
Negotiating the swamp: the opportunity and challenge of reflexivity in research practice

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ABSTRACT How should researchers reflexively evaluate ways in which intersubjective elements transform their research? The process of engaging in reflexivity is full of muddy ambiguity and multiple trails as researchers negotiate the swamp of interminable deconstructions, self analysis and self disclosure. This article examines how researcher-explorers from a range of research traditions have negotiated this swamp in practice, by drawing on examples of their reflexive experience. 'Maps' are offered on five variants of reflexivity, namely: (i) introspection; (ii) intersubjective reflection; (iii) mutual collaboration; (iv) social critique; and (v) discursive deconstruction. The diversity of practice suggests competing, though also overlapping, accounts of the rationale and practice of reflexivity. In a critical celebration of the richness of reflexivity, this article aims to demonstrate how each way of approaching reflexivity offers different opportunities and challenges. It is hoped that the maps provided will enable researcher-explorers to choose their preferred route through the swamp. The discussion section, along with a 'meta-reflexive voice' threaded throughout, highlights the critical issues at stake when attempting reflexive analysis in practice.

KEYWORDS: *critical analysis, intersubjectivity, methodological evaluation, reflection, reflexivity, researcher's experience*

Without some degree of reflexivity any research is blind and without purpose.
(Flood, 1999: 35)

Prologue: evolving reflexivity

Reflexivity in qualitative research – where researchers engage in explicit self-aware meta-analysis – has a long history spanning at least a century. It has moved from introspection towards critical realist and subjectivist accounts,

and more recently towards highlighting the socio-political, post-modern context through deconstructing the research encounter. Although not always referred to explicitly as reflexivity, the project of examining how the researcher and intersubjective elements impinge on, and even transform, research, has been an important part of the evolution of qualitative research. Critical self-reflexive methodologies have evolved across different qualitative research fields in a story of turns and shifts.

I need to give an account of this story of how the use of reflexivity has evolved. Yet I am all too aware of offering a partial, simplistic account – my understanding, my construction. How can it be anything else? Where to start? But a context is still needed – one that pays due homage to key names and the historical shifts while remaining sufficiently fluid to acknowledge how early genres are still in use even as contemporary critiques of critiques proliferate. . . . And, in making this rhetorical move, have I inoculated myself enough against likely protests that I am distorting history and offering too incomplete an account . . . ?

Early anthropological 'realist tales', where researchers conscientiously recorded observations in an effort to prove their scientific credentials, have gradually given way to more personal 'confessional tales' where researchers describe decisions and dilemmas of their fieldwork experience. With this movement, most evident from the 1970s, comes a growing 'methodological self-consciousness'. The ethnographic critique of ethnography (led by writers such as Clifford and Marcus, 1986) pushed qualitative researchers into a 'new paradigm, placing discovery of reflexivity at the centre of methodological thinking' (Seale, 1999: 160).

The concern of ethnographers and anthropologists (among other qualitative researchers) to unravel how their biographies intersect with their interpretation of field experiences led, initially, to highly subjectivist accounts of fieldwork. In such research, fieldworkers portrayed themselves as infiltrating a group and then reporting on their experiences as an 'insider'. Other researchers, on a more objective mission, sought to increase the integrity and trustworthiness of their findings. Through critical reflection, they used reflexivity to continually monitor, or even audit, the research process. As the research process is made transparent, they argued, personal experience is transformed into public, accountable knowledge. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) explain:

Transactions and the ideas that emerge from [the research process] . . . should be documented. The construction of analytic or methodological memoranda and working papers, and the consequent explication of working hypotheses, are of vital importance. It is important that the processes of exploration and abduction be documented and retrievable. (p. 191)

In these ways the full research history (insofar as there is space to give it) is offered as both a confessional tale (Van Maanen, 1988) and a transparent account of the research. But these uses of reflexivity, to offer better, more

committed (thus 'truer'?) accounts as part of trying to affirm the validity of the research, were quickly challenged as regretful backward glances at positivist ideals. Post-modern researchers began to seek a more radical relativism as they embraced the negotiated and socially constructed nature of the research experience. Attempts were made to erode the researcher's privileged position – an explicit and particular critique of earlier imperialist and colonialist anthropologies (for example, Clifford and Marcus, 1986). Greater attention was placed on how ethnographers, for instance, stood at the margins between two cultures (Barthes, 1972), decoding and reinterpreting the host culture for the home culture.

Concerns about the unexamined power of the researcher led to an emergence of feminist versions of reflexivity – for example, Wilkinson (1988) and Reinharz (1992). These aimed to reframe power balances between participants and researchers. Hertz (1997), for instance, urges researchers to be aware of their own positions and interests and to explicitly situate themselves within the research. She argues that researchers are

... imposed at all stages of the research process – from the questions they ask to those they ignore, from who they study to who they ignore, from problem formulation to analysis, representation and writing – in order to produce less distorted accounts of the social world. (p. viii)

Today, 'narratives of the self' have proliferated. In works such as Kondo (1990), reflexive feminism and cultural critique converge (Marcus, 1994). At the same time the sociological, structuralist turn in writings continues as researchers concentrate on the discursive and macro-sociopolitical forces shaping research narratives. 'Self-reflexivity unmasks complex political/ideological agendas hidden in our writing' (Richardson, 1994: 523). The researcher 'appears not as an individual creative scholar, a knowing subject who discovers, but more as a material body through whom a narrative structure unfolds' (Bruner, 1986: 150).

The last couple of decades has also seen a surge of interest in ethnographic and sociological writing itself. Writers (notably Geertz, 1988) have argued for less authoritative texts in favour of self-critical ones that explicitly acknowledge any text is partisan, partial and fundamentally bound to the social context and rhetorical genres. Parody, irony and scepticism are evident in self-reflexive experimental writing forms (for instance, Ashmore, 1989 and Tyler, 1987) seen as better able to represent a post-modern world. Trying out different evocative representations enables researchers to relate differently to their material.

In terms of current practice, it could be argued that reflexivity, in its myriad forms, is now the defining feature of qualitative research (Banister et al., 1994). Most qualitative researchers will attempt to be aware of their role in the (co)-construction of knowledge. They will try to make explicit how inter-subjective elements impact on data collection and analysis in an effort to enhance the trustworthiness, transparency and accountability of their

research. The debate resides largely between qualitative researchers of different theoretical persuasions who lay claim to competing accounts of the rationale and practices of reflexivity.

Introduction

From this brief – and all too neatly constructed – history, it is clear that reflexivity, in its multiple guises, has a firm place within the qualitative research agenda. As qualitative researchers engaged in contemporary practice, we accept that the researcher is a central figure who influences, if not actively constructs, the collection, selection and interpretation of data. We recognize that research is co-constituted, a joint product of the participants, researcher and their relationship. We understand that meanings are negotiated within particular social contexts so that another researcher will unfold a different story. We no longer seek to eradicate the researcher's presence – instead subjectivity in research is transformed from a problem to an opportunity (Finlay, 2002). In short, researchers no longer question the need for reflexivity: the question is how to do it.

When it comes to practice, the process of engaging in reflexivity is perilous, full of muddy ambiguity and multiple trails. To what extent should researchers give a methodological account of their experience? How much personal detail can be disclosed and what forms can it take? How are researchers to represent a multiplicity of voices while not hiding themselves? In some ways, embarking on reflexivity is akin to entering uncertain terrain where solid ground can all too easily give way to swamp and mire. The challenge is to negotiate a path through this complicated landscape – one that exposes the traveller to interesting discoveries while ensuring a route out the other side. Researchers have to negotiate the 'swamp' of interminable self analysis and self disclosure. On their journey, they can all too easily fall into the mire of the infinite regress of excessive self analysis and deconstructions at the expense of focusing on the research participants and developing understanding. Reflexive analysis is always problematic. Assuming it is even possible to pin down something of our intersubjective understandings, these are invariably difficult to unfold, while confessing to methodological inadequacies can be uncomfortable.

In this article I look at how researcher-explorers from a range of research traditions have negotiated the perils of the swamp by drawing on examples of their reflexive experience. I offer, as it were, a typology of what seems to be occurring in contemporary practice. Maps are offered on five variants of reflexivity, namely: (i) introspection; (ii) intersubjective reflection; (iii) mutual collaboration; (iv) social critique, and (v) discursive deconstruction. This new way of conceptualizing reflexivity¹ shows different routes through the swamp depending on researchers' aims and focus.

As with any typology, the borders overlap and researchers may well employ several

maps simultaneously. I am all too aware of the problems of offering this inevitably incomplete typology as a straw man to be knocked down. Still, I persevere. I see a need to be clearer about different practices so people can make an informed choice, one that is consistent with epistemological and methodological commitments. I remember well my own confusions and tensions as a novice researcher who sought different options (beyond the literature of my narrow field) for how to fulfil the expectations to be reflexive. Also, I want to challenge you, the reader, to see beyond your usual position. I want to cut across typical understandings – whereby certain versions of reflexivity are favoured as being attached to particular theoretical positions – and to show more of the shared enterprise of the broad sweep of qualitative research.

I hope that the maps offered here, along with the accounts of various reflexive journeys, will enable researcher-explorers to better choose their preferred route through the swamp. Also, to help tease out the critical issues at stake I offer a 'meta-reflexive voice' presented in italics. The issues raised here are taken up again in the final discussion where I argue that each variant of reflexivity carries its own strengths and weaknesses, and offers particular opportunities and challenges.

Reflexivity as introspection

When Maslow (1966) asserted 'there is no substitute for experience, none at all' (p. 45), he pointed researchers towards the value of self-dialogue and discovery. Those researchers who begin their research with the data of their experience seek to 'embrace their own humanness as the basis for psychological understanding' (Walsh, 1995: 335). Here, researchers' own reflecting, intuiting and thinking are used as primary evidence (Moustakas, 1994).

Moustakas (1990) describes this process in terms of forming the research question: 'The task of the initial engagement is to discover an intense interest, a passionate concern that calls out to the researcher' (p. 27). His major phenomenological work on loneliness, for instance, began at a critical time in his life when he was faced with a problem of whether or not to agree to major heart surgery that might restore his daughter to health or result in her death. 'The urgency of making a critical decision plunged me into the experience of feeling utterly alone . . . I became aware that at the center of my world was a deep and pervasive feeling of loneliness' (p. 91).

In a different mood, Moustakas (1990) describes the process of internal search through which meaning is discovered (what he calls 'heuristic research'), in relation to his research on delight:

I may be entranced by visions, images and dreams that connect me to my question. I may come into touch with new regions of myself, and discover revealing connections with others. . . . If I am investigating delight, then delight hovers nearby and follows me around. . . . Delight becomes a lingering presence. . . . It opens me to the world in a joyous way and takes me into a richness, playfulness

and childlikeness that move me freely and effortlessly. I am ready to see, feel, touch, or hear whatever opens me to a fuller knowledge and understanding of the experience of delight. (p. 11)

As another example, Murphy (1987) offers his personal, anthropological account of how being paralysed resulted in his loss of self:

From the time my tumor was first diagnosed through my entry into wheelchair life, I had an increasing apprehension that I had lost much more than the full use of my legs. I had also lost a part of my self. It was not just that people acted differently toward me, which they did, but rather that I felt differently toward myself. I had changed in my own mind, in my self-image, and in the basic conditions of my existence. It left me feeling alone and isolated . . . it was a change for the worse, a diminution of everything I used to be. (p. 85)

In addition to examining one's own experience and personal meanings for their own sake, insights can emerge from personal introspection which then form the basis of a more generalized understanding and interpretations. Reflections are assumed to provide data regarding the social/emotional world of participants. As Parker (1997) reminds us: 'We need to be aware of ourselves as the dreamers . . . unlike instances of other people telling us their dreams, we understand and share, partially at least, at some level, the story' (p. 488).

A powerful example of this comes from Rosaldo (1989) in his influential anthropological study of Ilongot head-hunting. Here he drew on his personal experience of bereavement (the death of his wife) to make sense of the rage people felt which pushed them to head-hunt. Similarly, Abu-Lughod's experience (see Hertz, 1997) of learning to live as a 'modest daughter' within a Bedouin community offers an example of how generating experiential data can contribute to a broader analysis – in this instance of women's modesty and veiling practices.

It was at this moment, when I felt naked before an Arab elder because I could not veil, that I understood viscerally that women veil not because anyone tells them to or because they would be punished if they did not, but because they feel extremely uncomfortable in the presence of certain categories of men. (Cited in Bolak, 1997: p. 98)

An example of this process also occurred in my own phenomenological research into the lifeworld of the occupational therapist:

On one occasion I was observing an occupational therapist work with a client who was suffering from the final stages of lung cancer. Although I was supposed to only observe, I found I could not stop myself becoming involved (by asking the patient questions and even intervening at a practical level). When I reflected on my behaviour, I understood it was my active need to be involved – to do something. I also recognised my own sensitivity as an asthmatic, witnessing someone with breathing problems dying of a lung disease. Once I recognised this, I could then see the occupational therapist was experiencing similar identifications with some of her other patients. Previously I had interpreted the therapist as being involved with fairly superficial, 'irrelevant' tasks – now I could see these

tasks had a meaning for her: they were as much for her as the patient. By examining my own responses I could better understand hers. (Finlay, 1998a: 454)

The use of personal data is also picked up by psychodynamic researchers who explore how unconscious fantasies can be mobilized in research encounters. Kracke's anthropological work (see Hunt, 1989) with South American Indians provides a good illustration of how competition with father images and castration anxieties became important themes. On noting how the tribe openly expressed feelings and fantasies normally disguised in Western cultures, Kracke was confronted by his own fantasy life:

Even now, in intense periods of working through conflicts, I find myself practically redreaming the dreams that were told to me by Jovenil or Francisco [his participants] – if not literally in the manifest content of my own dreams, at least taking a very important place in the latent content. I am sure at some level I was seeking something like this when I chose to work with South American Indians in the first place. . . . But the point here is the degree to which the experience was integrated into my personality – through my transference to Jovenil and . . . others. (pp. 32–3)

These examples show the value of using introspection and being reflexive about one's own personal reactions. Being preoccupied by one's own emotions and experiences, however, can skew findings in unfortunate directions. Perhaps 'skew' is the wrong word here as it suggests a right path from which one has deviated. On the other hand, the researcher's position can become unduly privileged, blocking out the participant's voice. As researchers, we need to strike a balance, striving for enhanced self-awareness while eschewing navel-gazing. Instead, with reflexive analysis, the self, in my view, should be exploited only while it remains purposeful to do so.

Ultimately, reflexivity should be 'neither an opportunity to wallow in subjectivity nor permission to engage in legitimised emoting' (Finlay, 1998a). The challenge for researchers using introspection is to use personal revelation not as an end in itself but as a springboard for interpretations and more general insight. In this sense, the researcher moves beyond 'benign introspection' (Woolgar, 1988: 22) to become more explicit about the link between knowledge claims, personal experiences of both participant and researcher, and the social context. This essential message carries through into the second variant of reflexivity which argues against individual subjectivity dislocated from research relations and in favour of intersubjective reflection.

Reflexivity as intersubjective reflection

The genre of reflexivity as intersubjective reflection has grown significantly in the last decade. Here, researchers explore the mutual meanings emerging within the research relationship. They focus on the situated and negotiated nature of the research encounter and, for those of a psychodynamic persuasion, how unconscious processes structure relations between the researcher and participant. The process here involves more than reflection – instead, a

radical self-reflective consciousness (Sartre, 1969) is sought where the self-in-relation-to-others becomes both the aim and object of focus.

Research by Ballinger and Payne (2000) into falls experienced by older people highlights how the researcher can be viewed by the patient participants as a 'professional with some kind of authority and influence' – a presentation which would impact on subsequent interactions. In their own case, they noted when the researcher approached the fieldwork she

. . . appeared very similar to that of a health professional. She dressed smartly, wore an identity badge and accessed patients through attending nurse hand-overs and reading medical notes. She asked patients to sign a formally worded consent form and then proceeded to ask about the event that had brought the individual into hospital. (p. 577)

When an analysis of discourse was carried out, these observations enabled them to see how and why participants seemed engaged in a project to counter negative professional evaluations that they were mentally or physically frail.

Here, in another extract from my phenomenological research on the experience of being a therapist, I explore some complex relationship dynamics which seemed significant:

Jane was much more reticent and reserved. She did not initiate any disclosures, which in turn made me much more active. I felt pushed to ask more questions and I became (reluctantly) much more directive. In the process I ended up asking what was for me an unusually large number of closed questions. Did I sense a vulnerability in her and, by asking closed questions, was trying to protect her from disclosing too much? Interestingly, Jane, more than any of the other therapists, got me disclosing more to her. She took the initiative to ask me questions, and I obliged, partly in my desire to share something with her in return. I also felt a need to confide in her. From the first moment I felt drawn to her as a therapist and as a beautiful woman. Somehow I wanted a part of her niceness and nurturing – perhaps even be her client? At the same time I could see that her general 'niceness', combined with her controlling quality (with her asking me questions) and lack of self-disclosure, were all effective defences in stopping me from pushing/challenging her. Jane and I together seemed to be engaged in an exercise to stop me probing too much. (Finlay, 1998b: 241)

Psychodynamically orientated researchers would also recommend the use of self-reflection while embracing a variety of psychoanalytic techniques such as dream analysis and interpretation of fantasies as research tools to enable researchers to become aware of the emotional investment they have in the research relationships concerned. In their research on subjectivity and crime, Hollway and Jefferson (2000) utilized reflexivity along with their narrative method using psychoanalytic interpretations. Jefferson, for example, describes his sense of rapport and identification with Tommy, one of their participants:

A big reason for this good rapport, I felt, stemmed from our both being members of big families. He never knew that about me, but listening to him talking about

his family produced points of identification which to some extent bridged our class, educational and work differences, probably enabling me to be a better, more informed listener. His clean, tidy, well-kept house (unlike some we entered), his active involvement in community affairs, including running a local kids' football team . . . facilitated my identification with him. . . . In short, I enjoyed interviewing Tommy because I liked him; and I liked him because we had things in common. (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000: 65)

Jefferson goes on to describe how he used his subjective feelings along with theory to probe his participant's account:

Our theoretical starting-point was undoubtedly important in alerting us to the contradictory nature of Tommy's account, but so too was my subjective feeling on reading it; how disjunctive it felt to my experience. . . . It might be objected that my memories are no more reliable than Tommy's and that I am projecting on to him my own feelings about unpleasant aspects of my childhood. This possibility can be tested against Tommy's text. . . . Our judgement is that they are present in the detail but shorn of the emotion which would naturally accompany them. It is that accompaniment that I feel I know and can use empathically here. (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000: 66)

Psychodynamic researchers remind us to explore how conversation or text affects us and to reflect on what we bring to it ourselves. In particular, they see unconscious needs and transferences as mutually structuring the relationship between researcher and participant. As Hunt (1989) notes, the inner worlds of researchers structure

. . . their choice of setting, experience in the initial stages of fieldwork, and the research roles they assume. The transferences that are situationally mobilized in the fieldwork encounter have implications for the questions researchers ask, the answers they hear, and the materials they observe . . . Most important transferences structure the researcher's ability to develop empathic relations with those subjects who provide the essential source of sociological data. (p. 81)

In her work on the police, Hunt (1989) identifies how her status as an unwanted female outsider raised a number of unconscious issues which then impacted on the research relationship:

Positive oedipal wishes also appeared to be mobilized in the fieldwork encounter. The resultant anxieties were increased because of the proportion of men to women in the police organization and the way in which policemen sexualized so many encounters. . . . The fact that I knew more about their work world than their wives also may have heightened anxiety because it implied closeness to subjects. By partly defeminizing myself through the adoption of a liminal gender role, I avoided a conflictual oedipal victory. That the police represented forbidden objects of sexual desire was revealed in dreams and slips of the tongue . . . the intended sentence 'Jim's a good cop' came out instead 'Jim's a good cock.' In those words, I revealed my sexual interest in a category of men who were forbidden as a result of their status as research subjects. In that way, they resembled incestuous objects. (p. 40)

Speaking as a therapist myself, I have to admit to often drawing on this type of reflexivity. It is second nature to examine my own motivations as a way of understanding another. I probe the therapeutic relationship and my own counter-transferences to reveal something more. Yet, at another level I can see the problems underlying the realist assumptions and the impossibility of the task of gaining access to motivations which are, by definition, hidden. Isn't it problematic to simply import therapeutic techniques into the research encounter without question? And who am I, simply by dint of my training, to be so sure when interpreting another's world? I am uncomfortable about the power I assume when explaining others' motives.

Such examples highlight the value of exploring the research relationship as well as the challenges. The difficulties of gaining access to personal (and possibly unconscious) motivations should not be underestimated while the complex dynamics between the researcher and participant adds a further layer of opacity. To accomplish such a feat, it could be argued, requires a 'superhuman self-consciousness' attainable only through intensive psychoanalysis (Seale, 1999). In reply, researchers interested in exploring intersubjective dynamics defend their mission to explore the co-constituted nature of the research looking at both inward meanings and outward into the realm of shared meanings, interaction and discourse. These themes also provide the focus for researchers interested in collaborative enquiry.

Reflexivity as mutual collaboration

Researchers making use of reflexivity as mutual collaboration are found using a broad range of methodologies, from humanistic new paradigm and co-operative inquiry research (e.g. Reason, 1988; Heron, 1996) to more sociological, discursive and feminist research approaches (e.g. Wilkinson, 1988; Banister et al., 1994; Potter and Wetherell, 1995; Yardley, 1997). These wide-ranging research methodologies are linked by the way they seek to enlist participants as co-researchers and vice versa.

Recognizing research as a co-constituted account, adherents of participative research argue that as research participants also have the capacity to be reflexive beings, they can be co-opted into the research as co-researchers. At the very least this involves participants in a reflexive dialogue during data analysis or evaluation. Smith (1994) cites an example of how utilizing participants' interpretations resulted in him confronting, modifying and honing his own interpretations.

Co-operative inquiry approaches, on the other hand, apply reflexivity more completely. Here researchers, simultaneously participants in their own research, engage in cycles of mutual reflection and experience. A fascinating reflexive study of interactive interviewing by Ellis et al. (1997: 21) provides insights into how a research relationship develops and shapes the findings produced. In this exploration of the researchers' experience of bulimia, they describe their work as 'sharing personal and social experiences of both

respondents and researchers, who tell . . . their stories in the context of a developing relationship':

Lisa and I are masters at intellectualizing bulimia. Through our conversations, I have moved beyond a literal interpretation of bulimia as being only about thinness to thinking about how eating disorders also speak to personal longings. But, it always has been hard for us to focus on emotional issues. I have come to see this as a relational problem to which we both contribute. . . . Bulimia is about mess. Lisa and I talk about it, study it, analyze it, and WE DO IT! As perfectionists . . . we craft exteriors that contradict the mess in our lives. Still I know what goes on 'behind the closed doors' in Lisa's life, because I know what goes on behind my own closed doors. (pp. 127–8)

Drawing on research by Traylen into the role of health visitors, Heron (1996) describes a co-operative inquiry where the co-researchers/co-participants engage in a reflexive dialogue about their research process:

Just when we were feeling so confident the group was thrown into confusion, uncertainty and depression. . . . We were swamped by the enormity of the task and scared about whether we would be able to make sense of it all. . . . The group's pre-occupation with action had, I think, something to do with avoiding the key issue of our lack of clarity about the health visitor's role, which had always been present hovering in the wings. I had no idea how we were going to address this. All I could hang onto at this stage was the thought that if the group could hold this chaos for long enough perhaps something would emerge. (p. 149)

While these studies are to be valued for their collaborative, democratic, inclusive spirit, critics reject the pronounced element of compromise and negotiation which could potentially 'water down' the insights of single researchers. In reply, collaborative researchers argue that dialogue within a group allows members to move beyond their preconceived theories and subjective biases towards representing multiple voices. Halling (1999) makes this point in his discussion on a dialogic study on forgiveness he carried out in collaboration with a group of post-graduate students:

Working in dialogue and comparing personal experiences and the interviews with each other allowed us to come to a rich, collective understanding of the process of forgiving another. . . . Freedom infuses the process with a spirit of exploration and discovery, and is evident through the group members' ability to be playful and imaginative with their interpretations. Trust provides the capacity to be genuinely receptive to what is new and different in the others' experiences and expressions and accounts for respect toward each person's descriptions, interpretations, and stories.

Similarly, Barry et al. (1999), in their study on teamwork and doctor–patient communication, argue for the need to represent multiple voices:

There are multiple voices in this area of applied health care research: the patient, the doctor, the pharmacist, the academic, and the educator. Many research projects speak with only one of these voices. . . . Using reflexivity to

uncover the different agendas of each team member helps us to avoid biasing the data toward one voice. (p. 41)

Reflexivity, here, moves from being an intellectual exercise into being of direct, practical use, and in this way I can value the results. However, I have to wonder if the collaborations are necessary. Aren't many of the discussions, conflicts and debates ones which would often occur with in-depth personal reflection anyway? And, in the end, with collaboration are the multiple voices even heard or are you simply left with one authorial account? I also worry about the supposedly egalitarian rhetoric which disguises what are often essentially unequal relationships. I know I have played this game and have attempted to legitimate my research using 'participant validation' or the 'positive responses of the academic community' to buttress my arguments.

Collaborative reflexivity offers the opportunity to hear, and take into account, multiple voices and conflicting positions. While the notion of shared realities finds favour with many researchers, some still challenge an egalitarian rhetoric where it disguises essentially unequal relationships. It is this last issue which is taken up in the fourth variant of reflexivity.

Reflexivity as social critique

One particular concern for researchers using reflexivity as social critique is how to manage the power imbalance between researcher and participant. They openly acknowledge tensions arising from different social positions, for instance, in relation to class, gender and race. As Wasserfall (1997) explains:

... the use of reflexivity during fieldwork can mute the distance and alienation built into conventional notions of 'objectivity' or objectifying those who are studied. The research process becomes more mutual, as a strategy to deconstruct the author's authority. (p. 152)

In their feminist account of researching 'Asian' women's experience of childbirth, Marshall et al. (1998) probe how they were centrally implicated in the representation of their research participants. In particular they acknowledge how this involved some selective silence on their part when it came to writing up their research:

We have used accounts . . . to point to care where the woman is viewed and treated on the basis of ethnic grouping. . . . But additionally, in these extracts there is a singling out of black nurses. This raises the issue of what to do when working with marginalized accounts which themselves reproduce prejudicial viewpoints and evaluations. Our decision to date has been not to report these aspects of the accounts. (Leaving silenced aspects of the accounts that we do not want to hear?) . . . These tensions around the representation of 'experience' were and are central for us as researchers. In adjudicating between what and what not to write up we could be accused of taking the political-moral high-ground . . . this sort of 'suppression' results in a misunderstanding of power . . . and hence, prevents opportunities for countering oppression which currently exist. (p. 128)

From his social constructionist perspective, Gough (1999) explores his use of humour to breach the 'detached researcher' stance. In the following extract, Gough (called Bren) uses his data to reflexively examine his sense of discomfort on somehow 'colluding with the lads' – his participants. The subsequent analysis provided valuable data for his broader critique of 'Men, masculinities and discourse':

Jack: . . . people look to label because it makes them feel safer . . . they think they know where they stand and they can control, but it's a lot more complex . . .

Bren: Psychologists are the worst offenders! [group laughter]

Jack: Yeah . . .

Glen: the media, the *Guardian* and psychologists on Channel 4! [group laughter].

I suppose the use of humour helps to suggest the illusion of 'normal' conversation, with the researcher temporarily colluding as one of the 'lads', albeit in this case one limited to one-line questions and interjections. This particular example could indicate a degree of self-deprecation, perhaps in an effort to reduce power differentials, or perhaps more likely, to create distance between myself and (the maligned) psychologists, hence appearing liberal or sophisticated (either way attempting to endear myself to the participants). Perhaps such occasional contributions give the impression of participation, thus rendering temporarily the otherwise peculiar position of polite interrogator less salient. It is also possible that humour is attempted as a defense in the light of anxiety or discomfort around my 'difference' (as researcher, tutor, outsider) and 'using' the participants for data.

Similarly, reflecting retrospectively, Willott (1998) examines the individual, social-political and research implications of being a feminist researcher researching men:

There is a tension between being a researcher and being a feminist. As a feminist I want to see a change in the patriarchal relations between men and women. I would like this change to extend to my relationships with the research participants, but found it difficult to challenge directly. As a researcher I was careful to nurture relationships, to avoid stepping over invisible lines in which these relationships might be jeopardized, and to 'enter sympathetically into the alien and possibly repugnant perspectives of rival thinkers'. (p. 183)

While much reflexive research focused on social critique arises out of the social constructionist and feminist literature, researchers of other theoretical persuasions also pick up these themes. My own phenomenological research on the life world of therapists is a case in point. Here I was confronted with the macro-social dimensions influencing my personal interactions:

[With one of my participants,] I found myself feeling irritated with what I saw as a cold, mechanical approach, one that was inappropriate in a therapist. I found myself being uncharacteristically challenging with him. I pushed him to get an emotional response. Then, towards the end of interview he gave it to me and he spoke, quite painfully, about how difficult it was to handle certain emotions and how he had to cut off from them at work. I then felt guilty for having

been so insensitive and forcing such disclosures. Reflecting on this I wondered about the extent to which I set all that up with my initial assumptions. To what extent did he produce behaviours, both the mechanical and emotional, because I was inviting it? . . .

Having engaged in reflexive analysis . . . [I concluded] that I had probably influenced my informant. In addition, I came to understand that the multiple, contradictory ideologies around in our culture also had a considerable influence and that emotions reflect our ideologies. . . . For one thing I suspect my informant had internalised the same messages I have about 'acceptable' gender behaviour. But I also saw that he would have been exposed to other ideologies, for instance, how as professionals we should be empathetic/emotional, as well as professional and in control of our feelings. My negative reactions probably reflected the society within which the occupational therapist practised and had to struggle. In this way, my reflections (about my own assumptions, society's ideas and my informant's inconsistent presentation) became part of the research data I needed to take note of and analyse. (Finlay, 1998a: 454)

Several thoughts occur to me as I reflect back on this analysis. 'I found myself being uncharacteristically challenging.' Look at this statement – a classic use of rhetoric! Yet in my defense, it is understandable why I felt the need to distance myself from this slightly negative behaviour. I am reminded how difficult it can be to reveal personal fragility and methodological inadequacy. I am also reminded about the need to continue to be reflexive about one's own reflexive analysis. And so we enter the loop of interminable deconstructions. Is it destructive in that it draws attention away from participant to researcher? On the other hand, we surely must be alert to underlying power issues – both at a micro and macro level – and the researcher cannot be outside the system. Yet the system is not fixed, nor is the position of the researcher, given the diverse, even conflicting, positions which emerge through interaction. It's the complexity of the shifting and negotiated positions which is interesting.

Reflexivity as social critique offers the opportunity to utilize experiential accounts while situating these within a strong theoretical framework about the social construction of power. A particular strength with this account is the recognition of multiple, shifting researcher–participant positions. The task of deconstructing the author's authority, however, carries associated costs. As with the previous variant, preoccupations with egalitarianism can divert attention away from other, possibly more pertinent, issues and can result, paradoxically, in a strategy which lays claim to more authority. Such rhetorical strategies are the focus of the final variant of reflexivity.

Reflexivity as discursive deconstruction

In reflexivity as discursive deconstruction, attention is paid to the ambiguity of meanings in language used and how this impacts on modes of presentation. How, researchers ask, can we pin down and represent the dynamic, multiple meanings embedded in language? Woolgar (1989) suggests one route forward is to juxtapose 'textual elements such that no single (comfortable)

interpretation is readily available. In this scheme, different elements manifest a self-referring or even contradictory relation with one another' (p. 85). In his thesis on 'Wrighting sociology of scientific knowledge' – a classic example of ironic reflexivity – Ashmore (1989) plays upon and parodies the circumstances of the production of his doctoral thesis by interspersing entertaining, fictional dialogues with literature reviews and dialectical critique:

It is not enough to take reflexivity as one's topic. . . . It sets out to be a mode of inquiry. The self-destructive solution of noninquiry in which paradoxical problems are outlawed, and only the others suffer, is no solution at all. Indeed, by showing and displaying and talking around its own socially constituted nature, its own textuality and its own paradox, instead of always and only talking of these things, it can talk of other things. . . . Celebratory practical reflexive inquiry is wrighting beyond the tu quoque. And it must be shown, not told. (p. 110)

Researchers inclined towards social constructionism focus more explicitly on deconstructing the language used and its rhetorical functions. As Edwards (1997) explains:

Factual and fictional stories share many of the same kinds of textual devices for constructing credible descriptions, building plausible or unusual event sequences, attending to causes and consequences, agency and blame, character and circumstance. (p. 232)

Researchers for this tradition would notice how both participants and researchers are engaged in an exercise of 'presenting' themselves to each other – and to the wider community which is to receive the research.

Other post-modern researchers have focused on reflexive writing itself in terms of textual radicalism. Lincoln and Denzin (1994) explain how textual experimentation reflects a move towards a post-modern pluralism, which qualitative research needs to reflect. Here, there is 'not one "voice", but polyvocality; not one story but many talks, dramas, pieces of fiction, fables, memories, histories, autobiographies, poems and other texts' (p. 584). In such a spirit, Harvey (forthcoming) utilizes poetry in order to represent the ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning that seemed to be at the core of what he was encountering in his research on organisations, managers and their employees:

'Here One Minute.....'

<i>Go for it!</i>	not coping
<i>Capture the moment!</i>	live the lie
<i>Be strong!</i>	keep stum
<i>Take no prisoners!</i>	bite tongue
<i>Do the business!</i>	doing just enough
<i>Prove yourself!</i>	as become pissed off
<i>Prioritise!</i>	distressed

<i>Manage it!</i>	deskilled
<i>Be empowered !</i>	delayered
<i>Feel the fear!</i>	gone.

Harvey goes on to explain how the poem better captures the 'starkness and bluntness' of his participant's delivery and the 'raw emotion of his talk of the culture he found himself part of (and colluding with)'. Through the poem Harvey was able to avoid sanitizing the research encounter and his own reactions.

I can enjoy creative textual presentations and radical deconstructions though I would resist the nihilism inherent in some pieces. There has to be some balance between critically deconstructing and taking it so far as to lose all meaning. Some post-modern pieces seem so intent on confounding readers they lose their research context. And then it can become a game. Perhaps, in the end, I am forced to 'come clean' and acknowledge my less-relativist (critical realist?) position, one which attempts to capture, something of a 'real' story while acknowledging its partial, tentative status.

Post-modern researchers employing reflexivity to deconstruct have the opportunity to be creative and powerfully thought provoking if they find a balance so as not to lose all meaning. 'Exposing the construction of a text', argues MacMillan (1996) ironically, 'could be viewed as undermining the strength of its own position, since deconstruction can clearly be applied to itself, with the researcher's analysis deconstructing (decomposing) before the ink has dried upon the page!' (p. 16).

Discussion

Reflexivity, then, can be understood in a multitude of ways according to the aims and functions of the exercise at stake and the theoretical or methodological traditions embraced. In terms of aims, reflexivity can be understood as a confessional account of methodology or as examining one's own personal, possibly unconscious, reactions. It can mean exploring the dynamics of the researcher-researched relationship. Alternatively, it can focus more on how the research is co-constituted and socially situated, through offering a critique or through deconstructing established meanings (Finlay, 2002). The functions of reflexivity shift from employing it to offer an account of the research to situating the researcher and voicing difference; from using reflexivity to interpret and understand in terms of data analysis to attending to broader political dimensions when presenting material.

In terms of theoretical and methodological commitments, the 'social critique' and 'discursive deconstruction' variants favoured by post-modernists, social constructionists and sociologists stand in opposition to the more personal and individual stance of 'introspective' phenomenological and psychodynamic researchers. At the same time, feminists and other socially minded

researchers would embrace several of the variants valuing both the experiential and critical dimensions. The attention paid to critical, relativist values in some variants offers a stark contrast to the realist intentions of some essentialist or methodologically focused accounts. The style adopted in 'intersubjective reflection' can be more descriptive (as with phenomenological accounts) or explanatory, when psychodynamic interpretations come into play. Decisions about which variant of reflexivity to embrace need to take into account these different epistemological values and assumptions.

Taken as a whole, in its various guises, we can understand that reflexivity has the potential to be a valuable tool to:

- examine the impact of the position, perspective and presence of the researcher
- promote rich insight through examining personal responses and interpersonal dynamics
- open up unconscious motivations and implicit biases in the researcher's approach
- empower others by opening up a more radical consciousness
- evaluate the research process, method and outcomes
- enable public scrutiny of the integrity of the research through offering a methodological log of research decisions.

(Finlay, 2002)

However, as we have also seen, reflexivity is not without its critics or its pitfalls. In offering a methodological account, researchers, in their quest to promote the integrity of the research, need to grapple with the problematic spectre of having a single, 'true' account. Does the process of explicitly situating researchers inevitably produce a better account or might it function as an unwitting strategy to claim more authority? When researchers focus on their own experiences, as in the case of reflexive 'introspection', the researcher's voice may eventually overshadow the participant's. Likewise, in reflexivity as 'intersubjective reflection' and mutual 'collaboration', assuming it is even possible to unravel such complex dynamics, focusing on the interpersonal process may shift attention away from the phenomena being studied. In a different way, researchers using reflexivity to deconstruct or as 'social critique' have to grapple with shifting subject positions and slippery meanings as they strive to find a balance between profitable deconstruction and nihilism.

Overall, it seems that different researcher-explorers entering the swamp lay claim to competing, sometimes contradictory, accounts of the rationale and practice of reflexivity. Thus, the debate begins. Each way of approaching reflexivity has opportunities and costs; its strengths and limitations. The task is to do the reflexive analysis well, whichever mode or modes are embraced.

So which is best? Surely the pertinent, and probably obvious, issue is how well the reflexive analysis is done? Introspection and intersubjective reflection without critical self-analysis, focused on how the self impacts on the research, is of limited value and open to the charge of self-indulgence. Collaborative reflexivity which doesn't

reveal conflicting voices and which lacks a well-grounded critical rationale can rhetorically camouflage inequalities present. In reflexivity as social critique, it is naive, if not disingenuous, to pay lip-service to the power dimension by assuming a fixed and knowable subject position. The focus, instead, needs to be on the diverse and shifting positions mutually adopted. Finally, nihilistic discursive deconstructions, taken too far, can lose the capacity to evoke and be thought provoking.

Is this 'objective' analysis of strengths and weaknesses simply 'spin' – a rhetorical device to legitimate my typology? I have tried to indicate how I value all the variants – and perhaps this is a fair assessment. I have also, I think, come 'clean' about my preference for introspection and intersubjective reflection. However, I will not be pushed into saying these are the 'right' ways of practising reflexivity – they just fit my way of working. Multiple options are needed to reflect diversity in qualitative methodologies and in order that different voices can be heard. Multiple options also allow us to relate to research material in different ways. Am I persuading you? . . .

Two particular problems confront researchers whatever their preferred method of reflexivity. First, there is the problem of the *rhetorical functions* (Potter and Wetherell, 1995) of reflexivity. Researchers' apparent openness and attention to multiple dynamics can, in fact, disguise the partial and emergent nature of their findings. Preoccupations with collaboration and egalitarianism can result in claims which disguise the inequalities actually present. Paradoxically, attempts to critically evaluate and deconstruct become, themselves, rhetorical strategies to claim authority and credibility. Here, researchers 'claim their stake' by acknowledging their interests, stemming for example from their gender and social class, before others can point to 'bias'. Or, researchers who offer their participants transcripts of the interview towards collaboratively discussing findings may proceed to suggest that because they have engaged in 'reflexivity' and 'participant validation', their study is to be trusted. Of course, stronger, more reflexively critical, pieces of research make no such claims and emphasize the contingent, partial, tentative and emergent qualities. The fact remains, reflexivity has its limits.

The second major criticism levelled against reflexivity returns us to the swamp analogy. Dangers of *infinite regress*, with researchers getting lost in endless narcissistic personal emoting or interminable deconstructions of deconstructions where all meaning gets lost, remains an ever-present threat. DeVault (1997) suggests a balance where personal revelation is only useful if links are made to analyse its relevance in terms of the broader study:

I am generally enthusiastic about the reflexive turn in sociological writing, and I feel impatient with charges that personal writing is 'self-indulgent' or 'narcissistic.' Still, I sometimes worry that the recent emphasis on the personal may signal a retreat from the attempt to interpret a wider social world . . . it has sometimes provided an excuse for spending more time at my computer than in the field. In each particular case, then, it seems important to consider what a personal element does in an analysis and how it contributes to a larger project. (p. 225)

Such questions confirm the challenges and contradictions inherent in the reflexive task. Researchers need to be aware of the critical issues at stake. They need to leave room to explore the relevance of their position in producing (imperfect, partial) knowledge. In addition, pragmatic considerations, such as the intended audience for the published research, will strongly influence the style of reflexivity adopted and depth of personal disclosure. The nature of the positivist hegemony still makes it difficult to publish qualitative research and researchers, with an eye to academic credibility, are often pushed to limit their subjective analysis with all its muddy ambiguity. Even where reflexive exploration is valued, accounts are invariably strangled by constraining word limits set by academic journals.

Researchers are, in effect, damned if they do and damned if they don't. It is the task of each researcher, based on their research aims, values and the logic of the methodology involved, to decide how best to exploit the reflexive potential of their research. Each researcher will choose their path – a perilous path, one which will inevitably involve navigating both pleasures and hazards of the marshy swamp. For all the difficulties inherent in the task, to avoid reflexive analysis altogether is likely to compromise the research. The swamp beast still needs to be confronted as MacMillan's (1996: 15) reflexive poem captures so eloquently:

Reflexivity, like hypnotherapy, has various levels.
Some dabble near the surface,
dipping into reflexive moments, flirting with the images evoked in the reflection, before
returning to the safety of the mundane.
Others attempt to confront the fear of the monster lurking in the abyss
by descending into the deeper realms of reflexivity. It is those who
confront the beast
who will truly know what is there, in the dark beyond . . .

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NOTES

1. Numerous typologies have, of course, been published. Two particular notable, and often referenced, typologies are the ones by Marcus (1994) and Wilkinson (1988). Marcus (1994) identifies four 'styles' of reflexivity: 1. Self-critique and personal quest; 2. Objective reflexivity as a methodological tool; 3. Reflexivity as 'politics of location'; and 4. Feminist experiential reflexivity as the practice of 'positioning' (of standpoint epistemologies). Wilkinson (1988) offers her feminist distinction between personal (i.e. subjective factors), functional (as related to one's researcher role) and disciplinary (looking at the place and function of the particular research project) reflexivity.

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