
37. Reflexivity in social research

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INTRODUCTION

Based on its etymology, reflexivity is generally described and understood as a turning back on yourself; a way for a researcher to question themselves and challenge their own assumptions, beliefs, and biases. While reflexivity is well-embedded in the contemporary social sciences landscape, the emphasis on reflexivity is relatively new. It was only in the second half of the 20th century that sociopolitical changes significantly impacted researchers' understanding and perception of truth and reality. A drastic shift followed, from accepting an objective scientific truth to now recognising the role of contextualised knowledge and the process of sense-making within scientific inquiry, especially in relation to ethnographic work within the social sciences. Today, we recognise that a "reflexive turn" had taken place (Foley, 2002). Since then, reflexivity has continued to evolve as a concept and practice so that nowadays researchers are expected to engage with reflexivity in their research work.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF REFLEXIVITY

Although the term "reflexivity" dates back to Ancient Greece, significant developments can be observed over time in relation to what the term means, how it is interpreted, and how it is put into practice. In effect, reflexivity emerged within philosophies and sciences as a response to issues around certainty, truth, and objectivity (for more philosophical details on reflexivity see May and Perry, 2017). Roland Descartes' maxim "I think, therefore I am" highlights the philosophical concerns around what existence and being are. In Descartes' view, reasoning and self-awareness are thus evidence for the duality of mind and body; of the subjective and objective. Conceptualisations of self-awareness and reflexivity also became central to debates around the relevance of self-determination.

During the Victorian era in the UK, scholars like Jeremy Bentham, Herbert Spencer, and John Stuart Mill explored the individual nature of humans within a collectivist organisation of society. Subsequently, Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and George Simmel built on these ideas of radical individualism within societies, and considered the conflicts that arise from the tensions between individual and collective needs or regulations. In their view, it is only through developing a strongly reflexive self that humans are able to reconcile these tensions and understand will, or self-determination. A different school of thought developed around the German philosopher Edmund Husserl, and his followers Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who founded phenomenology. Phenomenology is the study of consciousness, experience, and perception, in an attempt to find objective means to explore the subjective. Although the different forms of phenomenology according to Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty take slightly different philosophical stances, reflexivity is an expression

of the subject-object relation of lived experience. Reflexivity is therefore not a different way of thinking or experiencing, but an integral part of understanding and making sense of lived experiences.

In North America, the development of reflexivity revolves around John Dewey and pragmatism, as well as George Mead's symbolic interactionism. Both scholars belonged to what is now known as the Chicago School, a movement of sociology and criminology rooted in the work of the University of Chicago in the late 19th and early 20th century. Pragmatism and symbolic interactionism both emphasise the link between the self and society, and outline how creative forms of thinking enable humans to become more self-determined, as they free them from the shackles of rationality and reason. Reflexivity is seen as integral to the process of identity development and formation of a strong, self-determined self. Today's understanding of the concept developed in the middle and late 20th century; in particular through the work of the sociologists Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu. Drawing on John Dewey, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu developed his theories of *habitus* and *social capital* to describe how humans make sense of their experiences, belonging, and social mobility. For Bourdieu, reflexivity is a key element in that process, in that humans explore their positioning "in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside of agents" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 127).

In a similar vein, Anthony Giddens, together with Ulrich Beck and Scott Lash, reviewed the status of sociological research as a scientific endeavour and in the process coined the term "reflexive modernity" (Beck et al., 1994). For Giddens, the nature of modernity as an era that allows for more freedom, autonomy, and flexibility leads to individuals, societies, and cultures needing to critically assess intentions and potential consequences before taking action. This critical-reflective evaluation, in turn, leads to higher levels of self-awareness, reflectivity, and therefore reflexivity. While in Giddens' view, therefore, reflexivity is a key aspect of modernisation (Giddens, 1991), many philosophical discourses relate reflexivity to postmodernism. These two stances are not incompatible, in that Giddens claims that postmodernism is a highly advanced form of modernisation rather than a separate unit. Philosophically, Giddens' understanding of that highly advanced form of modernisation and postmodernism is very much aligned in that they both reject ideas of generally applicable truths and realities. Instead, they focus on how all knowledge is contextualised, interpretatively perceived, and generated from a particular viewpoint. Reflexivity, as we understand it nowadays, is directly linked to that, as it relates to the general recognition that researchers are integral to research, that they shape research, and that therefore they need to respond to that process. Yet, reflexivity is "an attitude of attending systematically to the context of knowledge construction, especially to the effect of the researcher, at every step of the research process" (Malterud, 2001, p. 484). As such, reflexivity needs to be thought of as a continuum, where researchers can engage in reflexivity at a minimum or maximum level (see Figure 37.1).

At the minimum end of the continuum reflexivity induces "a heightened state of self-consciousness in the service of self-transformation" (May and Perry, 2017, p. 3). Reflexivity in this context relates to an awareness of one's presence in the research process and that this presence impacts on the formulation of a research question, on the relationship with participants, and on how data is analysed. On the other extreme end of the continuum, reflexivity leads to the researcher's realisation that they can only exist in relationships with and through others and that therefore they must "reject individualism and accept our insignificance" (May and Perry, 2017, p. 4) in the world. Reflexivity, therefore, is not simply a task to be completed during the



Source: Author's Own.

Figure 37.1 Continuum of reflexivity

course of research. It is an ontology, the study of being that considers questions such as: what is? what is existence? what is becoming? what is reality?

Understanding reflexivity in this way requires the researcher to learn to be self-aware without being too self-aware; to be self-conscious without being too self-conscious; to be critical without being too critical. Engaging with reflexivity in research contexts is in effect the navigation of a very fine line between bias and subjectivity, between thinking radically about ways forward and undermining disciplinary conventions as well as confidence in disciplines. For rejecting individualism, accepting insignificance in the world could potentially take critiquing and second-order questioning one's position and role in research so far as to lead to querying the role of research itself. Reflexivity requires an intimate and detailed exploration of one's self, and thus requires subjectivity, but it needs to be as free from bias as possible. A researcher is only able to remove themselves from bias by continuing to critically challenge their own positionality. Some scholars suggest that reflexivity is practised at its highest possible level within autoethnographic investigations (Leavy, 2009). In autoethnography, critical introspection – thus reflexivity – is the “primary vehicle for inquiry” (Broussine, 2008, p. 36). This form of reflexivity is not narcissistic navel-gazing, but a systematic self-centring to account for the researchers' position within the research and beyond, within the relationship to participants and the world as a whole.

REFLEXIVITY IN PRACTICE

Reflexivity in social research practice takes different forms. Fook (1999) highlights reflexivity as subjectivity, thus relating to the whole self; reflexivity as reactivity, thus the participants' reactions to the research process; and reflexivity as interaction, thus the relationship between researchers and participants. Whitaker and Atkinson (2019) distinguish between epistemic reflexivity, disciplinary reflexivity, methodological reflexivity, textual reflexivity, and positional reflexivity. Although such categorisations may help understand reflexivity in practice, they are ambiguous and overlapping. It may therefore be more helpful to return to the continuum outlined earlier (see Figure 37.1) to identify how reflexivity is practised within the context of social research. Depending on their positioning along the continuum, researchers may decide to take a positivist, critical, or feminist stance in their reflexivity work (Dowling, 2008). Reflexivity from a positivist viewpoint involves recognising one's preconceptions, assumptions, and beliefs, and trying to actively set them aside from the research process. In

phenomenology, this process is described as “bracketing”; it is called “indifference” within ethnomethodology. Critical reflexivity goes beyond the immediate, personal levels of assumptions in that it interrogates sociopolitical factors impacting research. In engaging in critical reflexivity, researchers recognise that knowledge production is not value-free, but occurs within the context of sociopolitical, and indeed cultural, circumstances. It is therefore the researcher’s responsibility to identify and attend to tendencies and trends beyond the immediate study. The feminist standpoint in relation to reflexivity recognises that knowledge production in research is a joint endeavour between researchers and participants, and that therefore the relationship between researchers and participants is not neutral, but reciprocal.

In order to “do” reflexivity, most social researchers maintain diaries and journals, where they note key thought processes, assumptions, and beliefs that would impact their decision-making. Those researchers who engage with feminist standpoints, who develop more intimate relationships with their participants, and who will therefore more likely conduct unstructured, conversational interviews tend to also make journal entries after interviews, noting down their experiences, emotions, and thoughts. Such journal entries then form the basis for a systematic exploration and critical interrogation of the researchers’ role in shaping their research.

Reflexivity requires practice and experience. In order to do reflexivity well, it is imperative that researchers step out of the first level of reflection and into the reflexivity work. As we have seen, reflections on personal opinions and biases are a necessary step in undertaking reflexivity. However, it is the critical engagement with these personal reflections and the systematic exploration of how these reflections impact the research that moves the researcher from reflective work to reflexivity. Unfortunately, many researchers struggle to maintain the initial momentum of keeping a research journal in practice. It is therefore advisable to reconsider the process of maintaining a research journal (Brown, 2021), as unreasonable expectations and persistent myths around how to keep a research journal put unnecessary pressure on individuals, which often results in researchers abandoning their research journaling. To this end, researchers may find it useful to make a “reflexivity plan” (Kara, 2020, p. 97) to schedule time for reflexivity work and to ensure that reflexivity work occurs at regular intervals or key stages across the entire research process.

CONCLUSION

Although reflexivity has a long-standing history in philosophical and social theories, the concept continues to be elusive. Depending on their philosophical, theoretical, methodological, and disciplinary stances, researchers may engage with reflexivity in different forms, thereby compounding the elusiveness of the concept. There is, nonetheless, a general consensus within qualitative inquiry that reflexivity work is necessary in order to account for the role of the researchers in relation to an inquiry and how, therefore, they actively shape but also more unconsciously impact their studies.

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