

# Key Concepts in Social Research

## Reflexivity

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*Reflexivity is the practice of researchers being **self-aware** of their own beliefs, values and attitudes, and their personal effects on the setting they have studied, and **self-critical** about their research methods and how they have been applied, so that the evaluation and understanding of their research findings, both by themselves and their audience, may be facilitated and enhanced.*

*Section Outline: Reflexivity an underrated concept. Reflexivity for high professional research standards. Audit trails. Qualitative methods: personal reactions, feelings, doubts. Intellectual resource versus defensive audit. Positioning statements. Interacting with the setting. Self-critical awareness of own social skills. Limits of 'confessional accounts'. Writing with 'authority'.*

'Reflexivity is an immense area of comment and interest' (Denzin and Lincoln 1998: 394), but it receives little direct attention in many methods textbooks. The practice of researchers doing their research, and writing it up, *in explicitly self-aware and self-critical ways* is particularly important in qualitative research, where it feeds into debates about the 'validity' of research findings (**Qualitative Methods; Validity**). (This is different from 'reflexivity' in **Ethnomethodology**, which refers to how, when a pattern is perceived by members, it is used to interpret new situations, imposing definitions on novel experiences so that in turn 'evidence' is found in a form that supports the original pattern.)

The greatest variety and volume of commentary by researchers on their own work is to be found in qualitative work (e.g. Ladino 2002). However, at its most basic level, reflexivity is about maintaining high professional standards of investigation, which applies to all modes of social research. It may seem obvious, but good research depends on the selection and proper, systematic application of the right methods for the task in hand. The researcher is the *only* person who can ensure this happens. It means keeping each step under review, setting performance [p. 192 ↓ ] standards for oneself, thinking about how informants are reacting to being studied (**Unobtrusive Methods**), and constantly evaluating what is being achieved. Even highly competent or quantitative researchers need repeatedly to question their own practice, reflecting both on what they are trying to do, and on the progress of their work, so that they remain conscious of their research as a creative process, appropriately conducted.

Thus Huberman and Miles' call for 'regular, ongoing, self-conscious documentation' (1998: 201) in qualitative work could apply to other research methods. Any part of a project could be included, but they draw attention to decisions about sampling, operationalisation, data collection, analysis strategies (including any software used) and records of key evidence. It is on these that technical challenges to the findings might subsequently be mounted (i.e. validity questions raised: Hammersley 1992), or a replication study based. Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Schwandt and Halpern (1988) refer to such documentation as the 'audit trail'. However, perhaps because it takes more time to carry out, methodological audit is still not widely practised in this formal way.

On the other hand, it has become customary for fieldworkers to record not only their observations, but their own reactions to, and first interpretations of, those observations (**Fieldwork; Coding Qualitative Data**). This helps to keep the experiences alive, so that later analyses do not lose sight of their initial impact and intensity. The researcher retains something of the original emotional energy of events and encounters. Sanders refers to entries in his 'research diary' which start '*What a day!* This one starts off with an awful ... case that pushes me to the limit' and '*It really strikes me* that [what I am doing now] is very different from any of the other research' (Sanders 1998: 195; 190: emphasis added). Later reports written in neutral, 'scientific', professionally detached and bloodless terms lose the highs and lows of the events on which they are based, so falsifying the record.

To use experience and reflection as a potential resource, researchers convert their rough observation notes at the end of each fieldwork 'shift' into proper records, adding the reflections in a clearly identifiable format. This should not become a mechanical process of note-making, because its main purpose is to stimulate fresh thinking about the research. Miles and Huberman suggest including feelings about informants; second thoughts about what their remarks meant; doubts about data quality; new hypotheses and ideas; and cross-referencing to and clarifying of previous events (1994:66).

This emphasises reflexivity as an intellectual resource, rather than a defensive audit. Actively self-aware researchers not only produce more [p. 193 ↓] convincing research, but may also begin to question the very basis on which they started. Growing sensitivity to ethnographic methods provided grounds for a first generation of anthropologists

to mark off professional studies from travellers' tales and colonial reports. Then, as the next generation continued to work reflexively, they began to doubt their elders' – and their own – practice. In **Feminist Research** reflexivity was seen as part of consciousness-raising. A woman's articulated subjectivity enabled her to reject methodological conventions that were intrinsically patriarchal. Thus reflexivity can move from being a resource in a given project, to being *a resource for a radical paradigm shift* of a more general kind.

Once researchers were no longer seen as 'free-floating scientists', separate from their projects, then their own values and personalities became matters of interest. 'Positioning statements' in article publications – e.g. 'I am a white middle class woman' – became a fashionable shorthand way to acknowledge the cultural starting point, and often political stance, that researchers brought to their research.

The scientific observer is part and parcel of the setting, context and culture he or she is trying to understand and represent... scholars began to realize that the traditional problems of entrée or access to a setting, personal relations with the members of a setting, how field research data were conceived and recorded, and a host of other pragmatic issues had important implications for what a particular observer reported as the 'findings' (Altheide and Johnson 1998: 285).

In the ethnographic tradition (**Ethnography**), research is *situated* in specific settings, *relational* in its encounters with informants/members, and *textual* in the dual sense that it has first to be read/interpreted by the researcher, and then communicated via a written document. These elements interact with each other and the research method. They come together in the person of the researcher, who must remain centre-stage if an authentic account of the research process is to be achieved.

This in turn raises the question of how effectively has the research act been accomplished? As Grills reminds us, research is not simply an intellectual exercise: our personalities and social skills are crucial. Informants

may be much more attentive to the various qualities of the researcher (e.g. trustworthy, humorous, friendly, open, and non-judgemental) than

they are to the purpose of the research, consent forms, or credentials (1998: 12).

In reflecting on these elements, researchers began to include commentary in their own publications, and to write directly about doing research in [p. 194 ↓] order to demonstrate issues of wider practice. Following the lead of anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973), these cautionary tales or ‘confessions’ have come to show how research is a messy, complicated business, full of inter-personal problems and anxieties often unhinted at by the clean and tidy world of the textbooks. Through self-criticism, their manifest function is to offer help to other, particularly inexperienced, researchers (e.g. Bell and Newby 1977; Payne et al. 1981: 181–252).

The ‘telling it like it is’ tradition has itself been criticised (even by Geertz himself (1988)). At its worst, it deteriorates into personal self-discovery, of more interest to the writer than the reader. There may be no lesson to convey: all we are offered is narcissistic, self-indulgent introspection. By definition, it is not possible for unconscious biases to be brought out. Far from holding up the research process to further examination, apparent self-criticism can be presented so as to convince readers that the researcher was right all along. Confessional accounts can be exercises in self-justification, lending ‘authority’ to the author's version of reality (Seale 1999).

As a number of post-modern critics have shown, ‘authority’ in writing is a more general issue. The use of the editorial ‘we’, impersonal/passive verbs, formal structures to presentation and argument, bibliographic references and other academic writing conventions are signals of the writer's claim to competence and expert knowledge (undergraduates please note!). It is not clear to us why anybody should do research and then *not* claim that the findings have some special significance, but that is a problem for the post-modernists. What is more important is that in practising reflexivity, researchers help not only their own understanding, but that of readers too. All writing has a readership in mind, and reflexive writing should aim at assisting the reader to handle problematic elements and, in turn, to reflect upon them.