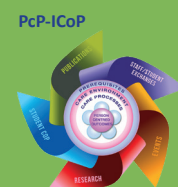


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## CRITICAL REFLECTION ON PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT

### The Student International Community of Practice: a critical reflection on the shared experience of being a member, using creative hermeneutics

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#### Abstract

*Background:* The Student International Community of Practice is a global network of more than 30 doctoral candidates affiliated with the Centre for Person-centred Practice Research, at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh. An ongoing challenge the community faces is its changing and growing membership; as members progress and complete their doctoral studies they leave the group, and as the centre grows new community members (doctoral candidates) join.

*Aim:* To explore and describe the experience of being a member of the Student International Community of Practice, using a creative process of reflection and collaborative analysis, and to identify the implications for the future of the community and the integration of new members.

*Conclusion:* The Student International Community of Practice is a valuable social learning experience for those who are members. It will continue to be a flourishing safe space if, despite its changing membership, we pay explicit attention to our agreed purpose, ways of working and values.

*Implications for practice/academic research:*

- Belonging to a sustainable and flourishing community of practice enhances learning, and decreases isolation and loneliness on the doctoral journey
- A community of practice is sustainable when it is underpinned by a clear purpose, agreed ways of working and values, to which all members consistently pay explicit attention

**Keywords:** Community of practice, safe space, person-centredness, doctoral studies, creativity, creative hermeneutic analysis

## **Introduction**

The Student International Community of Practice (SICoP) has been thriving since its creation in 2010. It comprises more than 30 members, who are doctoral candidates affiliated with the Centre for Person-centred Practice Research, operating out of Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh (QMU). The SICoP was originally born at the Person-centred Practice Research Centre at Ulster University, Northern Ireland (Lynch and Frost, 2015) before evolving and moving to Edinburgh. Over this time the community has stayed true to its intent: to foster a space for meaningful connection and collaborative learning that facilitates creative and innovative approaches to person-centred research for members.

A community of practice is defined by Wenger et al. (2002, p. 4) as: '[a group] of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis'. The SICoP's common and binding thread (topic) is person-centred practice research. Biannual face-to-face meetings provide the foundation for our community of practice, and further informal interaction is supported by a closed Facebook group – the agreed medium of communication for members. Connections also continue to be strengthened during informal social gatherings on the evenings of the face-to-face meetings, and by meeting at conferences, linking virtually and writing together. Finally, the SICoP benefits from professorial oversight and input from doctoral supervisors, who are affiliated with the Centre for Person-centred Practice Research.

In 2015, Lynch and Frost authored the first collaborative critical reflection on the experience of being SICoP members. They described how the 'shared learning and co-creation of knowledge' fostered within the community added immense value to the overall experience of an individual doctoral journey, which has been described as lonely and isolating (Janta et al., 2012). While the individual experience of being a part of the SICoP is unique, membership fosters meaningful connections and networks with others on an international platform and in a safe space.

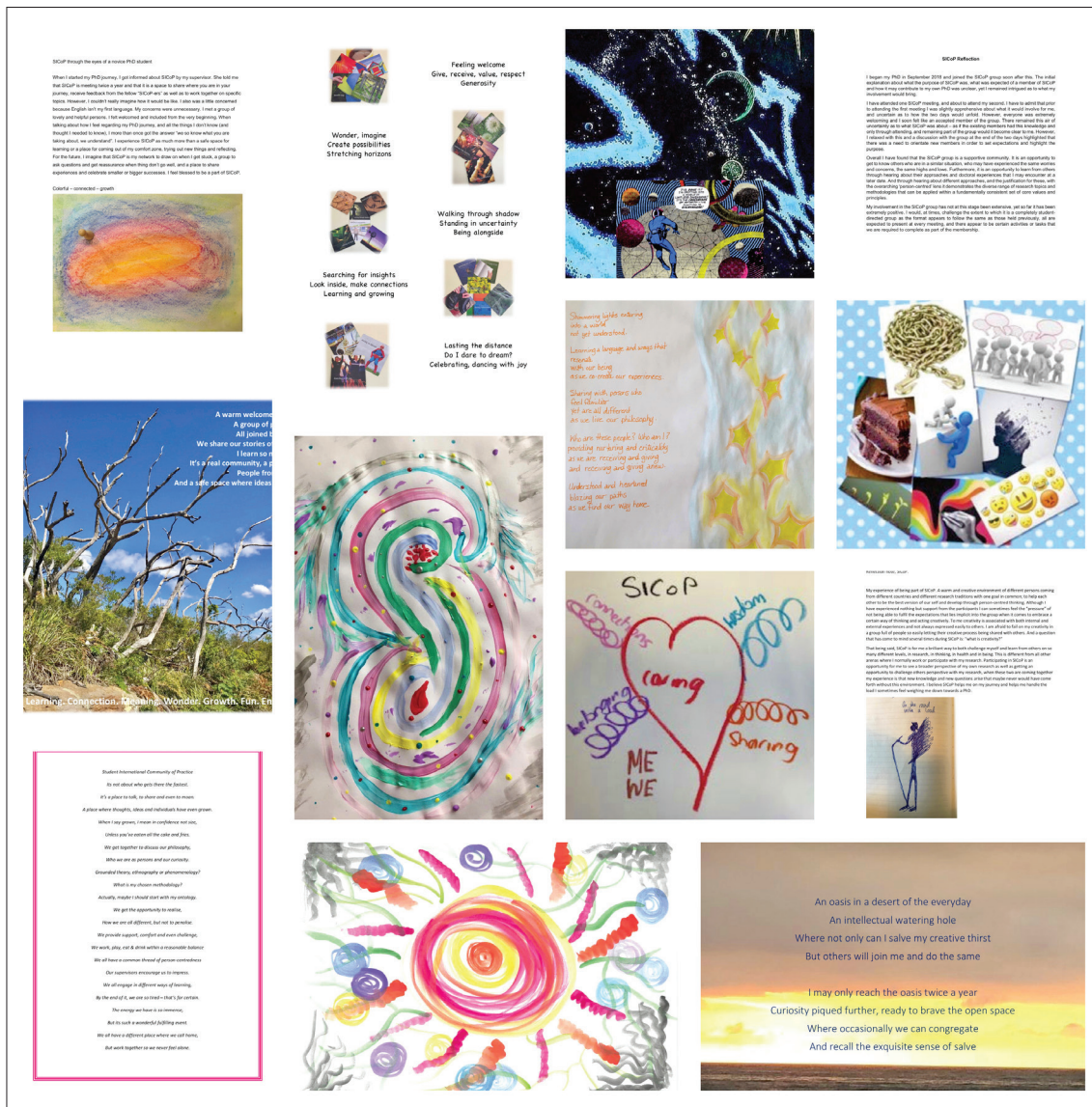
## **Aims of the article**

In recognition of the initial uncertainty of new members, the current SICoP members decided to engage in a process of individual reflection and collaborative analysis to make the experience of membership more explicit. Using the Rolfe et al. (2001) model of critical reflection 'What? So what? Now what?' as a structure, this article describes the processes used for individual reflection and collaborative analysis using adapted creative hermeneutic data analysis (Boomer and McCormack, 2010). It covers the themes that emerged and the learning and implications for the community in the future.

## **What?**

In December 2018, five SICoP members met virtually to discuss the ways in which we could work collaboratively to reflect on and share our experiences of being part of the community of practice. Following this meeting, we used our Facebook group to ask the SICoP members to create individual reflections on their experience of membership. They volunteered their reflections at the next biannual meeting in April 2019 (see Figure 1 and [tinyurl.com/fons-sicop](https://tinyurl.com/fons-sicop)). A collaborative analysis of the individual reflections was undertaken at the meeting, enabling us to co-create a collective understanding of the experience of SICoP members, and also provide a learning opportunity to engage in a creative analysis process.

Figure 1: Collage of Individual reflections



Working creatively is a practice that is encouraged by the Centre for Person-centred Practice Research. McNiff (1998, p 36) argues that ‘artistic knowing is different from intellectual knowing: this distinction is the basis of its creative value’, which enables us to become more open to ‘new ways of seeing and understanding’ (Simons and McCormack, 2007, p 295). Using the creative arts can help people to access experiential, embodied and tacit knowledge (van Lieshout, 2013); knowledge that might otherwise remain hidden or ignored (Weber, 2008). Similarly, when thinking about how we might analyse the individual reflections, we turned to and adapted the creative hermeneutic approach developed by Boomer and McCormack (2010), outlined below in Figure 2. Drawing upon the work of Gadamer (1993), this approach invites meaning to emerge through the subjective interpretation of individuals, rather than through cognitive interrogation of the data (Boomer and McCormack, 2010). The narratives created by the three small groups are shared in Table 1.

**Figure 2: Creative hermeneutic data analysis (adapted from Boomer and McCormack, 2010, p. 644)**

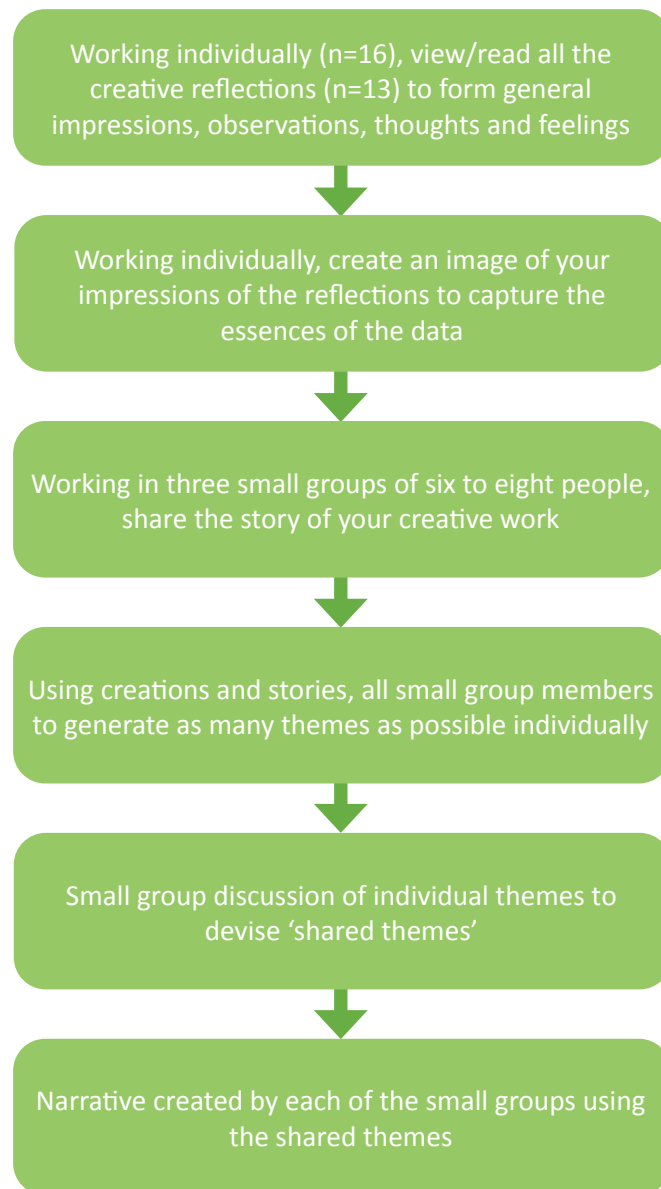


Table 1: Narratives created by each of the three small groups

**Group 1**

We strive towards creating a safe space that will enable authentic being and connecting around a common thread of person-centredness  
We enable self and others through creativity, curiosity, nurturing challenge, sharing differing perspectives and celebrations  
We experience certainty and uncertainty each time we come together, but also fun, support, love, energy, struggle and useful uncertainty  
Ultimately this enables growth and learning

**Group 2**

Valuing friendship  
Learning, challenge and support  
Trust uncertainty  
  
Nourish connection  
Safe co-creativity  
Kindness, trust and warmth  
  
Diverse fellowship  
Community acceptance  
Colour, sparkle, flow

**Group 3**

Within the context of a person-centred community of practice  
Persons connecting in a safe space  
With a structure, where fears and expectations can be explored  
Learning and reflection takes place  
Where all that glitters is not necessarily gold  
There you can find the courage to be creative  
Crafting a culture of celebration through sharing, authenticity and support

Following this process, the individual creative reflections and collective narratives were stored in Google Docs. Seven members of the SICoP agreed to review these and co-author this article. Through this process, an overarching theme and two related subthemes were identified (see Figure 3). The co-authors identified a theme/subtheme to explore and writing partnerships were created.

Figure 3. Overarching theme and subthemes emerging from the three narratives



#### So what?

#### ***Overarching theme: Persons connecting around the theme of person-centredness in a safe space***

The connection experienced in SICoP is what motivates us to participate actively and remain part of this community of practice. The connection is different for each of us, and the acceptance of our uniqueness as individuals is an integral part of our experience. Previous SICoP members describe being part of the community as a 'common ground and co-creation of an accepting and safe space' (Lynch and Frost, 2015). Since the SICoP was established, members have taken responsibility for the common ground we connect on, and how the safe space is maintained. Continually revisiting our agreed ways of working at each meeting to create this 'safe space' is one way we pay attention to this. However, a challenge is presented by the changing membership and the increasing number of participants at each meeting. Creating a safe space for each member in a fluid group, and enabling active learning and transformation of perspectives is an ongoing task for the SICoP.

The term 'safe space' is relatively new, reportedly generated in the 1960s in the context of safety for women (Gun, 2018). The Merriam-Webster dictionary (n.d.) defines safe space as one '...intended to be free of bias, conflict, criticism, or potentially threatening actions, ideas, or conversations'. The term has been further explored in the context of research. For example, Titchen et al. (2017) argue the intentional creation of psychologically safe spaces is aligned with the concept of relational connectedness. Such spaces can facilitate criticality and creativity, enabling transformative learning to emerge as a conscious and intentional process (Titchen et al., 2017). hooks and Cox (2014) challenge the concept of safe spaces, preferring to think about creating spaces where people can be brave and take risks.

The aim of creating a safe space in the SICoP is for each person to feel acknowledged and valued within the group, enabling them to make meaningful contributions and to be courageous with their learning,

and helping them to grow and develop as person-centred researchers and doctoral candidates (Titchen et al., 2017). The narratives suggest the current SICoP members experience a sense of safety through belonging, connectedness and acceptance. However, we need to ensure as we move forward that this continues and is not lost in the growth and development of SICoP as an evolving person-centred community of practice.

### ***Subtheme 1: Authentic being – individuality while belonging***

The League of European Research Universities (LERU, 2014) suggests that for doctoral research to be successful, the candidate must be working in a positive culture, with a balance of support and room for creative freedom. This space must allow for formal and informal communication where ideas can flourish. In the context of SICoP the acceptance, kindness, trust and warmth members experience creates a safe 'place' in time and space for doctoral candidates to be themselves. Within our group we are mindful that communities of practice are not limited by their formal structure (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015), and in fact connect people across both organisations and geographical locations. For example, our community of practice has members who participate internationally with whom we connect regularly through the Facebook group. The analysis shows members feel that although they are part of a collective group, their individuality and uniqueness still shines through.

We believe that in order to be person-centred, it is crucial to be authentic and to bring 'you' and who you are into the group and consequently into your research. Mantai (2015) contributes to the literature on doctoral experience and researcher development by outlining instances and practices that help doctoral candidates to identify themselves as researchers. In doing so, Mantai (2015) highlights that a person undertaking a PhD needs to feel validated as a researcher by self and by others. This emphasises the social nature of researcher identification and development, something with which we strongly identify. It is clear from the narratives that members feel the SICoP is a place to truly be themselves. Further to this, authenticity in the community enables members to explore how they can influence and shape their own research – for example, their choice of research question, their philosophical underpinnings and their methodology.

Having a strong sense of identity and the time and space to be oneself is influenced by community's acceptance, kindness, trust and warmth, all of which were identified in the analysis of information from SICoP members. Titchen and McCormack (2010) argue that being open to non-traditional ways of knowing, being and doing is necessary for person-centred research and can enhance authenticity for candidates. SICoP members try to facilitate this through providing supportive challenge to enhance ideas, engage in creative ways of learning and experience new things together – for example, experimenting with different and creative research methods.

### ***Subtheme 2: Growth and learning (of self and others)***

The second subtheme emerging from the analysis was growth and learning. In his book on change management *Theory U* (2016), Otto Scharmer invites persons to open their mind, heart and will as a way to facilitate growth. This closely aligns with the SICoP's values.

Having an *open mind* is evidenced in the SICoP by the authentic curiosity of its members. The willingness to help others understand and to be understood opens us up to varying perspectives on our research, practice and ways of being. Our individual and collective readiness to pay attention to the space and relationships we create leads us to acknowledge what we see, hear, feel and imagine as we grow and learn together. Having an open mind means overcoming our inner *voice of judgment* (Scharmer, 2016, p. 43), allowing our presence and creativity to increase.

An *open heart* begins with the existing openness and warmth of SICoP as new members are welcomed. 'Being in relation' (McCormack and McCance, 2017, p 17) invites members to open our hearts; we connect with one another as persons, giving and receiving support and love. While this does require

us to connect with and share our vulnerability, it in turn opens our capacity for growth and learning. Our open hearts invite us to remain courageous as we share our perspectives and explore our fears and expectations.

Embodying curiosity, courage and connection with one another, we are led to deeper experiences and understandings. Members move beyond open minds and open hearts to *open will*, as they let go of the *voice of fear* (Scharmer, 2016, p 44) that can block growth. Individual and collective disorienting dilemmas are resolved as we synchronise our open minds, open hearts and open wills. Woven throughout our growth and learning are the threads of creativity, fun, energy and celebration; it is these threads that sustain our growth and learning. Lynch and Frost (2015) suggest these connections evoke passion and energy for the doctoral journey, something the current SiCoP members continue to experience in the constantly evolving community of practice.

### **Now what?**

Although Seyfang and Smith (2007) express concern about the longevity of any community, we would argue that this article (flowing on from the 2015 work of Lynch and Frost) provides evidence of the sustainability of the SiCoP. Reflecting on the theme and subthemes identified in SiCoP members' narratives (see Table 2), it could be suggested that these evince both the processes and the outcomes of our community of practice. It is paying consistent attention to these that makes the SiCoP sustainable. Sustainability of our community of practice is vital if future generations of doctoral candidates are to benefit from this enabling, safe and authentic environment.

Bradbury and Middlemass (2015) suggest it is the passing on of knowledge and skills that contributes to the sustainability of communities of practice. Similarly, Lave and Wenger (1991) propose that learning occurs through generations of participants. This has certainly been our experience, as we see candidates learn and grow throughout their membership of the SiCoP, ultimately sharing their new knowledge and learning with those who follow behind. One cautionary note does emerge: Lynch and Frost (2015) identify integration of new members and connectivity of persons as the greatest challenges for the SiCoP. We recognise that our community of practice must always pay attention to our agreed ways of working, values and purpose if we are to maintain the flourishing environment.

Consistent with Bradbury and Middlemass (2015), the passing on of knowledge, such as the group purpose, aims and experiences of existing SiCoP members, enables this to be considered by the new members. This facilitates the sustainability of the SiCoP, by providing the opportunity to explore any issues around power, safety, connectivity and uncertainty associated with entering the SiCoP. When members pay attention to the agreed ways of working, ensuring that shared values are lived within the group, it becomes evident that the SiCoP space is safe, social and authentic, making it conducive to learning for doctoral candidates.

### **Ethical considerations**

Formal ethics approval was not sought for this reflection and analysis process. However, this does not mean that ethical issues were not considered with the members of the group. The SiCoP works on the premise of a safe space, where members are comfortable to authentically share their experiences with each other and the broader community. All members who participated did so voluntarily and consented to the use of their reflective piece in the analysis and in the published article.

### **Conclusions**

By undertaking the reflective process described, the community of practice was able to analyse the lived experience of what it means to be a member of the SiCoP using a creative hermeneutic approach. Being a member is a vital social learning experience that enhances the doctoral journey and enables growth as a person-centred researcher. Furthermore, we found that being true to the agreed ways of working and shared values of the SiCoP made the community of practice sustainable. However, we recognise the continuing need to pay explicit attention to these to enable an ongoing flourishing safe space for all members.



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