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Reflexivity: Situating the researcher in qualitative research.

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Reflexivity: Situating the Researcher in Qualitative Research

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This paper explores the concept of reflexivity as used in the social sciences. Accessing literature from various fields, it explores the nature of reflexivity for its role in meaning making and knowledge claims. By way of illustration the paper draws upon the author's current experiences as a qualitative researcher engaged in narrative work. Directing enquiry towards the self is central to the researcher's bringing out the inter-subjectivity inherent in qualitative work. From an examination of how one's values and attitudes influence the choice of topic to an exploration of the epistemological foundations of knowledge claims, reflexivity at each stage is central to contributing to the richness of the research and contributing to its credibility. Alongside a conceptual understanding of reflexivity, this paper raises certain questions pertaining to doing reflexivity. The questions emerge from the author's current research and will get addressed in her documentation and analysis.

Key words: Reflexivity; qualitative research; identity; narrative research.

Introduction

Qualitative research in the social sciences has often been considered poor in establishing the validity of research findings. Difficulty in replicating the process, issues around generalisability of findings and lack of scientificity and methodological rigour are some of the criticisms that mark many evaluations of qualitative work. In this discourse, the role of researcher's bias claims centrality. In response to these criticisms, an emergent debate on researcher's reflexivity gradually gained prominence in the social sciences. The practice of incorporating the researcher perspective in the design and interpretation of data has now gained currency in the fields of anthropology, sociology, psychology, feminist research, action research and medical, psychiatric and psychotherapeutic case study research.

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When I commenced with my research into identity development during the adolescent years, a qualitative narrative framework lent itself very well to exploring the fluidity of identity dimensions². As I proceeded with my empirical work, similar questions about validity began to crop up. An active reflexive process was essential for justifying the credibility of my findings. This paper is an off-shoot of that reflexive engagement. It explores the concept of reflexivity and shares my own experiences and questions that I am as yet addressing as a first-time independent qualitative researcher.

Contextualising Reflexivity

As compared to the quantitative method's straightforward claim to objectivity, qualitative research has often been labelled as impressionistic, anecdotal and influenced by researcher's bias (Buckner, 2005). The subjective interpretation of the data and focus on the researcher rather than the process of research were criticisms that led to a closer examination of researcher's reflexivity and its role in analysis. Highlighting the meta-cognitive nature of reflexivity, Salzman (2002) refers to social psychologist George Herbert Mead's reflections on reflexivity as part of social engagement and meaning making:

It is by means of reflexiveness – the turning-back of the experience of the individual upon himself - that the whole social process is thus brought into the experiences of the individuals involved in it; it is by such means, which enable the individual to take the attitude of the other toward himself, that the individual is consciously to adjust himself to that process, and to modify the resultant of that process in any given social act in terms of his adjustment to it. Reflexiveness, then, is the essential condition, within the social process, for the development of mind.

Mead, of course, was writing about reflexivity as part of the process of formation of self and not in the context of researcher-researched dynamics. This self awareness, however, is integral to the researcher situating herself/himself in the research process. That is perhaps better explained by Scholte's reference (Salzman, 2002) to human inter-subjectivity, which is

² This paper is based on my review of literature and empirical work as part of my dissertation on identity development during adolescence.

“a dialectical and constitutive relation of exchange and communication.” It is essentially a process of self critique by the researcher to examine how her/his own experiences might or might not have influenced the researcher process (Dowling, 2006). Thus, reflexivity is “the constant awareness, assessment, and reassessment by the researcher of the researcher's own contribution / influence / shaping of inter-subjective research and the consequent research findings.” In the process, the role of the researcher is, to borrow from Carolan (2003) quoting Rice and Ezzy, “subject to the same critical analysis and scrutiny as the research itself.”

Qualitative writing is socially constructed, situated in the researcher's use of varied interpretive lens. Reflexivity calls for turning this investigative lens towards oneself, in this case the researcher. At a very basic level, reflexivity is an attempt to find answers to the questions, “What do I know?” and “How do I know it?” (Caloran, 2003). Where quantitative texts sought to reduce reciprocity between the researcher and the participant, qualitative work seeks to draw out the richness of this inter-subjectivity by making it central to the research process. My professional work in counselling psychology and teaching with groups of adolescents and young adults motivated me to examine further the development of selfhood among an adolescent population. The interest was not only research oriented, but also aimed at gaining insight that will feed back into my professional commitments. I was not merely studying adolescents as subjects in a study, but as individuals who connected with me as much as I anticipated impacting them in a meaningful way. This did call for an enquiry into which role I was playing when interacting with the participants in my study. It was easy to slip from one role to another and then realise that the conversation had taken a different turn because of my shift.

An understanding of one's own attitudes, values and biases is a useful tool in not only gaining deeper insight into the research, but also in ensuring that the focus remains on the research and its participants. Simultaneously, by situating oneself in the research process the researcher facilitates the reader's understanding of the perspectives that led to the analyses and findings.

Nature of Reflexivity

Reflexivity acknowledges the role of the researcher as a participant in the process of knowledge construction and not merely an outsider-observer of a phenomenon. In this, reflexivity goes beyond reflection or merely a process of introspection or self awareness. An examination of the epistemological foundations of technical research skills such as interviewing (Hsiung, 2008) demands that the researcher engage in the composite study of self as subject and as object. Thus, reflexivity intentions may be understood as (Anderson, 2008; Dowling, 2006):

Introspective reflexivity – This involves consciousness of the self by the researcher in order to understand how one's own experiential location might influence the choice of subject, methodology and themes. The researcher is both, the documenter of events as well as co-creator on account of being present at the creation of the reality. By choosing to frame certain aspects and not merely mirror events the researcher determines the reader's perspective. Introspective reflexivity acknowledges that the researcher's experiences, attitudes and emotions will affect engagement with the participants and subsequent analysis of data. Introspective reflexivity is an attempt to maintain research focus by bracketing biases and attitudes of the researcher in order to minimise, if not prevent, their influence on the research process.

A common bracketing approach is to maintain a reflective journal. After every interview I spent substantial time noting my immediate observations, thoughts and interpretations before I subjected the data to structured analysis. This enabled me to capture in its raw state my own attitudes and responses to the participant I had met. Dowling (2006) recommends a three-phase process of "bracketing 'pre' action' bracketing 'in' action; and bracketing 'on' action" for this reflexive process. Pre action bracketing happens during the preparation stage when certain attitudes that are likely to influence the data are identified in advance and dealt with as appropriate. In action bracketing is contingent upon the nature emergent data during the empirical work. Certain aspects might compel the researcher to examine one's thoughts in manners not previously considered. Bracketing on action is the use of this new insight in subsequent empirical work.

The expectation of self disclosure is often an unusual and discomfiting experience for the researcher, who is more oriented towards eliciting data, rather than providing them. Overcoming this initial hesitation is important for the researcher to appreciate better the inter-subjectivity of qualitative work. This is also useful in building empathy for the participant situation and making the interview process more participant-centred.

Methodological reflexivity or reflexivity from a critical standpoint – While acknowledging the relationality of the researcher with the research, methodological reflexivity strives to ensure that standardised procedures have, nevertheless, been followed in the conduction of research. Through regular monitoring and testing of assumptions and approaches a researcher strives to establish the reality of the research (Rogers et al., 2005). Dowling (2006) called this the “politics of location”. Reflexivity in this instance identifies and examines the ethical, social and political considerations that govern the field of enquiry. Delineating the scope and institutional context of the research and strengthening the research rigour are methodological goals achieved through this process.

Conducting my study with adolescents who were legally minors entailed my seeking consent from parents to interview their wards, a textbook requirement of ethical standards. In seeking parental consent, my anticipation was concerns around confidentiality. As it turned out, confidentiality was the least mentioned of concerns. In one instance the parent was, in fact, quite eager that I convert the interview into a newspaper article, with identifying details. The dominant concern voiced was that of the time required for this activity. With a full day’s schedule of school and private tuition classes, the prospective participants were left with scant time for any pursuit outside of their immediate life sphere. Adjustments in terms of location of their convenience and their time preference made many participants come around. My pre action bracketing by considering how my professional credentials may be used to my advantage helped me secure time with several of my participants. The incentive of coming to my office, “a psychologist’s office”, as one participant put it, convinced them for the meeting.

Only one parent raised an objection that my questions might give ideas to her ward, ideas which may not be appropriate for his age. My immediate mental reaction was to think defensively that that was not my intention. In an attempt at in action bracketing, at that point I tried convincing her that I would not be asking any inappropriate questions, but I could not get her consent. Later, on reflection, the parent's concern brought back in focus an important dimension of narrative research – the process of narration can itself contribute to the process of identity making. Would my questions, and my framing of them, have made this adolescent actively think about certain topics? Would that have subsequently impacted any of his decisions? Perhaps a longitudinal study along these dimensions will offer answers. My interaction with parents in a different context had identified topics around sexuality, sexual relationships and substance use as sensitive trigger points, for the parent/s if not for the adolescent. While no other parent raised similar objections, I worked on my on action bracketing to frame my questions around these topics in subsequent interviews, such that I did not impinge upon their sensibilities to the extent possible.

In several instances, my professional credentials made the parents agree to the interaction and even want to talk with me themselves about their ward. Much of such conversation was about career plans for the adolescent. During my first interview I was hesitant to take on this role since I was concerned about keep separate my role as researcher from that of a psychologist and educator. A reference to literature on reflexivity set my mind at ease. An interactive interviewing approach was relevant to establishing rapport and encouraging the participant to share more of their lives. The unexpected bonus which I had not factored into my original design was to be welcomed rather than looked upon with scepticism. To minimise the possible effect of these supplementary interactions on the interview data, I scheduled them after the main interviews, by which time I had a sufficient degree of rapport with the participant. Having shared much personal information with me earlier, it was easier for the participant to now freely discuss career choices, more from a guidance perspective. This engagement conveniently helped address the question, “What is in it for me?” which several participants voiced in some manner or the other.

Epistemological reflexivity – Merely assuming personal engagement with the subject does not serve to explain the expanse of research knowledge. “Knowledge is not separate from the

knower.” An examination of the epistemological foundations of the knowledge claims being made is central to understanding the reality of the researcher and possibly reframing it along the research process. The researcher explores how the research question has defined and framed the area of enquiry and how else it could have been examined apart from the current methodology. Why did I choose narrative methodology for my research? For one, an inclination towards qualitative methodologies and grounded theory was a governing factor. Narrative as an approach to meaning making lends itself very well to identity research. Narratives enable exploration without insisting on framing of identity. This facilitation of fluidity and process approach was a significant attraction. My professional training as a consulting psychologist made me amenable to facilitating a narrative process rather than seeking out quantitative data. Being used to depth work in my sessions, extending the narrative methodology to a research set-up seemed a natural progression. This process might have been equally possible – and effective – with the use of statistical measures. There is a body of identity literature that is based on measure of specific identity dimensions. My discomfort with such approaches was in the notion of reducing participant identities into replicable statistics and into ‘subjects’ for study.

This, however, raises the difficult question, what legitimises the claim to knowledge? Imposition of criteria such as reliability, validity and generalisability often finds qualitative research fall short. A shift in perspective would indicate that it is not necessarily the research that is at fault, but the application of criteria borrowed from a dominant positivist school. Within a constructivist framework, what is more pertinent is to establish the trustworthiness of the research (Koch and Harrington, 1998). Reflexivity may be employed to establish trustworthiness by applying the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility refers to the vividness and accuracy of description of the phenomenon under study. Transferability is the equivalent of external validity – how well were the data likely to fit into a context different from the one in which they were generated. Dependability is the extent to which the data demonstrates the phenomenon it is expected to demonstrate. Confirmability is essentially a confirmation that the previous three conditions have been addressed. Ensuring that these conditions have been met lends credibility to qualitative work and engages it in a dialectical line of enquiry.

Achieving Reflexivity

A theoretical understanding of reflexivity is perhaps easier than achieving it in practice. There is the danger of it becoming an exercise in self indulgence. The researcher might also gain insights that incite self doubt. Developing sufficient grasp over exploration of self as a subject and as an object can be, in itself, an intense and lengthy process, taking the researcher away from the real objective of such engagement. However, the social construction of research demands that the researcher's voice be heard, not just to legitimise the researcher's philosophy in conducting the study, but also lend the work credibility and to embed it better in an epistemological context.

Some of the challenges that exist, especially for a new researcher like me, are to do with implementing a conceptual understanding of reflexivity in the field. Several aspects must be considered while engaging in a reflexive process. Selecting a suitable and convenient reflexive process, such as introspection, peer critique or supervised reflexivity, is important in setting the tone and pace. How to use reflexivity in the context of a particular study has been the source of much debate. The process of meaning making is definitely moderated by the philosophies of the researcher. Identifying relevant attitudes and values that govern the choice of topic, approach and interpretation is an exercise that requires practice and experience to develop to an adequate degree. A final intellectual tension is to do with the presentation of reflexivity in research writing. How much of the personal voice of the researcher is to be heard depends on the pragmatics of social and political framing of the research, the institutional/academic context of research and the potential readership.

To this end, operationalising reflexivity requires addressing certain questions at various stages of the research process (Greenaway, 2010; Hsiung, 2008):

- How has my personal history influenced the choice of topic?
- What are my personal value systems that may influence the process of research?
- How do my gender, culture and professional background influence my positioning in this topic and my relation with the participants?

- What are the alternate roles I might be called upon to play while interacting with the participant, apart from my primary role as researcher?
- What are the possible advantages that I have in terms of personal history and professional competence?
- What might be the barriers that my personal history and professional competence can create during data collection?
- How are the emerging data assimilating with my prior knowledge; making me revisit an earlier stance?

Conclusion

Reflexivity is a useful tool in narrative enquiry. It offers richer meanings to the phenomenon under study and clarifies the lenses used to arrive at certain interpretations. In the context of my work, a clearer understanding of my location in the process of meaning making is enabling me to situate my work in a social and political context. It allows me to try out alternative epistemological lenses, including my own philosophical leanings, to examine identity from a grounded theory perspective. Reflexivity does not automatically address the questions of validity. The establishment of authenticity of the reflexive process before conformation of the study outcome can become a circular loop which defeats the purpose of research (Dowling, 2006). Nevertheless, the very act of acknowledging multiple voices in the research discourse is a valuable addition to the inter-subjectivity perspective of qualitative research in the social sciences.

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