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Reflexivity in Qualitative Research

The term *reflexivity* is widely used in organisational research. The concept of reflexivity has been part of qualitative research methods in organisational research for a number of decades, so it is not a new phenomenon. However, as qualitative methods have become more prominent and more accepted within social science, reflexivity has increased in significance and has become embedded in debates about the nature of knowledge.

But what does reflexivity actually mean? How does it affect the way we approach research? How is it applied in practice? This chapter will address these questions with a discussion of the meaning of reflexivity and its significance in organisational research, together with some examples of reflexive research practice.

What is reflexivity?

In simple terms, reflexivity is an awareness of the researcher's role in the practice of research and the way this is influenced by the object of the research, enabling the researcher to acknowledge the way in which he or she affects both the research processes and outcomes. It is often termed as the process by which research turns back upon and takes account of itself (Alvesson, Hardy, & Harley, 2008; Weick, 2002), described by Clegg and Hardy (1996, p. 4) as 'ways of seeing which act back on and reflect existing ways of seeing'. Reflexivity involves awareness that the researcher and the object of study affect each other mutually and continually in the research process (Alvesson & Skoldburg, 2000). In other words, researcher reflexivity involves thinking about how our thinking came to be, how pre-existing understanding is constantly revised in the light of new understandings, and how this in turn affects our research.

Some researchers may query the difference between reflection and reflexivity. Hibbert, Coupland and MacIntosh (2010) provide a useful distinction between the two: that reflection suggests a mirror image which affords the opportunity to engage in an observation or examination of our ways of doing, or observing our own practice, whereas reflexivity is more complex, involving thinking about our experiences and questioning our ways of doing. Alvesson and Skoldburg (2000) suggest there are two key elements embedded within reflexive research – interpretation *and* reflection. The interpretive element recognises that interpretation is not just based on a simple analysis of facts or data, which reflects some kind of ‘reality’; instead it is aware that interpretation is influenced by the assumptions of the researcher doing the research, their values, political position, use of language. They suggest it calls for the utmost awareness of the theoretical assumptions, importance of language and of pre-understandings brought to the research. The second element is reflection – where the researcher turns attention to themselves, their research community and their intellectual and cultural conditions and traditions informing the research. Reflection becomes a form of interpretation of the interpretation, and this is what makes the research reflexive. We reflect on how our intellectual, perceptual, theoretical, ideological, cultural, textual, cognitive, principles and assumptions inform the interpretation. For Cunliffe (2004) the distinction between a reflective analysis and critical reflexive questioning relates to assumptions about the nature of reality: ‘a reflective analysis draws on traditional assumptions that there is an objective reality that we can analyse using logic and theory, whereas reflexivity draws on social constructionist assumptions to highlight subjective, multiple constructed realities’ (Cunliffe, 2004, p. 414).

Hence, reflexivity goes beyond simple reflection on the research process and outcomes, to incorporate multiple layers and levels of reflection within the research. These would include

considering the complex relationships between the production of knowledge (epistemology), the processes of knowledge production (methodology), and the involvement and impact of the knowledge producer or researcher (ontology). Reflexivity enables the research processes and outcomes to be open to change and adaptive in response to these multiple layers of reflection.

Conceptualising reflexivity

Conceptualisations of reflexivity therefore vary according to the researcher's own epistemological and ontological assumptions:

An objectivist view assumes a form of pre-existing social reality which can be researched by an independent researcher, where what is described exists independently of the researcher's description of it. An account of reality mirrors reality. Hence, reflexivity may be used as a technique or tool for evaluating the role of the researcher in the research process, often with a view to eradicating bias in research design and analysis, in order to maintain the objective position of the researcher. Often, fieldwork confessions are utilised to account for the field roles adopted by the researcher in the research, and the means of ensuring analytical distance by avoiding over familiarity and maintaining sufficient detachment. The self (researcher) and the other (researched) are considered as independent entities. However, this view might be deemed to consider only the method and not the ontological and epistemological assumptions which underlie it.

A subjectivist view questions the independent existence of reality and the researcher's role in researching it, suggesting that knowledge is socially constructed. The researcher's interpretation and representation of reality through their research therefore actively creates

reality. Hence, reflexivity is used here to question knowledge claims and enhance understanding by acknowledging the values and preconceptions the researcher brings to that understanding. Within ethnomethodological approaches, such as interpretative research, insights can be drawn from ‘pre-understanding’ i.e. ‘knowledge, insights, and experience before [engaging in] a research program’, and ‘understanding’ i.e. ‘knowledge that develops during the program’ (Gummesson, 1991, p. 50), such that prior-knowledge, experience, and new knowledge interact. For post-modernists, the social construction of reality is constituted within discursive and textual practices, where no fixed truths are privileged and a number of fluid, emergent and multiple truths may emerge. Hence, reflexivity is often centred on the process of writing and interpreting text, in all its various and multiple forms.

Cunliffe’s (2003) conceptualisation of ‘radical-reflexivity’ suggests that researchers ‘need to go further than questioning the truth claims of others, to question how we as researchers (and practitioners) also make truth claims and construct meaning’ (Cunliffe, 2003, p. 985). Such a view of reflexivity goes beyond advocating reflexivity as a ‘tool’ for more effective research and tends more towards a lived moral or ethical project (Cunliffe, 2003, 2004). So for Cunliffe (2003, p. 991), a construction of radical-reflexivity comprises:

- “Questioning our intellectual suppositions;
- Recognising research is a symmetrical and reflexive narrative, a number of ‘Participant’ stories which interconnect in some way;
- Examining and exploring researcher/participant relationships and their impact on knowledge
- Acknowledging the constitutive nature of our research conversations;
- Constructing ‘emerging practical theories’ rather than objective truths;
- Exposing the situated nature of accounts through narrative circularity;

- Focusing on life and research as a process of becoming rather than an already established truth”.

Processes of reflexivity

A number of researchers have considered the process of reflexivity. Hibbert et al (2010) evaluate the importance of recursion, or a sense of return, in the process of reflexivity, where through questioning the basis of our reflections, reflexivity necessarily brings about change in the process of reflection and is therefore recursive. They describe four steps that collectively encapsulate a meta-process of reflexivity, which integrates reflection and recursion. The initial step is *repetition* in which an individual reflects in a relatively self-focussed manner and recursivity occurs passively. This is followed by *extension* where there is ‘some building of new principles or understandings that connect with well-known principles’ (Hibbert et al., 2010, p. 53) with a conscious involvement in change. The follows *disruption*, which captures the doubting, unsettling element of reflexive research, as opposed to the routine or confirmatory modes of repetition and extension. Finally, *participation* describes ‘the situation where the researcher engages with a particular community and be transformed by it’ (Hibbert et al., 2010, p. 56). Not all conceptualisation of reflexive research would go so far as the disruptive, but the notion of self-critique and an unsettling effect is common in many reflexive accounts, as basic assumptions and values are challenged, and ultimately potentially transformed. It is in such moments that ontology and epistemology interact, questioning both self and knowledge. Reflexivity forces the researcher to re-examine his or her positioning in relation to methodology, theory, participants and self. Moreover, in participatory research, especially co-produced research between researchers and practitioners, the significance of politics, hierarchy, and authority in co-production is central to reflexive understandings of dynamics in play (Orr & Bennett, 2009).

Tensions and limitations in reflexivity

Notwithstanding, or perhaps because of, the variety of approaches to conceptualising reflexivity, there are tensions within and criticisms of reflexive research. Lynch (2000), for example, argues against reflexivity as an academic virtue and source of privileged knowledge, questioning the way reflexivity is used to promote theoretical and methodological advantage. Others have noted the tendency for reflexivity to be perceived as narcissism or navalgazing (Cunliffe, 2004; Tomkins & Eatough, 2010; Weick, 2002). In reflexive practice, the occasional confessional nature of reflexivity may stand in tension with self-indulgence, such that Fournier and Grey have argued that there is a tendency ‘to privilege the voice of the author, while the subjects of organizational life are effaced, or kept at a distance’ (Fournier & Grey, 2000, p. 22). Similarly, the *process* of conducting reflexive research may become more central than the content of the research itself. Cunliffe notes that the danger of ‘talking about reflexivity while being unreflexive’ lies in not recognising the situatedness of our position as researchers, an issue that she argues can be overcome through the use of radical reflectivity which highlights the tentative nature of theories and explanations and surfaces our fallibility as researchers (Cunliffe, 2003, p. 986).

Alvesson et al (2008) provide a comprehensive critique of four sets of reflexive practices that they find commonly appear in organization and management literature, together with their limitations. Firstly, *multi-perspective practices* occur when the researcher uses tensions among different perspectives to expose assumptions and open up new ways of thinking, using reflexivity to complement ‘incomplete’ research. However, the strategies for selecting particular perspectives may be unclear, and the particular ways in which the perspectives are juxtaposed remain contested. Secondly, *multi-voicing practices* focus on the authorial

authority of the researcher and their relation to the ‘other’, the research subject, in the interests of reflexivity being used to redress the balance between research and subject. However, Alvesson et al (2008) suggest that there is a paradoxical danger that attempts to ‘downplay’ the researcher, actually draw all the attention to the researcher. Thirdly, *positioning practices* draw attention to the various political, cultural and institutional constraints embedded in the academic community, in the interest of using reflexivity to reveal the role of institutional forces. However, in showing how reflexive researchers can navigate supposedly inescapable social forces, Alvesson et al (2008) suggest that these practices help construct the heroic researcher that they are trying to repudiate, which lead to highly individualistic explanation of knowledge production. Fourthly, *destabilising practices* occur when the researcher is ‘disruptive’, often using reflexivity to cross-examine or point out a lack of reflexivity of the part of others, in order to unsettle or undermine the foundations of research. However, such practices may be limited in their ability to generate new knowledge (Alvesson et al., 2008). Nonetheless, in critiquing reflexivity, Alvesson et al (2008, p. 498) call for its use in a ‘route to more thoughtful and interesting research’.

Hence, a researcher engaging in reflexive research may encounter tensions in the extent of self-disclosure and focus on processes of research. Nevertheless, reflexivity enables research to be insightful, questioning, inter-subjective and transparent on a number of different levels. Having defined reflexivity, and discussed its conceptualisation, processes and tensions, the next sections will put some of these ideas into focus through the use of examples drawn from research practice. I draw upon my own research projects on the gendered experience and embodiment of women in the accounting and professional services context, to illustrate some of the ways of doing and writing reflexive qualitative research.

Conducting reflexive research

While the importance of *being* reflexive is acknowledged, and indeed promoted, in qualitative research in organisations and management, the actual practice of reflexive research is less clear. How do we actually go about it in practice?

There are some choices to be made about how reflexivity is enacted in practice. We might, for example, be aware of ‘seeing oneself in the data’ (Weick, 2002, p. 894) at a number of different levels. As researchers we should try to be aware of how our ontological, social and political positioning affects the work that we do by informing the choices we make about research topics, questions, approaches, methodologies and outcomes. We might ask ourselves:

- What is the motivation for undertaking this research?
- What underlying assumptions I am bringing to it?
- How am I connected to the research, theoretically, experientially, emotionally? And what effect will this have on my approach?

Example – Motivations for research

My research project aimed to examine the identity politics of women accountants in the UK, particularly the social organisation of the accounting profession and its interaction with their experiences of motherhood (Haynes, 2005). It considered three interconnected areas, identity, motherhood and accounting, to explore whether interrelations between them are embedded within gendered processes, and the implications of this for women’s identity construction. Accordingly, it aimed to contribute to theoretical understandings of personal and professional identity, and the social structures of motherhood and accounting, with potential implications for cultural and political practices within them.

Despite these theoretical, academic aims, I actually had some much more personal aims. I wanted to try to understand, as part of a personal process of self-discovery, how I came to be myself, as woman, mother, accountant, and academic, with the myriad sensibilities that all these beings entail. The very nature of being human enables most of us at some time to speculate about who and what we are. How did I become myself? Is what I take to be myself my *real* self? Is there any such thing as a real self? What is the essence of my being, and how has it been shaped by cultural and political forces? Why do I feel I want to be a ‘good’ mother? How important is my career to my sense of self? It was the desire to try to gain a better understanding of myself, or rather all the selves described above, that was the personal impetus behind the research.

In my project, the academic and the personal aims were very much inter-twined. Not all research projects have such a personal motivation as this, nor do they need to have. Reflexive research does not require a desire for personal or individual understanding, but it does require sensitivity on the part of the researcher as to how their self, preconceptions and sensibilities influence the research. It is important to acknowledge and articulate the varied motivations, theoretical and/or personal, underpinning any research, as they are likely to shape the way the research is conceived, carried out, interpreted and produced. Such issues reflect the ontological position and identity of the researcher, which will influence the choice of theoretical position, methodological approach and interpretive rationale.

Strategies for reflexive awareness

There are a number of strategies for enabling this process of reflection, which then becomes a reflexive process, incorporating the reflections into reflexive knowledge production:

- Write down theoretical assumptions and presuppositions about the subject of the research and revisit these throughout the research process, noting how they may have shifted
- Consider if or how this has revised the research question, focus or findings
- Keep a research diary noting down thoughts and feelings about the research process
- Keep fieldwork notes of observations, interactions, incidents, conversations, emotions and responses
- Listen to tape recordings, or watch video clips, of your qualitative data gathering (interviews, focus groups, life histories etc) noting how your presence or interaction as the researcher affected the process
- Discuss and evaluate responses to the research subject, participants and process with fellow researchers

The following example draws upon the use of fieldwork notes and a reflexive account of the process of conducting a research interview.

Example – Managing Oral History interviews

My research project used an oral history methodology to explore the detailed life experiences of women accountants (Haynes, 2005). One of the participants, Deborah, was an audit partner in an accounting firm, who initially gave me what seemed like some kind of sales pitch about the value of accounting and the nature of her firm, such as might be given to a prospective client. Deborah appeared to be reluctant to speak about herself in any depth and I began to think that the meeting was not going to be particularly worthwhile for my research. As I explained that I was interested in the experiences of women who, like myself, were accountants and mothers, Deborah took a deep breath and interrupted me forcefully. The tone and pace of the conversation changed dramatically, being much less measured and far

more personal. Deborah then gave a frank and somewhat heart-rending account of her experiences and her struggles managing her new identity as a mother and her pre-existing identity as audit partner, between her unanticipated passion for caring for her child and her loyalties to her clients. Deborah's emotional account left us both moved and near to tears at times. I felt that she saw me as another mother to whom she could unburden herself rather than as a researcher. She appeared to value the opportunity to discuss some of her problems with someone from outside the accounting firm or her family, all of whom appeared to be implicated in any decisions about how she conducted her life and working arrangements. I noted in my fieldwork diary immediately afterwards:

“Despite her apparent primness at first, I liked Deborah and genuinely wished her well. This was much more like a conversation than an oral history interview and I wonder whether she will regret saying any of this later. But she seemed to value the opportunity to get it all off her chest...This was definitely a therapeutic opportunity for her. She is so raw and emotional and needing to talk things through”.

Deborah also probed me quite hard about my own experiences, as if she were eager for knowledge about ways of coping with what she saw as a problematic situation, being a working mother, as this further extract from my fieldwork diary illustrates:

“Deborah wanted to know a lot about what *I* thought and how *I* coped, and what other issues had derived from other women's experiences... I felt guilty that I could not help her more”

Deborah's probing went on to feel more like an interrogation of me at one stage, to the extent that she asked some deeply personal questions of me. For example, although she stated that she did not intend to have any more children, she was very interested in my account of having more than one child and whether I desired to have more, as if she were still affirming her own decisions. As I was trying to follow a feminist research paradigm, in which it is often argued

that self-disclosure during the research is good practice because it puts women participants at their ease (Reinharz, 1992), and as she had been so open with me, I felt some sense of obligation to respond and reciprocate. However, my disclosures here impinged on my unresolved sense of self, and left me feeling emotionally vulnerable. I did not want to discuss some of the issues she was confronting me with, as they left me feeling emotionally raw, just as she was. I was concerned about the implications of becoming too self-analytical myself, both from the perspective of how it made me feel on a personal level, but also in my role as a researcher with the need to remain in control of myself and my conduct. Whereas Deborah appeared to find the meeting therapeutic, contacting me afterwards to say how helpful she had found it to talk through her life history, decisions and doubts, I found myself weeping after leaving our meeting (extract from Haynes, 2006).

Given that reflexivity means interpreting one's own interpretations, the field notes, diary, observations and subsequent listening to tape recordings all facilitated this process.

Multiple levels of reflexivity

Reflexivity occurs on a number of levels and on several different themes, within, and arising from, these two accounts.

Theoretical reflexivity

Theoretical assumptions may be revised as a result of research practice and engagement. Reflexive research does not assume a social reality simply exists 'out there' waiting to be discovered by the researcher; rather, it recognises that all research is affected by the preconceptions, theoretical, methodological or ontological, which the researcher brings to the research and its interpretation. More importantly, our theoretical assumptions and

understandings will be revised by the new understandings gained during the process of research, which then go on to inform new theoretical knowledge. This is what has been termed a ‘double hermeneutic’ or the interpretation of interpreting subjects (Giddens, 1976 cited in Alvesson & Skoldburg, 2000, p. 247). In my example, engagement with theoretical perspectives on identity, the politics of motherhood and the sociology of the accounting profession gave me some new insights into my own identity and that of the research participants, which in turn informed new theoretical understandings.

Methodological reflexivity

Methodological position and detailed methods may be revised as researchers engage reflexively with the research process. By considering the effectiveness, conduct and process of data collection, researchers may reinterpret and revise their methodological position to take account of such issues as ethics, power relations, or use of language. In my example, if I felt as if I were being interrogated, how does the participant in the research feel about the process? What ethical issues arise from this situation, and how can they be dealt with? How far is the research embedded in a series of complex power relations? Reflexivity enables the power relations in the research process to be more explicit and the researcher to be more aware of how he or she may be affecting or affected by the research process (Haynes, 2006). In my case, a feminist perspective informed the research and its methodological approach (Haynes, 2008). A theoretical position or paradigm may underpin the research, informing a particular methodological approach, but a reflexive researcher will always reflect on the interaction of theory and methodology to evaluate whether each should revise the other.

Ontological reflexivity

All of us as researchers have our own ontological position, comprising our perception of the nature of reality, our sense of reality, or the way we see the world. A reflexive research approach engages with our ontological position, our values and choices. As Calás & Smircich (1999, p. 664) argue:

“Whether we are involved in ethnography, or heavy statistics research, whether we are writing about institutional theory, population ecology, organizational justice corporate mergers – whatever, no matter what topic or area or what methods we use – we are all... picking and choosing to pay attention and ignore ... excluding, including, concealing, favoring some people, some topics, some questions, some forms of representation, some values. Can we do our writing in a way that is ‘self-conscious’ of our choices?”

Being reflexive requires analysis of our ontological position, or view of reality, to make explicit these choices and the researcher’s relationship with the research object. Hence, in my example, through the empirical fieldwork and listening to the oral history narratives, I came to know myself better by observing and reflecting on the experiences presented by others, and by reflexively reviewing my own experiences in the light of other’s narratives. My aim to come to a deeper understanding of myself through the project was informed by the understandings I gained of others from the oral histories, and my greater understanding of myself informed those understandings of others, in an inter-subjective analysis. The researcher’s ontology links to, will influence, and is influenced by, theoretical positioning and methodology as he or she both acts within the research and is acted upon by it.

Emotional reflexivity

Emotion is also a valuable source of reflexive insight. The emotionalization of reflexivity refers to the process whereby individuals are increasingly drawing on emotions in assessing

themselves and their lives, recognising that emotions are crucial to how the social is reproduced and to enduring within a complex social world (Holmes, 2010). In my example, I could not gather and analyse the oral histories, where participants are being asked not only to relate facts about their lives but also explore the very essence of their being, without engaging with emotional hurdles, whether my own or those of the participants. Not all research may provoke such an emotional response as this, but all researchers will feel some kind of response towards their research and/or their research participants. Whether it is frustration, sadness, fear, liking or loathing, it is undeniable that the research process engenders emotional responses. These can be used as a source of reflexive intellectual inquiry where the emotional sensibilities of the researcher can be used creatively and analytically to enhance the research process and outcomes. Thus, this methodological, reflexive approach recognises the strong relationship between the process of research and the resultant product .

Cultural, social & political reflexivity

Reflexivity is also about understanding the relationship between individual practice and social structure, not only relating selves to social collectivities, but also recognising the part that selves play in constructing structures as well as being mediated by them (Stanley, 1993), so that the researcher is aware of how she may ‘inadvertently realign the issues that concern us with those of the relations of ruling’ (Smith, 1992, p. 96). In other words, the very cultural, social and political discourse of the subject being researched, could affect the way that the researcher treats and analyses the data derived on that subject. In my example, the discourses and ideologies of being a ‘working mother’, both positive and negative, are implicated in any interpretation I make of the oral history interview, which could either challenge or maintain those discourses. Researchers, therefore, need to maintain a reflexive

awareness of whether their research interpretations make use of dominant cultural, social and political discourses, which in turn perpetuates those dominant discourses.

Subjective reflexivity

A final level of reflexivity is related to this point. In many qualitative research projects, the researcher may effectively be both subject and object of the research. In my case, this was explicitly expressed: I was a researcher investigating accountants who were mothers, and I was both an accountant and a mother. In other research projects this may not be so explicit, but organizational researchers may often research aspects of organizational life they have experienced or observed. We may experience the tension of being both subject and object of the research, and working between the dualities of public social knowledge and private lived experience, by simultaneously serving an academic audience while also remaining faithful to forms of knowledge gained in domestic, personal and intimate settings (Haynes, 2008). We may find ourselves on the margins of academic discourse, as part of the ‘other’, the group we want to explore, perhaps because of their under-representation in academic analysis, while at the same time, we may be part of the academic social world that can potentially silence this ‘other’. Our research opens up, extends, limits or constrains understanding of particular groups or particular forms of knowledge. Hence, we need to maintain a reflexive awareness of our shifting sense of self as both subject and object of the research, of belonging to the research and being outside it. We may even question whether this distinction between subject and object is meaningful at all, given that it could be argued reality is constructed inter-subjectively through the process of research and does not represent some pre-defined existing reality or ‘truth’.

So instead of discussing reflexivity, we might instead talk of ‘reflexivities’ as there may be multiple forms of reflexivity. Of course, there may be additional reflexivities not noted here in relation to my own project, and, in practice, all these various forms, levels and themes of reflexivity are inter-connected and mutually related, not necessarily separate and discrete facets of reflexivity. They may have different emphases depending on what the research entails, includes, or questions. They all have a part to play in the relationship between knowledge production, methodological processes and the role of the researcher, enabling the research processes and outcomes to be open to change and adaptive in response to these multiple layers of reflexivity.

Applying theoretical processes and perspectives to practicing reflexivity

In this section I make use of my example to return to some of the theoretical approaches to reflexivity outlined earlier in this chapter to illustrate how the sometimes quite complex concepts that are the focus of the literature can be operationalised and applied to our own research practice.

Firstly I apply Hibbert et al’s (2010) conceptualisation of reflexive processes to my research encounter with Deborah illustrated above. Hibbert et al (2010) suggest that recursion, or a sense of return, occurs in a four-stage meta-process of reflexivity, which brings about change in the process of reflection and is therefore recursive. The initial step of *repetition* occurs when an individual reflects in a relatively self-focussed manner and recursivity occurs passively, and benignly, so that individuals stay within the accepted boundaries of thought for addressing a particular issue, or, in my case, role. In the case of Deborah, illustrated in the example above, my attitude towards her as a research participant was limited by my initial assumptions about her role as audit partner and her portrayal of herself as a spokesperson for

the audit firm. During the first part of my meeting with Deborah, she treated me as if I were a potential client, relating to me a promotional sales pitch on the attributes of her firm. I was more closed than I should have been to more subtle alternative conceptions of her identity, to the point where I had even wondered whether the research interview was going to yield any useful information, as my processes of recursive change merely supported an initial reinforcement of existing assumptions.

However, as Deborah unburdened herself in an emotive account, my processes of reflexivity turned towards *extension*, and the building of new understandings. My initial conceptions and transition to this mode of extension were overturned by failure or exogenous shock, with a sensation that existing notions are inadequate, promoting a more active form of reflexive engagement (Hibbert et al., 2010). Hence I was forced to engage in self-reflexivity to question my own practices, assumptions and role in the creation of social life, though still on my own terms (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005).

It was at the next stage in the recursive process that *disruption* occurred, leading to a more critical reflexivity causing me to question my own ideologies and hidden assumptions, in what was an unsettling and disorientating process. Hence at the time of the interview my own emotional response challenged not only my sense of self as a researcher but also my understanding of the research participant as ‘other’, as separate from and outside the research process. Through this form of critical reflexivity, my understandings were problematised through interaction with the inputs of others. This continued to a more disruptive form of recursion leading me to evaluate and problematise some of my fundamental ideological and methodological assumptions about ethical issues within an oral history methodology, arising from power relations in the research, the interpretation and ownership of research, disclosure

and reciprocity within the research relationship, and what can be avowed as a ‘feminist’ methodology (Haynes, 2010). While these were resolvable, they shifted my relationship with the research participants and the research to a more nuanced reflexive level. Finally, *participation* might be said to have occurred as a consequence of choosing to trust the other and engage seriously with their view, to engage with a community and be transformed by it. Hence, my example illustrates Hibbert et al’s (2010) call for consideration of reflexivity as change in the researcher as well as in the research activities, demonstrating the temporal dimension and transformative nature of the organisational researcher’s practice.

It also has resonance with some of Alvesson et al’s (2008) conceptualisation of reflexive practices. I would position my example as partly reflexivity as a *multi-voicing* practice, focusing on the relationship between the researcher and the ‘other’, which recognises how the researcher forms part of the research project, and is actively constructed through the process of research. In addition, as the research moved on it also became more embedded in reflexivity as a *positioning* practice, emphasising how research takes place within an academic field, within broader social processes that shape knowledge within a particular community.

Summary and Conclusion

Reflexivity is an important and pervasive concept that permeates much organizational research, enabling us to ‘think about thinking’. Reflexivity allows for a form of conversation through which we come to know ourselves and others, the positions from which we speak, and the political and social context in which the conversations take place. It questions the relationship between knowledge and the production of that knowledge, problematising how social, ethical, and political issues come to be embedded in the way that we produce and

value knowledge, from defining research, data gathering, analysis, interpretation, and through to writing up and publication. In doing so, reflexivity allows us to think ‘ through what one is doing to encourage insights about the nature of social science, especially the role that language, power/knowledge connections, social interests and ideologies, rhetorical moves and maneuvering in the socio-political field play in producing particular accounts’ (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 497).

Reflexivity questions the processes and practice of research, in terms of how our methodological conduct and theoretical pre-understandings as researchers transform and influence new understandings. It also questions the product of that research, in terms of how our philosophical or ontological positioning influences what counts as ‘knowledge’ or social reality. When researching and writing reflexively, therefore, we need to be aware of how the traditions of our particular field influence the way that research is carried out, by constraining or enabling, valuing or rejecting, particular forms of knowledge. Reflexive methodologies link with ontology and epistemology to integrate ethical, social and political judgements on the research process and increase accountability for the knowledge that is produced.

Further reading:

The *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* and *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal* are both useful journals containing a number of reflexive accounts using different research methodologies. In addition the following additional reading provides a range of perspectives on reflexivity:

- Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L. (1992), *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Chicago University Press, Chicago.
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