approach provided valuable insight into shared meaning-making, the absence of supplementary data sources limits the depth of analysis. In a more bounded organisational setting, these narratives could have been triangulated with other materials such as meeting observations, internal communications, or discourse

analysis, to offer a more robust and multidimensional understanding of both the data and the organisational context.

4 Results / Findings

In line with the sense-making structure in Participatory Narrative Inquiry, this section begins by identifying patterns and associations that emerged from participants' self-interpretative responses. Given the small sample size, the aim is not to establish statistical significance, but to observe qualitative tendencies and possible patterns.

The analysis followed a two-stage process. First, we examined how survey participants interpreted their own narratives to surface potential themes and hypotheses. Only afterward did we engage with the full narratives to assess whether and how these interpretations were grounded in the story data. The purpose was not to confirm hypotheses or validate fixed interpretations, but rather to clarify which topics and inquiries warrant deeper, exploratory dialogue.

Finally, these emergent themes and the most resonant hypotheses were brought back into a workshop with a different group of change agents, who engaged in further sense-making to refine or challenge these insights.

4.1 Possible Tendencies on Interpretative Data

A) Personal qualities and capacities are less crucial

Based on Marshall et. al (2002), we have used a series of factors that influence reflective spaces according to their research. Our question to participants was:

```
What factors were crucial to the process and outcome
of the experience you shared? (choose all that apply)
```

Observation: The answers presented in Figure 1, show that the change agent chose two factors less frequently. All others were pointed as crucial to about 50% of experiences when only about 25% chose the two below:

1. More experienced participants and facilitators
2. Facilitator / Consultant qualities

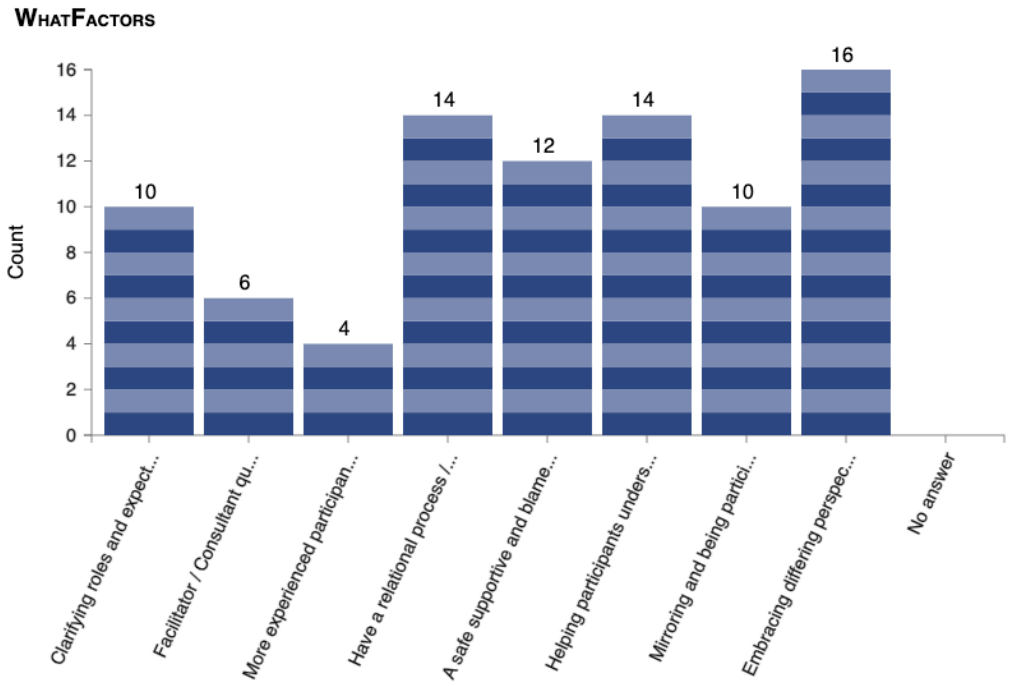


Figure 1: Factors crucial for the experience

The less frequent choices did not show up differently depending on the emotional tone of the experience, so both positive and negative tones show a similar lack of crucial impact.

Interpretation and Hypotheses: Both factors concern the qualities and capacities of facilitators or consultants. Since all respondents in this study identified themselves as either hosts/facilitators (62%) or external consultants (38%), their interpretations are grounded in the lived experience of occupying these roles within reflective spaces.

One hypothesis is that facilitators and consultants lack awareness or underestimate the impact of their own qualities, experience and readiness in hosting reflective spaces within organisations. Instead, they may assign crucial factors to external actions (helping others understand and clarify roles) or the environment (blame-free, participant-centred), while overlooking the impact of their own reflexivity, role, and authority.

A second hypothesis, informed by the tendency for reflective spaces to focus more on concrete experiences than on abstract concepts (see Figure 2), is that these spaces already contained sufficient expertise or lived experience related to the topic at hand. As a result, facilitator qualities or interventions were perceived as less crucial. It is not clear, when participants refer to “concrete experiences”, whether they are describing the

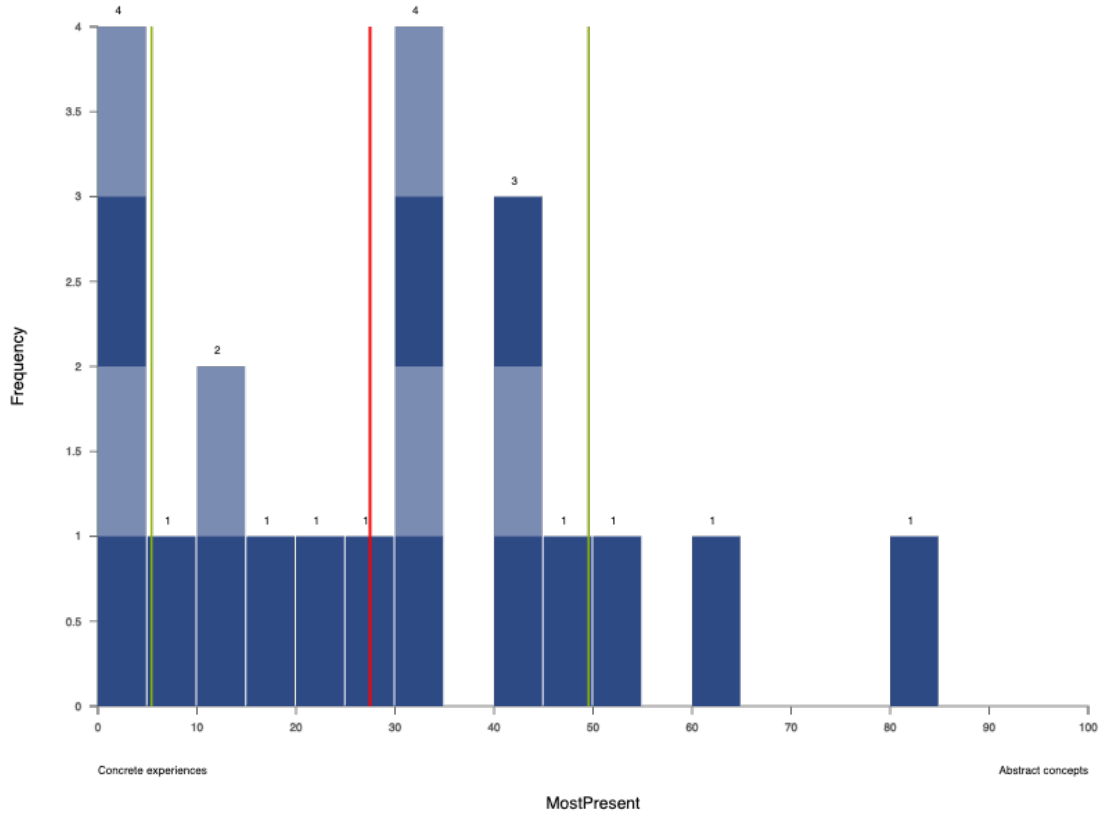


Figure 2: Most present in the experience shared

content of reflection or the experience of being in reflection itself. The former would suggest the reflective space functioned more as a technical space, focused on practical problem-solving, rather than as a critical reflective space, oriented toward examining assumptions, power dynamics, or deeper systemic issues.

B) Reflecting on concrete experiences, people and behaviour

To qualify their experiences, participants were asked to indicate, using sliders, how much the experience related to a continuum between two characteristics. Two such questions were:

```
In the experience you shared, what was the focus of reflection?
People and Behaviour (0) -------- (100) Structures and Processes

What was most present in the interaction?
Concrete experiences (0) -------- (100) Abstract concepts
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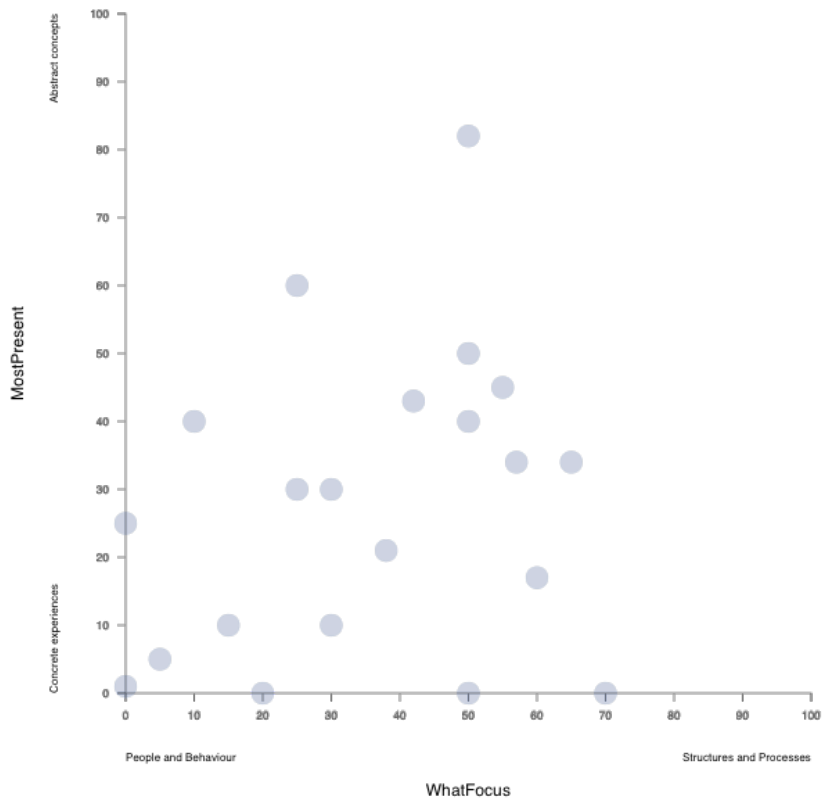


Figure 3: What was the focus vs What was most present

Observation: As shown in Figure 3, participants tended to locate their experiences toward the people and behaviour end of the first spectrum, and toward concrete experiences on the second.

Interpretation and Hypotheses: This pattern may suggest that reflective spaces invite a more personal and concrete approach to the issues at hand, where facilitators and change agents perceive individuals as more inclined to share their interpretations of organisational situations and their own roles within them. In such settings, the label 'reflection' may come to be understood as an inherently concrete lived experiences, while more abstract or structural conversations are displaced to other forums.

A competing hypothesis is that facilitators or consultants carry an unconscious bias towards individual-level dimensions, emphasising personal insight, behaviour, or transformation as the primary focus of reflection. This orientation may implicitly de-prioritise structural or systemic aspects of organisational life. Such a tendency would align with themes surfaced in the literature review, which suggest that reflective practice is often framed as a vehicle for individual insight and development, rather than collective

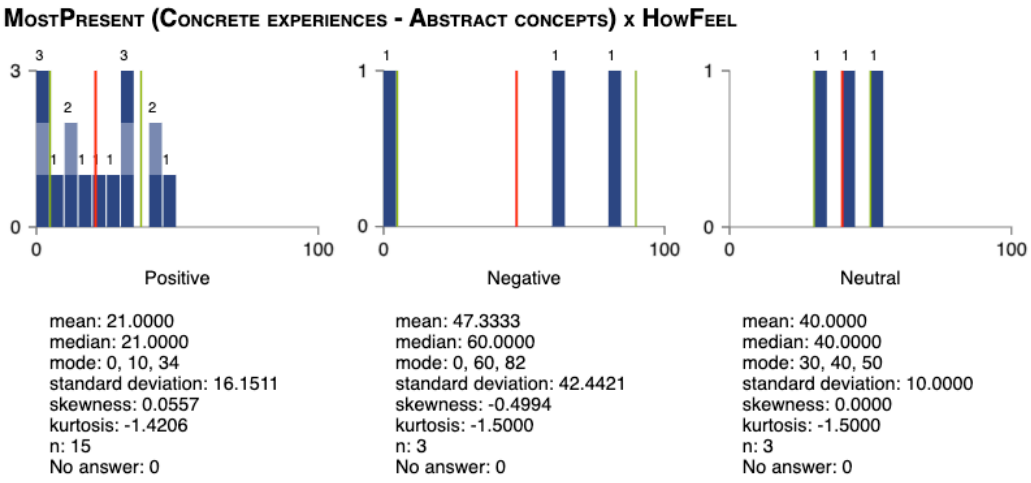


Figure 4: What was most present by sentiment analysis

critique or organisational transformation.

C) Abstract concepts unwelcome

Earlier, we observed that change agents judged concrete experiences to be more present than abstract concepts in reflective spaces.

Observation: When we filter responses by sentiment analysis (clustered into positive, negative, and neutral experiences), we observe a tendency that positive experiences are associated with a higher presence of concrete experiences (see Figure 4).

Interpretation and Hypotheses: One hypothesis is that facilitators and consultants tend to evaluate reflective spaces more positively when they involve concrete explorations of events, actions, or perceptions rather than abstract ideas, theories, or generalisations. This may reflect an understanding of reflective spaces as divergent and adaptive: places for surfacing lived experience and uncertainty, rather than for applying conceptual models or reaching convergence.

A second hypothesis is that the change agents who responded to the survey recalled and chose to share moments of personal resonance. In experiences they perceived as more positive, participants may have expressed vulnerability, authenticity, or meaningful insight, which in turn had an emotional impact on the change agent, making the session more memorable and more likely to be shared.

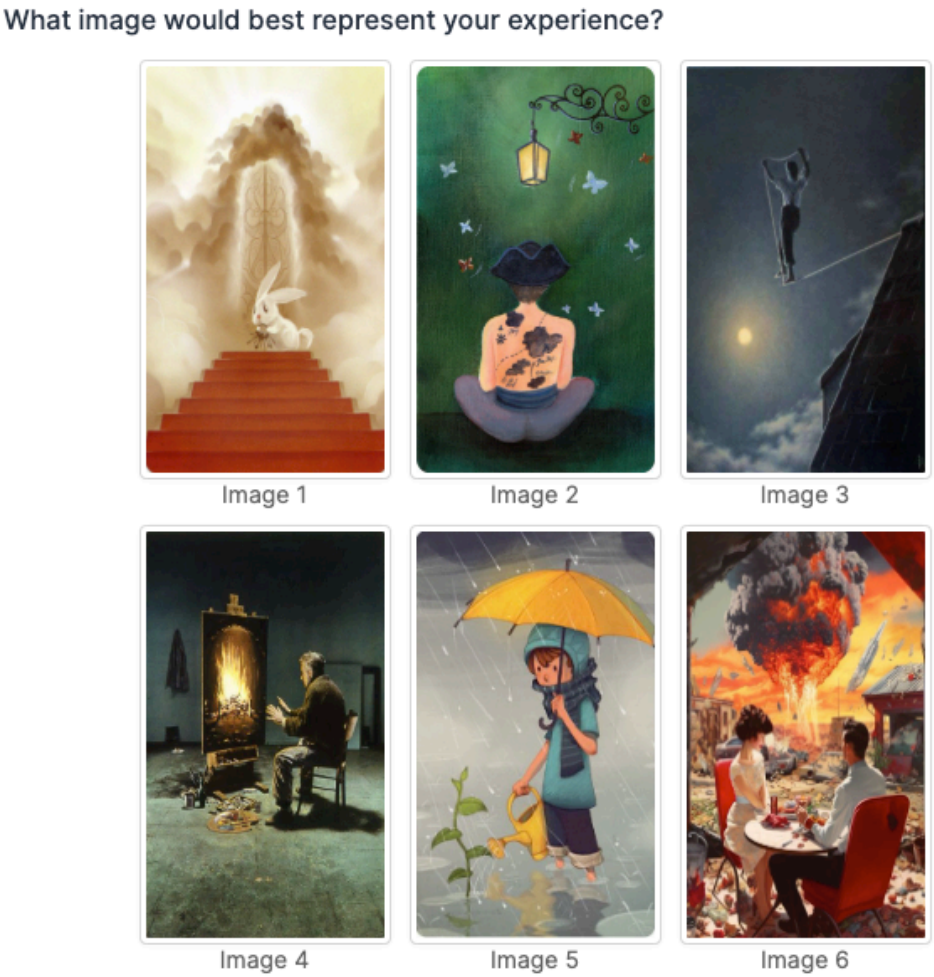


Figure 5: Experience representation in an image

D) Image representation

As an associative method, we asked change agents to connect their story to a selected image, choosing from the options on Figure 5.

Observation: Two images were selected significantly more often than the others (Figure 6).

Interpretations and Hypotheses: The two most frequently chosen images appear to represent a common metaphor of reflective spaces in organisations: as ongoing journeys into the unknown. One image suggests the act of building the tightrope while walking on it, evoking the sense of constructing support while already in motion. The other implies the presence of an internal or hidden map, something guiding the process from within, though not immediately visible to the subject. Both metaphors speak to the emergent,

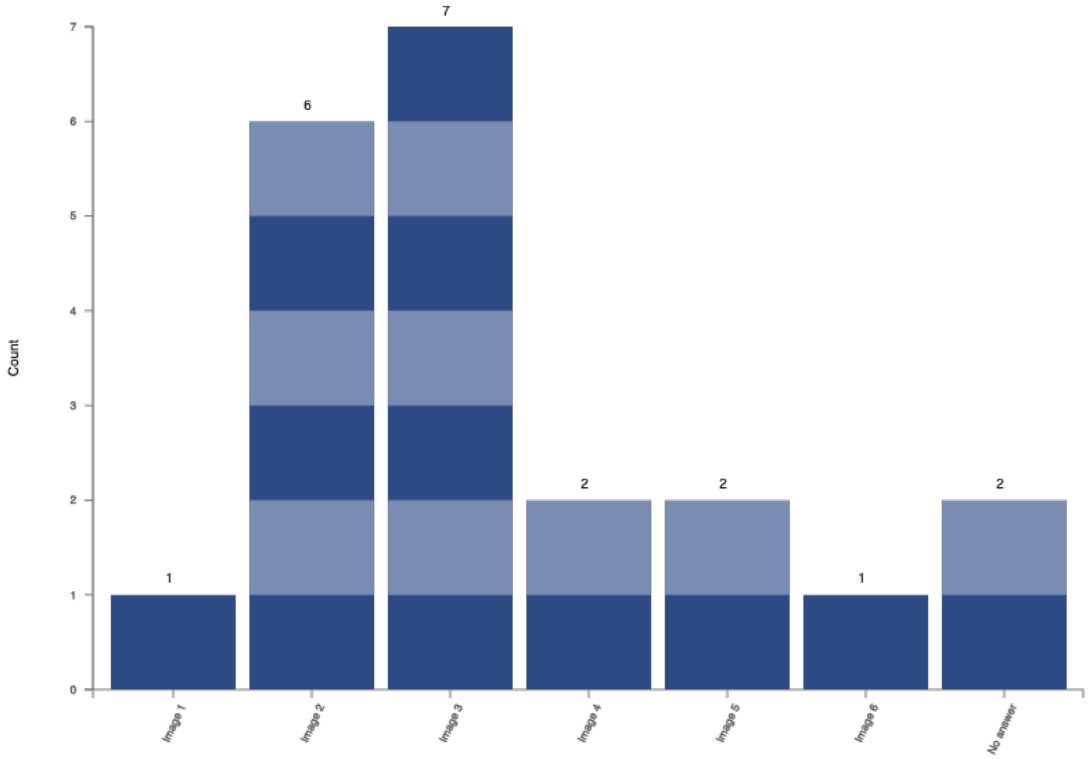


Figure 6: How many experiences per image

dynamic, and self-organising nature of group and organisational reflection.

A second interpretive layer connects to these selections' lamp light and moon imagery. These elements could represent lighthouses aimed to guide the subject, which may imply a teleological understanding of reflective spaces: even if in uncertainty, there is a sense of direction or purpose, a telos, that provides orientation or support to those navigating reflection.

4.2 Narrative Data and Hypotheses Exploration

Up to this point, the analysis has focused on patterns derived from participants' interpretative responses, rather than the narratives themselves. This approach allowed us to surface tendencies and thematic directions without being anchored prematurely to individual stories. In a study with a larger sample, these tendencies might be supported by statistically significant correlations or the identification of distinct clusters. In our smaller sample, however, they serve as a basis for opening collective sense-making conversations.

The objective is not to confirm hypotheses, much less to diagnose. Our aim is to provoke meaningful dialogue around themes that resonate with participants' lived experiences. The emphasis is on how individuals and groups engage with these interpretations, and how they make sense of them.

In what follows, we present selected hypotheses and thematic patterns alongside excerpts from participant narratives. These anonymous quotes serve as illustrative evidence to support our interpretive lens and to stimulate further inquiry.

A) Personal qualities and capacities are less crucial

The narrative data suggests two ways change agents perceive their own role and authority in shaping reflective spaces. Some quotes reveal that facilitators or consultants do not initially recognise the importance of their own skill, authority, or emotional competence, while others reflect on these aspects in hindsight. These narratives often centre on the need for more effective contracting, greater clarity around their role and mandate, and the capacity to work with emotions.

> "the experiment was successful, as long as the quality of the participants' presence was achieved."
>
> "to better contract with new facilitation partners and to make sure I don't get pigeon-holed in a role from which I can't deviate."
>
> "working with emotions require a mandate, requires time, it is not possible to throw a team who rarely ever exposes itself to such thing"

Some narratives also indicate that participants were already familiar with reflective spaces, suggesting that little visible facilitation effort was needed. At the same time, other stories expose a tension between the facilitator's verbal declaration of safety (e.g., "this is a safe space") and the actual behaviour or readiness of the group to engage.

> "I saw my role mainly as that of host of the space and holder of the boundary of time..."
>
> "Expressions like, this is a safe space, it is OK not to know, just connect your brain with your heart. But the team did not know how."
>
> "people brought an issue with our 'speaking up' mechanism and it was openly challenged by the attendees."

B) Reflecting on concrete experiences, people and behaviour

The hypothesis that an invitation to reflect naturally leads to a focus on concrete experiences is inconclusive, as the data tends to refer more to their explorations without qualifying them. However, the accounts suggest a consistent emphasis on people and behaviour rather than on structures and their impact. There are explorations on "how equipped they feel", "levels of trust", and "relational". Some change agents do gesture toward structural or contextual dimensions, mentioning the "operating context" or how the space "mirrored the dynamics of the organisation".

> "although the team have been working together for around 2 years it turned out this was the first time they had sat together in any kind of relational and dialogic space together"
>
> "Profound conversations emerged as well as connection with each other's stories"
>
> "Also, the team had a chance to reassess how they were doing internally, regroup as an entity, have open and honest conversations, and increase their levels of trust"
>
> "This conversation was mostly about justifying responses, they actively avoided reflection."
>
> "We explored their operating context, how equipped they felt to meet the changing demands of that context."
>
> "The dynamic of the reflective space mirroring the dynamics of the organisation. A space to unearth some hidden topics."

A recurrent theme in the narrative data is that change agents tend to frame reflective spaces primarily as opportunities for personal transformation. Many accounts imply this assumption, either explicitly or implicitly. Even the final quote below, despite referencing "group inquiry", describes the benefit of individuals developing their own skills. This suggests that reflective spaces, as described by the respondents, may be oriented more toward intrapersonal development within a social context, rather than toward collective inquiry into broader organisational dynamics or structures.

> "supporting a peer to evolve in the face of a personal or professional challenge or blockage"

"Based on that feedback we reflect how they can become a more effective and empathetic leader."

"In the learning space created, it is very powerful when people realise that, for example..."

"the challenge is to know the extent to which participants were already on the journey to self evolution"

"the two persons in role found again a way to communicate"

"Key to this was supporting people to develop their dialogue skills to engage in GROUP inquiry."

C) Abstract concepts unwelcome

We initially hypothesised that change agents may perceive reflective spaces as focused primarily on concrete experiences, rather than on abstract concepts. However, the narrative data does not fully support this assumption. Several accounts reveal that abstract dimensions were present in the reflective process: emotional expression, metaphorical thinking, and discussions of trust, for example.

"draw a relationship map, identified client and feelings and expectations towards them, shared success cases, producte a metaphore for their actual role"

"Reflection was superficial - they were presented with results from a survey"

"and they looked excited, proud and strong together. Probably, the process was enough for them at that stage."

"They expressed 'have zero trust …', '.. trust has been broken' and feeling upset, worried, frustrated, and confused as dominant feelings."

"I structure each session to promote thoughtful contributions, steering clear of repetitive or unproductive dialogue."

These quotes suggest that both abstract and concrete elements coexist in reflective spaces, and that abstract concepts are not unwelcome. In fact, some change agents appear to consciously structure reflection to include emotional depth, conceptual metaphors, and affective insight. The earlier hypothesis may therefore oversimplify the dynamic:

rather than rejecting abstraction, change agents may value it when it remains connected to lived experience or group dynamics.

D) Image representation

The images selected by change agents could serve as powerful prompts for collective sense-making. These visual choices offer material for further conversation, and could be used to explore participants' associations and the reasoning behind their selections. Some narrative excerpts align with the metaphor of a journey, suggesting a sense of movement, development, or progression. Others imply a teleological orientation, in which the reflective process is framed as leading toward a desired end state or future vision.

Building a journey

> "it definitely felt like a 'good enough' move in a more psychologically aware direction."
>
> "the challenge is to know the extent to which participants were already on the journey to self evolution"

Teleological aspect

> "from their vision on the organisation's primary task to what they can do to improve their individual tasks and as a team."

4.3 Workshop - Collective Sense-making

As part of the methodology of Participatory Narrative Inquiry, which advocates for returning narrative data to participants for collective sense-making, a workshop was held to explore emerging patterns from the narrative data. Depending on context, this process may begin with participants looking at raw stories or to some pre-arranged clustered themes. While these clusters reflect researcher interpretation, they were offered not as definitive conclusions, but as hypotheses for dialogue, aiming to spark reflection and conversation.

The workshop took place during a conference and brought together primarily change agents, consultants, and facilitators. While some participants had contributed to the

original survey, the majority were present in their broader role as organisational development practitioners who engage in reflective practitioners.

Participants sharing their experiences

The session began with participants sharing stories of their experience in creating or hosting reflective spaces. These narratives were not formally recorded but were noted for their content and resonance with existing patterns and hypotheses.

Several participants spoke about the challenges of maintaining reflective spaces in practice. One consultant described working in a healthcare environment where, despite intentions to promote open dialogue, reflective conversations were perceived as evaluative or disciplinary. Another shared a case where a client developed a dependency on the consultant's presence, transforming the space into something resembling a training session. When the consultant realised that transformation, they added the difficulty of re-contracting their role and maintaining the purpose of the reflective space.

These accounts echoed a key theme in the dataset: the centrality of the facilitator's role and the perceptions projected onto them, despite not being the explicit choice of a crucial factor according to survey participants.

Illustrative Pattern – Authority and Hosting

Pattern A from the data focused on the qualities and skills of the host or facilitator. During the workshop, one story illustrated this clearly: a participant described how the way the space was introduced led others to misinterpret the session as personal criticism rather than collective inquiry. Another account highlighted how the consultant became the repository for group reflection, with expectations to hold, direct, and interpret all meaning.

Interestingly, the workshop itself became a mirror of the dynamics under discussion. During a reflective moment, one participant turned to the facilitator (the researcher) and asked what was expected of them, and whether the session was "successful." This was followed by requests for interpretation and meaning. As a group, participants reflected on this dynamic, noting how the desire to defer interpretation to a figure of authority often plays out in the reflective spaces they facilitate. Therefore, the workshop became a live example of the very relational tensions described in the stories.

Exploring Transformation and Responsibility

Another set of reflections centred on transformation and responsibility. One participant observed that reflection often quickly moves toward personal change or toward locating saviours or scapegoats. This tendency was seen to divert attention away from structural or systemic issues, reducing collective inquiry to individualised action or blame.

This theme appeared to resonate with the group, surfacing questions about how reflective spaces can navigate the tension between personal growth and systemic awareness.

The workshop functioned both as a participatory space for validating and enriching narrative themes, and as an emergent data source in its own right. It surfaced key dynamics around:

- The role and projection of authority onto the change agent, host or consultant, asked to give the 'right' interpretation;
- The perceived interpretation of reflection spaces as having a hidden agenda: e.g., being evaluative;
- The tension between individual and collective inquiry and responsibility.

5 Discussion

Our results show that the creation and hosting of reflective spaces in organisations are influenced by several key factors, as perceived by change agents with direct experience in these processes. Among the emerging hypotheses, three appear to be the most consistently supported:

1. The anxiety experienced by groups within reflective spaces, and the tendency to activate individual and collective defence mechanisms;
2. The critical role of the change agent, including the need for negative capability and the self-perception of occupying a position of authority;
3. The dominance of an individualised framework of change, which tends to displace attention away from systemic, structural, and political components of transformation.

5.1 Group anxiety and defence mechanisms in reflective spaces

The open-ended nature of a reflective space can generate uncertainty and emotional discomfort. In psychodynamic terms, such discomfort is often managed unconsciously through projection, where participants displace their internal anxieties onto another person, in our case the change agent, who is in a position of authority. During the workshop, the group exhibited signs of what Bion (2003) called basic assumption dependency, as participants demanded clarity about what a "successful" session should look like, positioning the facilitator as responsible for making sense of the work done by the group. In other accounts, participants described a dynamic of basic assumption fight, manifesting in episodes where the facilitator was scapegoated or "pigeon-holed" into a narrowly defined and limiting mandate.

In parallel, the change agent can unconsciously manifest their own unresolved anxieties into the group, a process known in psychoanalytic theory as countertransference. During the workshop, I recognised my own anxiety when asked whether I considered the session had being a "success". My fear of being seen as incompetent was present, but I paused long enough to engage in self-inquiry, and later to invite the group in reflecting on the origin and intention behind the question. This opened a deeper conversation about how it may connect to the collective anxiety in the room, a likely projection when exploring a complex topic.

In both cases, projection and countertransference can be seen as defence mechanisms, protective responses to uncomfortable emotional states. However, when brought into awareness by the facilitator and the group, they can become, as Racker (2007) suggests in exploring the meaning of countertransference: "an important tool for understanding", serving as valuable material for the group's development. The ability to notice and work with these processes relies on the facilitator's engagement in reflection and reflexivity, practices that promote emotional awareness and support the development of negative capability.

5.2 The role of the change agent, self-reflection and reflexivity

The experiences gathered from our data and workshop reflections reveal a striking paradox: while change agents often underestimate the centrality of their own role, they are

simultaneously positioned as the epicentre of projected responsibility, dependency, and avoidance.

This discrepancy highlights the need for deeper reflexivity and dedicated reflective spaces for the change agent. As likely recipients of the group's unconscious dynamics, their task is not to react impulsively, but rather to cultivate what Paucar-Caceres et al. (2016) describe as "the ability to resist undertaking actions which only serve to calm anxiety." This lies at the heart of negative capability and is developed through ongoing practices of reflection, reflexivity, and emotional self-awareness.

One way to develop this is by recognising triggered emotions and using them as facilitators of transformation. In working with emotions themselves, change agents can better surface and share emotional dynamics within the group. Reflecting on the how facilitators deal with shame, Curtis (2023) states that the work "offers an opportunity to support others to recognise the shared nature of uncomfortable emotions".

Opportunities for reflexive practice are often supported through professional group settings and supervision, both of which are well established in the literature. Jackson (2021), writing on coaching supervision, suggests that reflexivity involves becoming progressively more aware of how one's circumstances shape their responses in the moment. Similarly, Calvert et al. (2016) introduces the concept of dialogical reflexivity, a process used in clinical supervision, which can support change agents in enhancing their relational and reflective competencies.

The data suggests that change agents frequently underestimate their impact on reflective spaces. They often do not anticipate how their presence and role may impact the group. In hosting reflective spaces, we suggest a need for structured opportunities for reflection for the facilitator, both to make sense of their practical experiences and to cultivate the reflexive awareness necessary to engage in the here-and-now dynamics of anxiety, projection, and countertransference.

5.3 Focus of Change Primarily on Individuals

Participants' interpretations of their experiences focused on individual behaviours and personal development rather than on organisational structures or systemic processes. This emphasis was evident both in narrative data and in workshop discussions, where reflective spaces were frequently aimed primarily for individual transformation. In many

cases, participants did not have a shared working environment or collective challenges, but instead described insights to enhance personal resilience and adaptive capacity.

Inputs such as “their own approach to dealing with the difficulties posed” or “how equipped they felt to meet the changing demands of that context” suggest that reflection was often framed as a way to support personal transition. Others focused on relational concerns, e.g., “I found again a way to communicate” or “I could not express myself”, suggesting that reflection served to rebuild individual confidence and relational functioning, rather than addressing systemic or cultural conditions.

Some contributions shifted from lived experience to abstract conceptual tools, such as “I presented five mind traps in complexity” or “we drew a relationship map”, probably aiming to invite further reflection. The outcomes of such invitations were not always clear but may indicate either a move toward more systemic reflection or a tendency to intellectualise experience while still centring the individual.

This focus on the individual echoes critiques in the organisational literature that argue reflection, when disconnected from social, political, and structural dimensions, can serve as a form of soft adaptation, helping individuals adjust to prevailing norms rather than fostering critical, novel change. In ‘Organising Reflection’, Vince (2002) critiques how reflection can be contained and sanitised in organisations, excluding emotional, political and power dynamics, and reduced to personal development.

> “The impetus for such reframing of reflection derives in part from acknowledging that within the workplace vested and often contradictory interests shape the way policies and decisions are understood and enacted.” (Vince, 2002, p. 4)

Although valid in some contexts, reflective spaces aimed at individual transformation can serve as strategies for conformity, avoiding engagement with the systemic and power dynamics that shape organisational life. In such cases, reflection becomes not a means of transformation, but a mechanism for stabilising the status quo, reinforcing the ideological myth that individuals alone are responsible for change. As Vince (2002) warns, reflection can be sanitised and depoliticised, while Mowles (2015) goes further, suggesting that reflexivity itself can be co-opted by dominant organisational regimes “to sustain and enhance what they are doing, rather than challenging it.”

One way this co-option occurs is by constraining reflective practice to individual behaviours and self-improvement, rather than encouraging inquiry into collective norms, institutional structures, and organisational ideologies. For sponsors and change agents facilitating reflective spaces, it is therefore crucial to ask: Who or what is this space in service of? Regularly reflecting on the intended purpose, limits, and systemic constraints of such spaces is essential to resisting their misuse and to enabling reflection that opens up, rather than closes down, possibilities for real change. Otherwise, reflective spaces risk becoming containers not for transformation, but for adaptation by teaching individuals to cope with conditions they are not empowered to change.

6 Conclusion

This study explored the impact of reflective spaces within organisations, focusing specifically on the experiences of those who create and host them, facilitators and consultants. Our inquiry started with examining a particular type of reflective space: critical rather than technical and engaging with ambiguity. These spaces were investigated for their potential to support individual and collective transitions during internal and external organisational change.

A contribution of this research lies in its use of change agents' narrative accounts and self-interpretations to identify emergent patterns. The emphasis on participant-led interpretation and a participatory ethnographic approach helped minimise researcher bias, positioning Participatory Narrative Inquiry as a compelling methodology for studying complex systems and organisational dynamics.

We incorporated the researcher's interpretative lens, grounded in system psychodynamics and insights from management theory. This framework enabled a deeper understanding of the unconscious individual and group processes triggered in organisational contexts, particularly under conditions of change and ambiguity.

Drawing on narrative survey responses and a facilitated workshop, we gathered experiential accounts that offered insights into how change agents perceive and navigate these reflective spaces. Our analysis revealed several areas for exploration, with a focus on those most consistently supported by the narrative data.

First, we examined the individual and collective defences that frequently surface

in reflective spaces. The inherent complexity and open-ended nature of these dialogues tend to evoke anxiety and a range of emotional responses. Our data pointed to dynamics such as projection and countertransference, and explored how they can serve as both defences and containers of these spaces.

Second, we considered the role of the facilitator or consultant. While survey respondents did not explicitly emphasise their role as crucial for the experiences shared, both narrative accounts and workshop discussions indicated their vital importance. We argued that the capacity to work with their own and the group's emotions, particularly looking at negative capability, is crucial for sustaining the integrity and purpose of a critical reflective space.

Finally, we observed a strong tendency for these spaces to focus on individual transformation, often at the expense of addressing deeper systemic or structural issues within the organisation. This individualised framing, while valuable, may also contribute to the depoliticisation of organisational life, thus maintaining existing power structures and limiting the range of what can be brought to reflection.

Reflective spaces hold significant potential as transitional environments, they are able to contain the anxiety and uncertainty that accompany today's organisational challenges. For these spaces to fulfil their purpose, special attention must be given to the emotional transitions they trigger, the preparedness and emotional resilience of the change agents involved, and the broader systemic impact they have the ability to serve. Engaging in reflection about the nature and function of reflective spaces can surface additional themes and areas of inquiry, broadening our understanding of their transformative capacity.

6.1 Practical Implications for Change Agents

From listening to how change agents experience creating and hosting reflective spaces, we can extract practical points of attention for practitioners engaged in such activities. Based on our study, change agents willing to engage in creating and hosting reflective spaces in organisations should:

Pay attention to the historical and social context in which the space will be created.

A rush to create a reflective space risks overlooking the organisation's mood, emotional undercurrents, and cultural dynamics, which can significantly impact what unfolds. These spaces, designed to deal with ambiguity and change, will likely surface latent or unconscious tensions. While it is impossible to predict exactly what will emerge, having a broader picture enables the change agent to host with more awareness and open space for systemic inquiry.

Strategies to become acquainted with the organisational context include spending time observing the environment, conducting informal interviews with key stakeholders, or even conducting a small-scale narrative inquiry like the one used in this study.

Align the space's purpose and contract the facilitator's respective role and mandate.

Given that the change agent or facilitator can become the target of projections and group anxieties, having a clear contract and mandate is essential. These help define the boundaries necessary for the work to unfold. In several experiences shared, facilitators were described as being repositioned, sometimes reduced to trainers, or stuck "in a role from which I can't deviate." Others noted their role being minimised as simply "holding the boundary of time."

A helpful framework tool here is BART—Boundaries, Authority, Role, and Task (Green and Molenkamp, 2005). It supports advance clarity about the space itself (What are its boundaries? What is its task?) and about the facilitator's position (What authority is granted or assumed? What is the intended and perceived role?). Clarifying these dimensions can help avoid unconscious role distortions and build a stronger foundation for the space.

Prepare internally by joining reflexive activities, working with colleagues or in supervision.

The ability to host reflective spaces requires not only theoretical understanding but internal capacity, especially around emotional containment and negative capability. As discussed in this study, reflective spaces often mirror the complexity they seek to address, and the facilitator is not immune to this. Handling difficult group dynamics,

projections, or silences can trigger responses in the facilitator that need to be managed with awareness.

Building this internal readiness often comes through practice. However, it can also be supported by joining reflexive activities with peers, participating in a community of practice, or engaging in individual or group supervision. Shadowing or being shadowed by a colleague can also create rich learning opportunities and foster a sense of containment and reflection for this internal work.

6.2 Contribution and Future Research

This study offers a novel contribution by exploring how change agents — including internal facilitators, consultants, and organisational leaders — experience creating and maintaining reflective spaces across diverse organisational contexts. Drawing on survey data and workshop-based narrative inquiry, it identifies recurring relational dynamics, such as authority projection, role ambiguity, and the tension between personal transformation and systemic critique.

Rather than offering prescriptive conclusions, the study frames reflective space itself as a dynamic site of inquiry. It positions the experiences of change agents not simply as data, but as entry points to a broader "meta-reflection" on how organisations engage with ambiguity, emotion, and learning. In this way, the research does not merely report findings, but invites an ongoing, collective dialogue within the field of change practice.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of Participatory Narrative Inquiry as both a data collection method and a reflective intervention. The research modelled reflective practice by returning patterns to participants and creating space for sensemaking.

Future research could expand on this approach by engaging larger and more diverse actors involved in reflective spaces. Studies might also compare experiences across different contexts or track how they evolve over time within a single organisation. Additionally, further inquiry could explore the interplay between reflective spaces and their influences on organisational power structures, change processes and organisational culture.

Ultimately, this research invites the study of reflection to be grounded in lived experience and collective participation. It proposes that research analysis and pattern recog-

nition can serve not as endpoints, but as material for ongoing sense-making and the advancement of reflective practice.

6.3 Closing Reflexivity: the Research Journey

This research emerged from a deeply felt tension in my ongoing practice as a facilitator of reflective spaces. While early conversations with clients often generate rich and promising data, the reflective spaces themselves frequently become overwhelmed by anxiety, defence mechanisms, or premature demands for closure. These moments, and my emotional responses to them, were the inspirations for this topic.

Background and Practical Context

The curiosity in exploring this topic came from my current practice of creating reflective spaces with clients. In a methodologically similar process to that used in this study, the current understanding of an organisation would be derived from listening to its stakeholders: how are you experiencing the daily organising, decision-making, and relations? What are the patterns that emerge from those accounts?

Patterns in hand, the next step would always be to either construct hypotheses of what those patterns might signify, in collaboration with the client or, in some cases, arrive with some hypotheses as triggers to an explorative conversation about how things might be.

Experiences had shown that this ethnographic approach resulted in rich and pertinent data, and created material to broaden understanding of a place's take on organising.

At this point, my emotional state was typically marked by enthusiasm about the many possibilities the collected data seemed to offer. However, what followed in the actual reflection sessions with clients often contrasted sharply with these initial hopes.

Experiences and Tensions Encountered

In many instances, the reflection space with the client proved disappointing. Even after framing the space as an exploratory one, the reality would show the enactment of defence mechanisms and increased anxiety that inevitably constrained the language and possibilities to what was known. Opportunities for exploration often led to a premature focus on diagnosis or explanation, or in a search to identify the next right decision.

In one instance, the client would come up with an explanation for every hypothesis of why people were leaving the organisation. In another, a hypothesis regarding internal conflict within top management was silenced and treated as taboo. On a third, the uncomfortable topic prompted the conversation to shift to a request for more work from the consultant. In all cases, a possible reflective space, even if framed as such, was blocked by emerging defences.

Many possible explanations could be extracted from these outputs, from my inability to properly host the space to the strong overall corporate culture of performance, responsibility displacement, and short-term results. These recurring challenges raised more profound questions about the factors that influence individual and collective behaviour in reflective spaces, including the change agent hosting it and the systemic and cultural dynamics at play within organisations.

Reflective Insights and Justification for the Study

Regardless of the explanations for those challenges, it was evident that they were not disconnected events and carried complex and intertwined forces, which spanned across individual, collective, and systemic dimensions.

This study is then an effort to add more voices to the experiences of creating reflective spaces, but also an opportunity to make more sense of those complex forces that prevent or allow collective reflective spaces in organisations. It emerges from the need to understand the structural and relational barriers to reflection, and to explore under what conditions such spaces can be a real contribution.

Frustration, Memory, and Countertransference

The choice of this study also connects to my realisation of a recurring emotion of frustration that is always present in those encounters, which might be a reaction to the defences of the client and evoke a tendency toward contrarianism during the interaction. There is a balance between holding an uncomfortable topic so transformation can happen and accepting the time and socio-political landscape. My past disappointments in working in corporate training environments or highly political multi-lateral organisations, where conversations often lacked depth or required long-term engagement to be meaningful, could explain my tendency to push some topics forward that are not ready to be pro-

cessed.

The frustration I experience with current clients is at least partly countertransference, a projection of emotional frustration from past professional contexts onto present reflective spaces. Recognising this frustration in future interactions allows me to work through it, rather than act it out. In this way, frustration can become a helpful trigger, an invitation to return to reflection on my role, my contribution within a larger system, and the long-term perspective required in complex endeavours.

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A Thesis Survey

Survey Introduction

Title: *Creating Reflective Spaces in Organisations — Experiences from Changing Agents, Consultants and Facilitators*

For change to happen in organisations, we often require transitional spaces — spaces of reflection that invite adaptive work and sense-making.

This study aims to collect experiences from people who create such reflective spaces and to extract possible patterns from the anonymous data. Your contribution will remain anonymous, and all data will be presented as aggregates. Quotes from your experience might be used, but these will be selected carefully to ensure anonymity.

Please share as many experiences as you'd like. If you have more than one, great — please submit them separately.

They can be successful or otherwise, including the ones you're still making sense of. All are welcome.

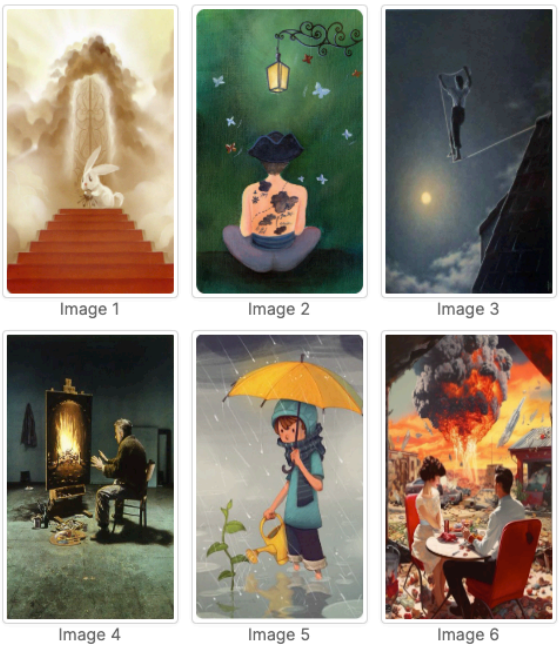
Survey Questions

1. In your role within organisations or teams, tell me about an experience in which you were directly or indirectly involved in a space aimed at reflection. What happened? Who was involved? What feelings and expressions were used?

2. Give a title or a hashtag # for your experience.

3. What image would best represent your experience?

What image would best represent your experience?



4. When looking at the experience you've just shared, how do you feel about it?

    - Frustrated
    - Proud
    - Excited
    - Confused
    - Sad
    - Other

5. What was your role during this reflective space?

    - Host / Facilitator
    - Sponsor
    - Participant
    - Team Leader / Manager
    - External Consultant
    - None of the above

6. In the experience you shared, what was the focus of reflection?
   Scale: People and Behaviour (0) —— (100) Structures and Processes

7. What was most present in the interaction?
   Scale: Concrete Experiences (0) —— (100) Abstract Concepts

8. How much do you believe different frames of reference were being explored?
   Scale: Not at all (0) —— (100) Extensively

9. What factors were crucial to the process and outcome of the experience you shared?
   (Choose all that apply)

   - More experienced participants and facilitators
   - Have a relational process / Building relationships
   - Embracing differing perspectives to help participants see beyond themselves
   - Clarifying roles and expectations
   - Facilitator / Consultant qualities
   - Mirroring and being participant-centred
   - A safe, supportive, and blame-free environment
   - Helping participants understand reflection and encouraging dialogue
   - Other

10. What type of sector did the experience take place in?

    - Third Sector / NGO
    - Private Sector
    - Multi-lateral Organisations
    - Government
    - Other

11. **About You**

    - Gender

- Male
- Female
- Other
- Prefer not to say

- What region are you based in?
  - Latin America
  - Europe
  - Asia-Pacific
  - Africa
  - North America
  - Prefer not to say

12. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience?

Original Source: https://augustocuginotti.com/emc-thesis-survey/

Images Source: https://www.pinterest.com/cassagram/dixit-cards/