

Keywords in Qualitative Methods

Reflexivity

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Reflexivity

Definition

Reflexivity is an awareness of the self in the situation of action and of the role of the self in constructing that situation. Reflexivity is thus distinct from [p. 146 ↓] reflectivity in its focus on the constitutive role of the self. A famous Max Escher lithograph, 'Drawing Hands', is said to represent reflexivity analogically in its depiction of two hands sketched on paper, each hand holding a drawing pencil with each in the act of drawing the other on to the drawing paper.

Distinctive Features

Reflexivity is particularly associated with the 1980s 'crisis of legitimation' in the social sciences in which the authority of authorship was challenged by writers from divergent traditions, those of feminist scholarship, the post-Marxist writings of Foucault and his followers, and poststructuralist literary critics. Research reports were viewed as deriving their truth status and generalizability, not from their skilful deployment of scientific research methods, but rather from their skilful deployment of authorial rhetorical devices (Geertz, 1988). Postmodern scholarship, in 'deconstructing texts', therefore sought to examine how these authorial devices were effectively employed. Postmodernists have side-stepped the criticism that they are using the self-same devices to make their own claims to authorial authority by both refusing to claim legitimacy (asserting that scholarship should be characterized by dialogue and the encouragement of divergent opinion), and (crucially) by retaining a reflexive awareness of their own authorial practices. 'Author-evacuated texts', Geertz's phrase, are held to be a thing of the past, as each author seeks to communicate to the reader the terms of his or her engagement with the tasks of research and writing.

Yet, although the 'reflexive turn' is synonymous with **postmodern writing**, the constitutive role of the researcher in the setting studied has been long understood. It underlies the preference of many psychologists for controlled laboratory settings, 'uncontaminated' (allegedly) by a co-present observer. And the constitutive power of all actors - researchers included - to socially construct the reality they inhabit was the central analytic preoccupation of **symbolic interactionism** and **phenomenology**, and of much methodological writing: for example, the recognition is found in all qualitative research texts that the research interview is a species of conversation, and that the interviewer is not a neutral information-gatherer, but rather is an active co-participant with the interviewee in the social construction of the research data.

Examples

Seale (1999) discusses examples of recent contrasting attempts by researchers to 'reinstate the author' in a manner consonant with postmodern sensibilities.

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Evaluation

As Geertz has commented, it should be a matter of relief that academic scholarship can abandon the pretence that the author is absent from the text. There is an important issue of intellectual honesty here, exemplified in the belated publication of the research diaries of Malinowski (1967), which betray a much more critical view of his native informants than is to be found in his classic text *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Malinowski, 1922). The reportage of the author's engagement with the research is a helpful resource to readers in their evaluation of the text.

However, reflexive accounts can be done clumsily. Many a Ph.D. examiner must have sighed to find the candidate's methods chapter begin, yet again, by likening the research process to 'walking down a long dark tunnel'. And worse still, as Atkinson (1992) has pointed out, reflexive accounts can be overdone: no reader, apart from the

author's mother, will be engaged by a research report which is too self-referential. There are no guidelines to the production of a faithful and illuminating reflexive account.

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Associated Concepts:

#Atkinson, P. (1992) *The Ethnographic Imagination: Textual Constructions of Reality*. London: Routledge.

Geertz, C. (1988) *Works as Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Cambridge: Polity.

Malinowski, B. (1922) *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. New York: E.P. Dutton.

Malinowski, B. (1967) *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*. New York: Harcourt Brace.

Seale, C. (1999) *The Quality of Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.