

Critical Reflexivity

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1



2

Reflexivity

- **Reflexivity can be described as** the process of exploring the ways in which researchers and their subjectivities affect what is and can be designed, gathered, interpreted, analyzed, and reported in an investigation.
 - Researchers are unavoidably present and influential in the inquiry.
 - Major epistemological differences on how to interpret and deal with the researcher's presence.
 - Also, need to think critically about WHAT is present (the ontological dimensions of the researcher and the research rapport)
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- 3
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Main kinds of reflexivity

1. personal reflections on the influence of the researcher's identities and positions on the inquiry;
 2. analyses of the mutual relations between participants (or data) and investigators and how they affect the research;
 3. critical considerations on assumptions, expectations, and boundaries of the researcher's specific discipline.
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Theoretical assumptions

1. Realism
2. Humanism and universalism
3. Representationalism (linguistic)



5

Realism

- ▣ Content of reflexivity
 - ▣ Independent from the observer
 - ▣ Existing “*a priori*”: before the act, context, and process of the reflexive analysis
- ▣ Reification
- ▣ Invitation to mechanistic epistemological positions
 - ▣ Determinism
 - ▣ Controlling the cause will change the effect
 - ▣ Contents of reflexivity (e.g., biases, positions, agendas, ideologies) as variables

6



7

Researchers act and react on positions and assumptions that – at least potentially – direct their choices and practices. By “clearly exposing the influences that have shaped the design and conduct of the research” (Garnham, 2008, p. 193), reflexivity becomes “a way for researchers to inform their audiences about their perspectives as well as to manage their subjectivities” (Morrow, 2005, p. 250) to help avoiding arbitrariness (Hoshmand, 2005) and to move “beyond the partiality of our previous understandings” (Finlay, 2003, p. 108).

8

Some alternatives...

- Research as a process of co-construction
 - relational
 - discursive
 - performative
- Focus on genealogy (Foucault)
 - Processes: "Everything is said by an observer" (Maturana)
 - Conditions of possibility that make something appear as "true" (politics of truth) or as "worth-considering" (problematization)
 - How boundaries are produced



9

- Realist underpinnings in which reflexivity is reduced to a "method of self-positioning [that] remains caught up in geometries of sameness" (Barad, 2007, p. 72).
- "All interpretations are provisional; they are made by positioned subjects who are prepared to know certain things and not others" (Rosaldo, 2009, p. 170).
- While positions influence what is and can be known in a study, the boundaries of knowledge (i.e., what can and cannot be known) are not fixed.

10

Instances:

- ▣ The redefinition of issues and the re-working of the analysis that takes place while writing a report ("Writing as a method of inquiry" by Richardson & St Pierre, 2005)
- ▣ The links between data and agency, evidence, beliefs (Denzin, 2013)
- ▣ The ethical aspects linked to perceptions of the researcher's role and expectations (Fine & Weis, 1996) or the researcher-researched rapport (Gemignani, 2011).

A tentative attempt to rewrite positioning and reflexivity

- ▣ a researcher is studying a phenomenon that she personally lived (*Think of an example that is relevant in/for your inquiry*)
- ▣ Instead of seeing reflexivity as a sort of confession (e.g., "this interpretation of mine was influenced by my experience of X"), we could say something like this...

- “In the context of this inquiry, the X phenomenon becomes relevant to me because, through the participants’ stories and my personal experience of X, I realized that social constructions of X promote specific trajectories of interpretations (i.e., specific directions or power/knowledge structures that both limit and allow for particular interpretations) for X, including its relations to other people and phenomena, its impact in/for individuals, groups and societies, and its consequences for them. Therefore, these views of X create specific possibilities for the becoming of those who have experienced X and find themselves in discursive practices and situated narratives about experiences of X. In this inquiry, I develop alternative and shifting interpretations of X through the process of gaining more knowledge about it.
- It becomes interesting and useful to explore not only X, but also the genealogy of its different constructions or **constitutions**, and the ways in which these genealogies and constitutions lead to different ‘truths,’ possibilities, and interpretations of X, including its very **reality** and experiences.”

13

Humanism

- The centrality of the researcher
- Reflexivity as cognitive act, finalized to increase self-awareness
- and to confess (Foucault, 1979, 1982; Pillow, 2003)
 - Subjectivity / subjectivation
- to “produce a more complete account of the research project” (Marecek, 2003, p. 63)
- In summary, the researcher “becomes a human instrument” (Guba & Lincoln, 1988, p. 83).

14

Complexity in humanism and phenomenology

- Humanism as opposed to reductionism and scientific determinism
- Emphasis on intersubjective dialogue
- “relational humanism” (in particular, Merleau-Ponty) prominently introduced topics of intersubjectivity, sociality, embodiment, historicity, language, and interpretation
- Nonetheless,
 - eventual centrality of the thinking/sensing subject
 - emphasis on accuracy and the risk of subjectivity

15

Universalism

- Universal goodness of reflexivity
- Counterpoint:
 - Universality of the process, not the content
 - But, the separation of process (the act of observing, the performing of a research) and content is an realist and representationalist epistemological position.

16

Alternative considerations...

- Focus on social and discursive practices that normalize the subjects and concerns of a discipline.
- Focus on the ways in which research designs and practices may contribute to the existence of the object or phenomenon of interest

Representationalism

- Direct correspondence between the language in use to represent a reality and such reality
- Reflexivity as instrument to increase accuracy and validity
- Reflections as intentional processes wholly determined by what they represent

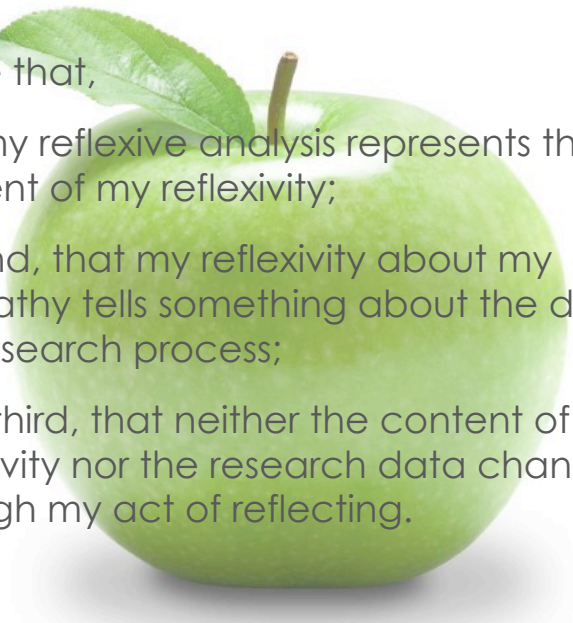
An example:

- Let's suppose, for instance, that my research concerns issues toward which I feel very close and, therefore, I decide that, in my reflexive analysis, I should reflect on my sympathy toward the participants.
- According to representationalism, the predicates and narratives that I use to describe my feelings derive directly from the qualities of the stories I heard.
- If these qualities change, my emotional reactions (that form the phenomenology of my experience of the participants' stories) will change too. By attending to my sympathy, I assume that I am able to use my cognitive abilities to look at the qualities of my feeling and, hopefully, generate some insights from this experience.

19

I assume that,

1. first, my reflexive analysis represents the content of my reflexivity;
2. second, that my reflexivity about my sympathy tells something about the data or the research process;
3. and, third, that neither the content of reflexivity nor the research data change through my act of reflecting.



20

Reflexivity as looking glass



21

Reflexivity as cartography

The lines in the map derive from the perceptions of the territory and from the purpose of the communication



22

"The real question is not why it was that Elizabeth Tudor chose not to marry, but rather how it came to be that there was a social structure in which her refusal to marry could have such enduring political consequences" (Abbott, 2005, p. 1).

- Stuart Hall: ethnicity is not observed or even less discovered (Hall, 2006).
- ethnicity is created within and through representation
- there is no explanation or "understanding of ethnicity outside culture and representation" (Procter, 2004, p. 125).
- Impossible separation between ethnicity and its representation
- A critical awareness of its political and constitutive processes becomes necessary: "The problem of representation therefore includes both an epistemological and an ethical-political dimension" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 200).

23

Some proposals...

- Put on hold the assumption that "there are representations and ontologically separate entities awaiting representation (Barad, 2007, p. 49)
- Focus instead on
 - the practices and performances of representing
 - the productive effects of these practices
 - The conditions for their communication and acceptance (for instance, by the scientific community or funding agencies)
- How would a direct engagement (rather than a detached observation) with the world/issue be like? What knowledge would it allow for? What consequences would it have?

24

Reflexivity as process ontology

- ▣ What's constituted through the practice of reflexivity?
- ▣ How come some content of reflexivity became "true" to me?
- ▣ What possibilities (for knowledge and ethics) does this representation create or allow for?

25

But, is there a guarantee that oppressors will be less oppressive just because they become self-conscious?
Consciousness-raising can only be preparatory to a critique that might have a chance of being truly subversive.
(Fabian, 1990, p. 768)

26

Conclusions

Reflexivity as crucial and defining for QR:

1. Relational nature of QR
2. Questions the possibility of stable (vs. fluid) and single (vs. plural, localized) knowledge
3. Underscores the importance of context and discourse in research interpretation and analysis.

27

- Important to be reflexive about reflexivity and the genealogical formation of the realities that are not so much identified but constructed through the reflexive analysis.
- Reflexivity as performance.
- From reflexivity as tool, strategy, or standard to reflexivity as inquiry in itself

28

- If everything moves, but yet we perceive and desire continuity and stability, then the key epistemological question for the social scientist concerns the exploration of the ways in which the discursive boundaries that create an object, concern, or issue and, with it, the perception of its continuity and importance, are produced.

The example of experience:

Experience in general and, in the specific, the experiential content of a reflexive analysis "is at once always already an interpretation *and* something that needs to be interpreted. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, and always therefore political. [...] Experience is, in this approach, not the origin of our explanation, but that which we want to explain" (Scott, 1991, p. 797)

Experience can be understood as the "correlation, inside a culture, between fields of knowledge, modes and type of 'normativity,' and forms of subjectivity" (Foucault, *The use of pleasure*, p. 5)



"The architecture of empathy" by John Isaacs (photo taken in Milan, in March 2016, at the 2050 Exhibit)

31



32

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33

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34

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35

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36

- Instead of being better, interpretations that are informed by reflexivity are potentially critical of the researcher's positions, but not for this they are necessarily more accurate. If the goodness of reflexivity is due to its mere practice, then reflexivity becomes a humanistic celebration of the researcher's centrality. The same outcome would of course result from the absence of reflexivity.

37

Conoscenza "agantica"

- Taking an epistemic and ontological position in which representations are not seen as "reflexive but constitutive and therefore have a real, material impact" (Procter, 2004, p. 125), means to shift toward a performative and agentic view of knowledge. Instead of mirroring or representing something, agentic knowledge is concerned about the ways in which it makes or constructs realities (Barad, 2007) and the ways in which objects and their representations mutually construct each other. This epistemological position leads scientists to forms of critical engagement with the research, as the focus of science shifts from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality (i.e., mirroring and representation), "to matters of practice or doing or actions" (Barad, 2007, p. 28). Stepping away from the assumption of the centrality of interpretation and the thickness that characterizes "deep" re-search opens the inquiry toward horizontal explorations of knowledge and toward ongoing critical negations and constitutions of power, which is seen as a force that is both limiting and constitutive (Braidotti, 2013).

38

- reflexivity still plays an important role for qualitative inquiry, not as a realist and humanist tool of research but as a constitutive and performative practice.
- reflexivity is not merely about something, but for something too.
- reflexivity not as a tool or strategy but as inquiry in itself.
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39

- Ricercatori are part of disciplinary and institutional discourses and forms of knowledge that contribute to make the content of a reflexive analysis appear as an external reality, which researchers observe, analyze, and represent. The content and results of the reflexive analysis substantiate then the view of the researcher's mind itself, which is seen as being concerned about true issues and influences "to the degree that they adequately 'represent' or 'refer to' facts or states of affairs in 'reality'" (Madison, 1999, p. 247). The discursive process of asserting the existence of phenomena and issues through their problematization and analysis (Foucault, 1983) is further validated by the formation of apparatuses or dispositifs dedicated to study, assert, and defend its ontological reality (Foucault, 1977), such as research and practice institutions, scientific communities and journals, and funding and governmental agencies that include reflexivity among the standards for quality of qualitative inquiry.

40

Ontologie relazionali vs. Representazionismo

- Ken Gergen (2014) invites qualitative researchers to embrace a form of critical knowledge (including reflexivity) that is neither representational nor empirical. Renato Rosaldo's reflections on the experience of losing his wife during an ethnographic study provide an example of a relational ontology that is infused with critical reflexivity. Instead of either neglecting or fully embracing the self-centered dimensions of research, he acknowledges the tension between the two positions. Rather than resolving it, he thoughtfully and bodily considers the complex entanglement of emotions, responsibilities, and positions that is not uncommon in studies in which an additional "force, among other things, opens to question the common anthropological assumption that the greatest human import resides in the densest forest of symbols and that analytical detail, or 'cultural depth,' equals enhanced explanation" (Rosaldo, 2009, p. 167). Seeing reflexivity as a tool to analyze symbols, gain analytical depth, reduce biases, or control agendas still carries a research mandate to represent. This post-positivist view of reflexivity neglects the constitutive properties of language, which should instead be a central area of a reflexive analysis.

41

- From a relational perspective, reality is a network or an open system of fluid interpretations of interpretations, with no end or definite answers. Objects, subjects, observers, issues, and dynamics do not precede their mutual constitution and do not exist as discrete elements.

42

Separazione tra conoscenza e processo.
Questa e' la base della ricerca azione