

Reflexivity Nick's Notes

(Note to students: you'll see I have inconsistent referencing below. Don't do this in your own essays!)

To what extent is it advantageous or disadvantageous to maintain an 'objective' distance from the people or phenomena under consideration? Reflexivity is her necessary quality of the researcher for whom the distance between researcher and researched narrows, and his or her own reactions have to be understood if the research process is to be free from bias. The process was described by McCutcheon:

For scholars who adopt the reflexive option, studying others explicitly involved a high degree of reflexivity, a turning back onto the researcher of his or her own questions and answers. Claims that the researcher is able to make objective or neutral claims about the world at large are therefore highly suspect to the reflexive scholar for he or she would maintain that the world at large is just what it is for you or I precisely because you and I are what, who, and where we are. For instance our choice of question shapes the answer we will receive; a researcher's presuppositions and biases regarding who counts in a society as it tells us about the society under question.¹

David Hufford described reflexivity as 'a popular and potentially powerful concept in the interpretation of epistemological activities',² the central point of which is that all knowing is subjective. The key is the quest for meaning. As Etherington (2004: 7), put it, 'As human beings we learn a great deal from re-telling stories, creating new meanings and deepening existing ones'

The consequences for the research process can be profound. According to Davies (1999: 6), 'Reflexivity in social research is not a single phenomenon but assumes a variety of forms and affects the research process through all its stages'. The process can extend to the entire research programme; speaking of feminist research, Bryman argued that reflexivity can result in a dialogue between researcher and researched. He wrote that, 'the research situation is treated much more as an exchange in which the feminist researcher gives something back – of her own views, experiences, and the like – to those being interviewed.'³ That is, the researcher then affects the researched: Davies (1999: 7) continues, 'In its most transparent guise, reflexivity expresses researchers' awareness of their necessary connection to the research situation and hence their effects upon it' (Davies 1999: 7). According to Davies (1999: 9), 'This more radical reflexivity thus contends that the activities and results of social research are constructed from and reflect both the broader sociohistorical context of researchers and the disciplinary context to which they belong'

1 McCutcheon, Russell T., (ed.), *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: a Reader*, London: Cassell 1999, p. 10.

2 Hufford, David J., 'The Scholarly Voice and the Personal Voice: Reflexivity in Belief Studies', in Russell T. McCutcheon, ed., *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell 1999), p.294.

3 Bryman, Alan *Quantity and Quality in Social Research*, (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), p.111

Etherington (2004: 32) pointed out that reflexive texts are complex and multilayered and therefore difficult to manage: the line between text and context is blurred. Such texts might include a wide range of data, including interviews, field notes, conversations, photographs, drawings, dreams, poems and diaries. If we are able and willing to know and relate to the data differently, we might open ourselves up to creative and transformative opportunities for personal growth and new learning.

Reflexivity requires self-awareness but is more than self-awareness; it is neither subjective nor objective, but falls into the space between (Etherington 2004: 36-7). The notion of reflexivity as, in effect a synthesis of a polarised thesis and antithesis is inherent in Davies' set of dualities which underpin the reflexive process: public/private, collective/individual, explicit and implicit, partial and total (Davies 1999: 6)

Etherington (2004: 36-7) concludes on the personal level that 'the judicious use of ourselves in research needs to be essential to the argument, not just a "decorative flourish" for it to be described as reflexivity', and on the public, that 'reflexivity challenges us to be more fully conscious of our own ideology, culture, and politics and that of our participants and our audience'

One logical conclusion of the reflexive process is autoethnography, 'an autobiographical genre of writing and research' (Etherington 2004: 139) in which the researcher him or herself becomes the object of research. It has been described as a "blend of ethnography and autobiographical writing that incorporates elements of one's one life experience when writing about others" (Scott-Hoy 2002: 276), or 'a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context (Reed-Danahay 1997).

Criticism of Reflexivity

The danger of reflexivity is that the researcher disappears into their own feelings, and there is nothing more than their own experience. Reflexive research that overtly acknowledges the life and presence of the researcher as part of the research, and deals with issues such as gender, culture, race and class, has contributed to what has been called a 'crisis of representation' (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). This crisis has been created in response to the falling away of traditional assumptions of truth, reality and knowledge that previously provided us with familiar structures for presenting our "findings (Etherington 2004: 83)

Bibliography

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