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CHAPTER 2

Deconstructing reflexivity

Brendan Gough

Positioning the self: author's story

As a qualitative researcher and social psychologist, my work has been heavily shaped by social constructionist and (more recently) psychoanalytic thinking. I am enlightened by the way social constructionism helps explain how individuals are inserted into society, and I am also convinced by psychoanalytic accounts of (inter-)subjective affiliations and motivations. In terms of analysing qualitative data, I have drawn upon discourse analytic approaches (see Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Burman & Parker, 1993) and am also turning to modes of data collection and interpretation informed by psychoanalytic theory (see Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Although both traditions espouse very different conceptual repertoires, social constructionism and psychoanalysis converge in presenting the subject as defined by forces largely beyond control, whether they be prevailing discourse(s) or unconscious identifications. As such, a radical challenge is posed to humanistic (and Western) themes of agency, choice, responsibility – and reflexivity. How can an individual know which societal and unconscious forces prompted particular courses of action? Similarly, how can a researcher identify subjective influences on the research process?

Postmodern responses to this problem have stressed multiple researcher and participant voices, and some have turned to poetic and dramatic forms of writing to highlight complexity in subjectivity and representation generally (e.g. Denzin, 2001). Others, influenced by ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, have concentrated on enactments of reflexivity as topics for study (see Lynch, 2000). In this chapter, I argue that both these positions are overly preoccupied with style over substance and end up avoiding issues of responsibility for and ownership of the research. I suggest that qualitative researchers should attempt a balance between flat, unreflexive analyses and excessive, hyper-reflexive analyses. In this way, something can be said about the topic under investigation, as well as how this understanding was constructed.

Introduction

In this chapter I proceed from the first chapter in presenting reflexivity as multi-faceted and the subject of much debate in contemporary social science. In this light I argue for the plural term 'reflexivities' in order to move away from the notion that reflexivity is something that can be captured once and for all, something that we can all agree upon. In the section on 'Doing reflexivity' I then suggest that opportunities to practise whatever brand of reflexivity can be limited by established writing and publishing conventions. The next section critiques realist forms of reflexivity, arguing that these can serve as a means of privileging the analyst's account, of reinforcing a supposedly accurate or 'true' interpretation of the phenomenon. I then consider postmodern variants on reflexivity which concentrate on language games and often deploy techniques from art and literature to deconstruct authorship. I also reflect on ethnomethodological treatments of reflexivity which study how reflexivity is warranted by researchers and laypeople alike. Both these postmodern and the ethnomethodological approaches to reflexivity are problematic in over-prioritising language use at the expense of coherent analysis of researcher subjectivity and the research topic. Finally, some balance between the extremes of realism and textual radicalism is advocated, emphasising the importance of reflexivity, but not to the extent that the analyst and the phenomenon disappear from view.

Reflexivities

For qualitative researchers, reflexivity facilitates a critical attitude towards locating the impact of research(er) context and subjectivity on project design, data collection, data analysis, and presentation of findings. It refers to a set of practices which help distinguish qualitative from quantitative forms of inquiry (where the emphasis is on the suppression of material pertaining to the process of research, including researcher subjectivity) and which facilitates insights into the context, relationships and power dynamics germane to the research setting (Wilkinson, 1988). As such, the personal is celebrated as a strength by qualitative researchers, a resource to be exploited in order to enrich the quality of analysis (Finlay, 2002).

Reflexivity is signalled by the researcher's incorporation of information relating to the research context and to relevant personal thoughts and feelings into the research report. But there is great variation in practice. Reflexivity may be concentrated at one stage of the research, or applied throughout the research process. It may be enhanced through discussion with colleagues and/or research participants, or simply by regular solitary reflections recorded in a research journal or diary. As Finlay notes in the previous chapter, diverse definitions of and theoretical positions on reflexivity will inform how different qualitative researchers practise reflexivity. Clearly, research informed by psychoanalysis will approach reflexivity differently from humanistic work or social constructionist projects. Some of the debates between distinct perspectives will be touched on in this chapter, particularly regarding the functions of reflexive accounts and the status of researcher knowledge. Because of this lack of consensus concerning the conception and application of reflexivity, I want to endorse the term reflexivities (Lynch, 2000; Pels, 2000) to signify current plurality, flexibility, and conflict.

Several researchers have attempted to summarise different positions on, and practices of, reflexivity and in so doing have effectively captured complexities (see Marcus, 1994; Lynch, 2000; Finlay, 2002). By way of highlighting diversity and setting the scene for the ensuing deconstruction of reflexivity, I now draw upon an early, much cited paper by Wilkinson (1988) which identifies three distinct but interrelated forms of reflexivity: *personal*, *functional* and *disciplinary*.

At the very least, reflexivity implies that the researchers make visible their individuality and its effects on the research process. There is an attempt to highlight those motivations, interests and attitudes which the researcher has imported to the research and to reflect on how these have impacted on each stage. Such subjective factors are typically construed as bias or interference within 'scientific' research, but recognition of the personal dimension to research is heralded as enriching and informative by qualitative researchers. For example, researchers conducting an interview study on experiences of parenthood might fruitfully reflect on their motivations for choosing such a topic (to better understand their experiences of parenthood or being parented; to gather knowledge on a phenomenon which they themselves are considering), their choice of interview questions (a focus on family/work balance), interviewees (of similar age to themselves) and their expectations about what the research might yield (a view of parenthood as challenging, fulfilling or isolating). Such self-awareness can help inform data collection. For example, if the researcher has experience of parenthood, a stance of respect and empathy relating to the interviewees could be used to develop a rich understanding of this phenomenon. When collecting data, personal thoughts and feelings prompted by the interviews/interviewees should be recorded – it is likely that experiences with different people will produce diverse reactions. Data analysis can then be informed by the researcher's data as well as that of the participants.

But reflexivity extends beyond the personal domain. Wilkinson's (1988) second variant, 'functional reflexivity', relates to one's role as a researcher and the effects this might have on the research process. It focuses attention on the different identities presented within the research and the interactions between researcher and participants. Here, a key issue concerns the distribution of power and status within the research process. Although many qualitative researchers are committed to democratic forms of inquiry where the voices of participants are encouraged and respected, it is virtually impossible to escape researcher–participant relationships structured by inequalities (see Parker, 1992). After all, it

is the researcher who generally develops an idea, formulates the research questions and organises the format of the research. For many qualitative researchers, such taken-for-granted ideas and professional routines should be destabilised as far as possible (Taylor & White, 2000). In my own work on men and masculinities, I draw attention to the subject positions and power relations which pertain to the research context, which mostly favour the researcher (e.g. as expert interrogator) but which at times indicate participant status and researcher vulnerability, as when participants suddenly depart from the script and direct difficult questions to the researcher (see Chapter 11).

Wilkinson's (1988) third category, 'disciplinary reflexivity', involves a critical stance towards the place and function of the particular research project within broader debates about theory and method. It suggests delineating those existing concepts and traditions which have been important in shaping the research and calls for some discussion of the potential contribution of the research to a particular literature. This political dimension of reflexivity is enthusiastically endorsed by feminist and critical researchers interested in challenging the findings of conventional (usually quantitative) social science research (see Stainton-Rogers et al., 1995). For example, work by Gill (1993) on indirect sexism challenges psychological and liberal humanist values which construct prejudice as individual pathology rather than social practice promoted by dominant institutions and reproduced in everyday talk. In her critical analysis of sexist talk, the aims of (social) psychological research are rewritten to address the oppression of marginalised groups rather than simply reflecting prevailing social norms (see Gough & McFadden, 2001 for an introduction to 'Critical Social Psychology').

Doing reflexivity

Reflexivity, then, can mean many things, and perhaps works best when different forms or levels are recognised and practised. Reflexivity which dwells only on one level may appear impoverished. An exclusive focus on personal reflexivity, for example, does not situate research within relevant interpersonal, institutional and cultural contexts, and as a result the analysis may seem unduly limited. But how do ideas about reflexivity translate into practice? In this section, I provide a brief account of popular reflexive practices, before proceeding to interrogate the way reflexivity has been enacted within certain traditions of qualitative research.

One useful preliminary strategy is to look at one's choice of research question(s), and how this question is framed. It is often helpful to arrange for a colleague to assume the role of devil's advocate, challenging one's chosen research plan and perhaps tentatively suggesting alternatives. As a result, one might end up with better research questions, and some insight into personal motivations and values. Maso (this volume) proposes using the 'why interview' ('why this, why

not that?') as a means to clarify and refine one's research interests, whereby the researcher's plans are placed under the spotlight until a more satisfactory version emerges. I think one would need to be careful here to ensure an egalitarian exchange of views, as a critique of one's original ideas might prove disheartening for inexperienced researchers. But if handled well, explicating and revising one's research goals can prove extremely enlightening and set the scene for a more rewarding research experience.

As a general rule, reflexivity implies rendering explicit hidden agendas and half-formed intentions, but not just at the start of the research process – this should be a continuous endeavour. Many qualitative researchers favour some form of research diary or journal which documents the researcher's thoughts and experiences before, during and after data collection and analysis (Banister et al., 1994). Notes concerning why certain choices and decisions were made, about changing directions, personal reactions etc. can be used to inform a 'reflexive account' which in turn will inform the research report. Again, asking oneself difficult questions can facilitate enhanced reflexivity and, ultimately, greater understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. In research projects involving other members, issues raised in one's research diary can be brought back to the team for discussion. Of course, team members may well offer differing, even conflicting, perspectives on a given matter, and this process would need to be carefully managed (see Barry, this volume).

Another interesting approach is to promote reflexivity in participants, in parallel to that being practised by the researcher(s). Of course, participant reflexivity is implicitly encouraged by certain methodologies, such as diary studies, where reflection on social interactions and personal relationships might be encouraged. Co-operative inquiry approaches may ask participants to consider data previously gathered and analysed to stimulate thinking about, say, continuities and changes in the transition from pregnancy to motherhood (see Smith, this volume). This practice clearly goes beyond the common strategy of offering one's data analysis to participants for their commentary in order to help validate researcher interpretations. On the other hand, facilitating participant reflexivity throughout the project would be a significant feature of collaborative and action research projects where there is a concerted effort to reduce power differentials between researcher and researched, to establish a team of equal status co-researchers (e.g. Reason, 1988; Banister et al., 1994). Feminist researchers, for example, might tackle the subordination of women at a particular site (a workplace, a leisure facility) by enlisting local women as active participants in conceiving, designing and enacting the research plan (see Rheinharz, 1992).

In practising reflexivity, it is often useful to articulate a theoretical position which can help stimulate critical thinking (see Finlay, 2002). A phenomenological commitment, for example, would prompt sustained self-reflection in order to reveal personal values and intersubjective experience relevant to the phenomenon in question (see Giorgi, 1985). Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that

researchers often have a vested interest in studying specific topics in the first place, so any insight into such personal investments might prove valuable. In contrast, a social constructionist orientation would entail locating the researcher within prevailing discourses pertaining to, say, gender and work, if the research was on the meaning(s) of unemployment. Here, identifying the subject positions available to the researcher (and others) would help illuminate the social construction of unemployment.

It is my own personal view that concepts and strategies from psychoanalytic theory can fruitfully inform research reflections and reflexivity generally. I find it a little strange that discussions of reflexivity rarely make reference to psychoanalytic theory, despite a long and rich tradition of writing on intersubjective dynamics. Of course psychoanalytic writing has attracted widespread critique from a variety of perspectives, much of it well-justified, but I agree with Frosh (1997) when he contends that there are valuable concepts which can be drawn upon by social scientists in making sense of materials. The concept of countertransference may be especially useful as a way for researchers to gain access to their unanticipated (unconscious) thoughts and feelings pertaining to specific research encounters. Better understanding of the case in question may well ensue (see also Hollway & Jefferson, 2000).

Theoretical predilection notwithstanding, the incorporation of one's reflections into the analysis and writing-up process is a vexed issue, with many authors preferring simply to provide information about researcher and participant subject positions (gender, age, social class, race etc.) and perhaps hazarding some speculation towards the end of the paper on the effects of these factors on the research outcomes. This limited, undergraduate form of reflexive accounting is perhaps encouraged by established journals which prioritise the reporting of results within tight word limits (see Kleinman, 1991) and ensures that more substantial reflexive analyses are mainly confined to unpublished writing (e.g. doctoral theses) or more specialist texts (such as this volume). This is an issue which I feel needs to be addressed within the community of qualitative researchers. While I do not advocate limitless space to muse about research processes and intersubjective encounters, I believe the conventions for inscribing qualitative research within recognised journals and books need to be revised to facilitate analyses which are properly interrogated and contextualised.

Reflexivity and realism

At another level, the functions of reflexive writing need to be examined, since what may pass as reflexivity may, upon scrutiny, draw upon the idioms of quantitative research. Being 'open' about researcher subjectivity and its impact on the research process sounds like a good idea, but the presumption of access to subjective feelings and values has been radically challenged in the wake of the

linguistic turn in social theory heralded by postmodernism, social constructionism and discourse analysis (see Kvale, 1992; Gergen, 1991; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). The notion that reflexive researchers can uncover their 'real' motivations if they dig deep enough is reminiscent of the discourse of positivism which argues that the 'truth' about the objective world can be revealed through rigorous application of scientific methods. Researcher honesty or openness may be imagined, but because neither the researcher nor anyone else can ever establish 'true' intentions or motivations, then such claims must be treated with suspicion. In this section I consider the implications of social constructionism for understanding the presentation of research and look at some of the discursive strategies used by qualitative researchers to render their analyses objective. I go on to argue that reflexive attention to our discourse(s) as researchers can help prevent a preoccupation with positivist ideals of objectivity and can enable a more vibrant form of writing.

If we take seriously social constructionist and/or postmodern perspectives on subjectivity, which conceptualise the subject as decentred, fragmented, relational, evolving and incomplete (see Kvale, 1992; Wetherell & Maybin, 1996), then the notion of uncovering underlying personal influences becomes problematic. Denzin (2001, p.28) notes: '... there is no essential self or private, real self. There are only different selves, different performances, different ways of being a gendered person in a social situation.' (It is also worth pointing out that, historically, psychoanalytic theory highlighted this problem of subjective awareness, arguing that what we know about ourselves is but a defensive fiction which obscures our 'real', irrational and confused self).

Social constructionism (e.g. Burr, 1995) and discursive psychology (e.g. Edwards & Potter, 1992) contest the notion that language/interpretation reflects reality, arguing, on the contrary, that interpretations – even those given by 'authoritative' sources such as scientists and doctors – construct reality. For example, work on the sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK) has drawn attention to an 'empiricist repertoire' which scientists, including psychologists, use to bring off a depersonalised account of the 'facts' (e.g. Woolgar, 1980). An obvious demonstration of this repertoire is the use of the passive voice ('the experiment was conducted', rather than 'I conducted the experiment'). When authorship *is* acknowledged, the collective, institutional 'we' is preferred. Such 'externalising devices' are also witnessed in other contexts, such as journalism ('the facts state that ...'; 'the evidence suggests ...') (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984). Other work on doctor–patient communication has identified further strategies for legitimating professional accounts, such as 'category entitlement', which refer to the use of categories (e.g. doctor–patient) in talk which mobilise culturally prescribed expectations about who is knowledgeable. For example, when the term 'doctor' is used in conversation it commonly denotes status and expertise and can be used to warrant certain accounts and to challenge those of patients, 'laypeople' or others (see Silverman, 1987).

But qualitative researchers are not immune from using rhetorical devices to convey the authenticity of their analyses, whether reflexive or not. In contrast to suppressing the (human) processes of data collection and analysis as a means of legitimating accounts, qualitative researchers have achieved the same goal through recognising, even celebrating, personal input into the research endeavour. Such reflexive accounting, which draws attention to researcher as well as participant practices, constructs the researcher as expert witness, immersed in or close to the scene or phenomenon under investigation. Seale (1999) locates this form of accounting within anthropological writing, whereby researcher entry into other groups or cultures is presented as an ideal vantage point for better observations. Such confessions are often told in great depth (detail is a way of enhancing credibility) and suggest an invaluable, objective insider account. In this sense, reflexivity can be used to warrant data analysis as truthful or rich, thereby falling back on positivist notions of objectivity (but, ironically, through subjectivity).

In fact, instances of allegiance to realist epistemology abound in the literature on qualitative research. For example, Hall and Callery (2001) have recently argued that reflexivity should be used by grounded theorists in order to improve rigour. It is widely felt that such endeavours can enhance the transparency, accountability and general trustworthiness of qualitative research (see Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). More broadly, there is a major emphasis on validating analytic claims via a range of techniques, such as member checking, audit trail and triangulation (see Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Clearly, the discourse structuring these activities is one of truth-seeking, a quest for an interpretation to which all parties can subscribe.

Seale (1999) refers to a study by Buckingham *et al.* (1976) of wards for terminally ill patients to illustrate the point. In Buckingham *et al.*'s research account, emphasis is placed on the great lengths that the researcher went to in order to gain insight into ward life – the researcher subjected himself to various physical invasions to pass as a credible candidate for admission to the hospital. Once inside the ward as a 'patient', he recorded his observations from this valued position and later included them in published reports in order to validate the analysis about regimes of care on the ward.

So, even when a positivist view of research is critiqued (as is often the case in papers which proceed to endorse the use of qualitative methods), writers can end up (unwittingly) reproducing a positivist discourse which prioritises rigour and accuracy. Discourse analysts have produced a considerable literature on how speakers and writers, including researchers, work to construct accounts as persuasive and legitimate. It is argued that greater awareness of the assumptions and practices habitually deployed in research and professional discourse generally can aid greater reflexivity, what White (1997) calls 'epistemic reflexivity'. For example, credibility of the speaker or writer is frequently carried off through 'stake inoculation' (Potter, 1996) whereby personal interest ('stake') is disavowed

to suggest that the 'facts' are independent. Typically, ground is prepared to position the speaker outside the event or situation, as a rational detached observer (much like the stance of the scientist within the empiricist repertoire). Consider the practice of suspending presuppositions which is popular in some phenomenological research and forms of grounded theory so that a (pure) focus on data is enabled and, ultimately, an analysis which is more objective, less contaminated, can result.

Another strategy used in the reporting of research is to set up a 'contrast structure' (Smith, 1978) whereby one element (e.g. established 'quantitative' research) is presented in a negative light which then enables another element (e.g. your 'qualitative' research) to come across as superior. Positive aspects of the subordinated element may even be admitted ('some research in this tradition has produced interesting findings, but...') before one's own contribution is presented as distinctive and progressive, albeit perhaps modestly ('In contrast to previous research, what I hope to show is...').

One must also bear in mind the degree of editing and selectivity which informs the process of writing up such 'insider' analyses, say for submission to an academic journal. Only pre-specified aspects of researcher involvement may be presented to an academic audience, perhaps to highlight the researcher's credentials in conducting the research (e.g. self-identifying as a 'feminist' in studies of gender), whilst others might be omitted (e.g. instances of discomfort in the research process, such as questions which don't work or moments of researcher defensiveness, although these could also be included, coded as initial shortcomings in a narrative of progress culminating in the 'truth'). Pressures towards offering a coherent narrative aligned with more prosaic constraints such as word limits will inevitably mean that contradictions are glossed over and only a small selection of categories and data extracts are included in the finished paper.

Qualitative researchers interested in doing reflexivity then, need to attend to their discourse, the rhetoric used to produce accounts of researcher involvement, the research process and analysis of the phenomenon. Indeed, researchers influenced by postmodernism and related approaches have attempted to demonstrate awareness of researcher and other voices in order to de-privilege and de-stabilise conventional understandings of authorship. This 'meta-reflexivity' is evident in experimental writing whereby established formats for social scientific presentation are undermined, although such endeavours raise complex issues, as we shall see.

Reflexivity as deconstruction

Metaphors for describing contemporary or postmodern society tend to emphasise pluralism, such as 'polyvocality' (Lincoln & Denzin, 1994) and 'saturation' (Gergen, 1991). These metaphors have informed how some qualitative research

gets reported. One technique is to disrupt the narrative flow of the text with commentaries at the end of each section, thereby counter-posing the academic analysis with more personal (e.g. identifying researcher emotions) reporting (Lather, 1992). In this way, the dual positions of the researcher become apparent and some self-doubt might be intimated by the researcher (e.g. Rosaldo, 1993), although the personal may still be used to warrant interpretations as superior to traditional, distanced investigations (Seale, 1999).

But some qualitative researchers have gone further, advocating a more radical disruption of narrative conventions concerning coherence and representation. Some have striven to make the author/analyst disappear altogether by simply presenting participant's data with minimal or no commentary (e.g. Dwyer, 1982), although one wonders about processes of selection and editing which produce an apparently pure text (Seale, 1999).

Avoiding interpretation strikes me as somewhat pointless, and seems to rely on a realist repertoire where the data somehow 'speaks for itself'. Others have turned to the creative arts for inspiration and have rendered qualitative analyses in the form of poetry (e.g. Richardson, 1994), dramatic dialogue (e.g. Paget, 1995), narrative collage and montage (Dillard, 1982). According to one definition, 'performative writing' is 'evocative, reflexive, multi-voiced, criss-crosses genres, is always partial and incomplete' (Pollock, 1998, cited in Denzin, 2001). The deployment of fictional forms and characters fundamentally disarms claims about authenticity and authorship, and arguably enlivens scientific writing. This postmodern reflexivity evokes rather than represents (Tyler, 1987).

However, concerns have been raised about such innovative literary-minded texts. Sometimes they can come across as rather self-indulgent and narcissistic, as if analysts are attempting to realise hitherto frustrated desires to become artists. Also, the de-centring of the author in such accounts often masks decision-making processes in the production of the account, i.e. authorship. Questions about how data extracts were selected and reworked remain. Despite claims about opening up social scientific writing towards more egalitarian formats comprising multiple voices, invariably the analyst plays a dominant role in writing and editing the 'script'. According to Law (1994, p.190): '...literary devices abound and self-referential loops relieve readers of the burden of engagement for, in reading these accounts, they appear "strangely self-contained, sealing themselves off from comment and criticism"' (cited in May, 1999, p. 32). In ethnography, Murphy (2002) has lamented the pre-eminence of style over substance and worries that the discipline may 'implode under its own inward gaze' (p.259). Similarly, in discussing some examples from the postmodern genre, Seale (1999, p.176) argues that the author should be reinstated and that transparency in accounting procedures should remain paramount: 'Although powerful in their ability to convey particular meanings, fictional and dramatic forms should be used with caution by researchers in case they discourage authors from making clear presentations of the evidence that has led to particular conclusions'.

Another strand of research deriving from ethnomethodology and conversation analysis subjects reflexive discourse itself to analysis. Within this tradition, reflexive activities become the topic, the data to be examined (e.g. Lynch, 2000; Slack, 2000). Here, questions about and commitments to specific forms of reflexivity and what constitutes good qualitative research are sidestepped in favour of analysing how reflexivity is claimed and enacted. After all, contemporary social theorists have pointed out that we are all reflexive now, that we live in a reflexive society and so forth, so that reflexivity is not just confined to qualitative research, but is a mundane activity which permeates selfhood and relationships today (Giddens, 1984). In other words, there is nothing special about reflexivity conducted by academics – 'ordinary' people do reflexivity, and the ways they do it should be the subject of social scientific investigation, as opposed to social scientists using reflexivity to produce more interesting, provocative or relevant analyses.

But an exclusive focus on 'member's' accounting procedures as advocated by ethnomethodology and conversation analysis implies that the researcher is detached from the researched – no presuppositions are admitted or interrogated (May, 1999). It is as if scrupulous descriptions of everyday language use absolve the researcher from taking up positions vis-à-vis positioning in the social world, i.e. within societal discourses which define and constrain speakers according to gender, race, sexual orientation etc. According to Atkinson (1988, p.446), 'the radical stress on observable details risks becoming an unprincipled, descriptive recapitulation devoid of significance ... minute descriptive detail is assembled in a hyper-realist profusion, until the reader loses any sense of meaning' (cited in May, 2000).

Whilst careful attention to participant's language is important, I believe that qualitative researchers should not shy away from making pronouncements which situate this language within wider social and cultural currents. Ethnomethodology has presented an important critique of scholarly overinterpretation, but it would be a mistake to throw out the baby of standpoint with the bathwater of representation. In other words, researchers should take responsibility for making intelligible interpretations rather than exclusively concentrating on participant's accounts (or opting for fictional presentations). But researcher involvement should be examined critically, reflexively, so that analysis is not overdetermined. A balance is required between opening and closure, between deconstruction and reconstruction, between recognising our qualitative analyses as constructed (and perhaps using some devices from art and literature to deconstruct our analysis), and – temporarily at least – settling for a version of analysis with which we are satisfied, which we think makes a valid theoretical and/or political point (see Latour, 1988).

Recovering reflexivity

In sum, some balance between the extremes of unreflexive, 'flat' description, which presents a supposedly 'objective' picture of the phenomenon, and convoluted, meta-reflexive textual presentations, which move too far away from the phenomenon in question, is recommended. This is what Pels (2000) calls 'one-step up' reflexivity: 'a self-conscious exercise in circular reasoning, which breaks with the unending quest for a transcendent objectivity, and rests satisfied with merely partial and partisan perspectives' (p.15). More succinctly, Pels notes that 'it is both feasible and important to talk about something and simultaneously talk (at least a little) about the talking itself' (p.3).

Other theorists use different terminology and advocate slightly different 'solutions': Harding (1991) prefers 'strong reflexivity' over conventional ('weak') objectivity, while Bourdieu (1981) advocates 'scientific' reflexivity over 'narcissistic' or 'nihilistic' reflexivity. This balance can be seen in some feminist and critical psychological appropriations of discourse analysis (e.g. Parker, 1992: 'critical realism'; Gill, 1993: 'politically informed relativism') which argue against relativism in order to hold on to a standpoint (for example women as oppressed within discourses of motherhood) for political and practical purposes. Indeed, various efforts have been made within feminism to move beyond both modernist confidence and postmodern nihilism towards a position which doesn't prescribe inertia, variously termed 'fractured foundationalism' (Stanley & Wise, 1993), 'interactive universalism' (Benhabib, 1992) and 'strategic essentialism' (Grosz, 1990).

Summary

To conclude, reflexivity is a contested term, attracting diverse definitions and associated with a range of activities and goals. A broad distinction can be made between *realist* uses of reflexivity, wherein researcher confession is deployed to reinforce the 'accuracy' or 'authenticity' of analysis, and postmodern or *relativist* forms of reflexivity, which tend towards disrupting narrative coherence and advertise analysis as constructed. I have argued that neither version of reflexivity is exclusively desirable, that researchers need to take some responsibility for producing an analysis which can be applied to support a particular view of the world, whilst recognising researcher involvement in the production of the account. In the chapters which follow, there are several examples of qualitative researchers doing just that, and offering good advice for practising and enhancing reflexivity in the process.

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