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## **“Outing” the Researcher: The Provenance, Process, and Practice of Reflexivity**

Linda Finlay

*To increase the integrity and trustworthiness of qualitative research, researchers need to evaluate how intersubjective elements influence data collection and analysis. Reflexivity—where researchers engage in explicit, self-aware analysis of their own role—offers one tool for such evaluation. The process of engaging in reflexive analysis, however, is difficult, and its subjective, ambiguous nature is contested. In the face of challenges, researchers might retreat from engaging in the process. In this article, the author seeks to “out” the researcher’s presence by exploring the theory and practice of reflexivity. Examples from research illustrate its problematic potential.*

The pot carries its maker’s thoughts, feelings, and spirit. To overlook this fact is to miss a crucial truth, whether in clay, story, or science.

—Susan Krieger (1991, p. 89)

As qualitative researchers, we understand that the researcher is a central figure who influences the collection, selection, and interpretation of data. Our behavior will always affect participants’ responses, thereby influencing the direction of findings. Meanings are seen to be negotiated between researcher and researched within a particular social context so that another researcher in a different relationship will unfold a different story. Research is thus regarded as a joint product of the participants, the researcher, and their relationship: It is co-constituted. Furthermore, the qualitative research process itself has the potential to transform the very phenomenon being studied: “Interviews augment experience, rather than simply reflecting it,” argued Beer (1997, p. 127), “They alter meaning, instead of delineating it. They change people.”

As part of laying claim to the integrity and trustworthiness of qualitative research, it is vital for researchers to find ways to analyze how subjective and intersubjective elements influence their research. Reflexivity offers one such tool. Here, the researcher engages in an explicit, self-aware meta-analysis of the research process. Through the use of reflexivity, subjectivity in research can be transformed from a problem to an opportunity.

However, this process of engaging in reflexive analysis is difficult, and its ambiguous nature is contested. Taking the threatening path of personal disclosure, the researcher treads a cliff edge where it is all too easy to fall into an infinite regress of excessive self-analysis at the expense of focusing on the research participants. In the face of external criticism, researchers might become furtive, sanitizing their accounts of research, or they might retreat, avoiding reflexivity altogether.

In this article, I seek to “out” the researcher’s presence by exploring the provenance, process, and practice of reflexivity—what it means in theory and how reflexive analysis can be unfolded in research practice. Reflexivity in action is illustrated by the words and work of a range of researchers. Confronting some of the challenges, I aim to show how reflexivity, fraught as it is with ambiguity and uncertainty, can 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;
- empower others by opening up a more radical consciousness;
- evaluate the research process, method, and outcomes; and
- enable public scrutiny of the integrity of the research through offering a methodological log of research decisions.

## EXPLORING THE CONCEPT

### Defining Reflexivity

Reflexivity can be defined as thoughtful, conscious self-awareness. Reflexive analysis in research encompasses continual evaluation of subjective responses, intersubjective dynamics, and the research process itself. It involves a shift in our understanding of data collection from something objective that is accomplished through detached scrutiny of “what I know and how I know it” to recognizing how we actively construct our knowledge. “The reflexive ethnographer does not simply report ‘facts’ or ‘truths’ but actively constructs interpretations of his or her experiences in the field and then questions how those interpretations came about” (Hertz, 1997, p. viii).

Callaway (1992) extended the notion with reference to gender politics:

Often condemned as apolitical, reflexivity, on the contrary can be seen as opening the way to a more radical consciousness of self in facing the political dimensions of fieldwork and constructing knowledge. Other factors intersecting with gender—such as nationality, race, ethnicity, class, and age—also affect the anthropologist’s field interactions and textual strategies. Reflexivity becomes a continuing mode of self-analysis and political awareness. (cited in Hertz, 1997, p. viii)

Reflexivity can often be confused with reflection—and, indeed, in much of the literature, these terms are used interchangeably. The concepts are perhaps best viewed on a continuum where both ends are acknowledged to be important across the stages of a project. At one end of the scale, reflection can be understood as “thinking about.” As a subject, I reflect on an object. The process is a distanced one—the thinking is about something else and it takes place after the event. At the other

end of the scale, reflexivity taps into a more immediate, continuing, dynamic, and subjective self-awareness.

A lived experience does not confront me as something perceived or represented; it is not given to me, but the reality of lived experience is there-for-me because I have a reflexive awareness of it, because I possess it immediately as belonging to me in some sense. Only in thought does it become objective. (Dilthey, 1985, cited in van Manen, 1990, p. 35)

Although actual (prereflective) lived experience can never be fully grasped in its immediate manifestation, with reflexive analysis, the researcher is aware of experiencing a world and moves back and forth in a kind of dialectic between experience and awareness. As Hertz (1997) put it, "To be reflexive is to have an ongoing conversation about the experience while simultaneously living in the moment" (p. viii). Having come to understand that the researcher, the world, and the researcher's experience of the world are intertwined, the challenge is to identify that lived experience that resides in the space between subject and object. The researcher strives to capture some of the connections by which subject and object influence and constitute each other.

### Theoretical Foundations

Methodological self-consciousness in the form of "confessional accounts" have been a common genre since the 1970s among ethnographers and *anthropologists* (Seale, 1999). In this kind of research, field-workers have been portrayed as infiltrating a group and then reporting authentically the experience of being an insider. The key process turns on transforming the personal experience data into public and accountable knowledge—hence the reflexive, methodological account. 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 less explicit ways, the provenance of the concept of reflexivity can also be found within other theoretical frameworks, including phenomenological, social constructionist, and psychodynamic theories and participative research approaches. Here, competing, sometimes contradictory, accounts of the rationale and practice of reflexivity are offered. Although it is possible to draw on several theoretical frameworks simultaneously, researchers who practice reflexivity tend to subscribe to particular visions and reject others. These fragmented origins contribute to the ambiguity of the concept. In the following discussion, my aim is to map this diverse territory, providing signposts for the uncertain researcher-explorer.

*Phenomenologists* focus on the way subject and object are enmeshed in pre-reflective existence. One key route to understanding is to reflexively interrogate our subjectivity as part of investigating how the subject is present in the object. In Gadamerian terms, reflexivity involves a positive evaluation of the researcher's

own experience to help him or her understand something of the fusion of horizons between subject and object (Outhwaite, 1985).

From this starting point, phenomenological philosophers such as Heidegger (1962) argued that each person will perceive the same phenomenon in a different way; each person brings to bear his or her lived experience, specific understandings, and historical background. This way of being-in-the-world means that researchers cannot help but bring their own involvement and fore-understandings into the research.

Applying these ideas, phenomenologists begin their research with the data of their experience; their own reflecting, intuiting, and thinking are used as primary evidence (Moustakas, 1994). They seek to “embrace their own humanness as the basis for psychological understanding” (Walsh, 1995, p. 335). Phenomenologists argue that researchers need to look within to attempt to disentangle perceptions and interpretations from the phenomenon being studied. “For phenomenology,” commented Giorgi (1994), “nothing can be accomplished without subjectivity, so its elimination is not the solution. Rather *how* the subject is present is what matters, and objectivity itself is an achievement of subjectivity” (p. 205). Understanding thus results from a dialectic between the researcher’s preunderstandings and the research process, between the self-interpreted constructions of the researcher and those of the participant.

*Social constructionists* draw on the notion of reflexivity to explain how individuals make sense of the social world and their place in it. Three strands of argument about the social dimension of reflexivity can be differentiated:

1. Mead (1934) considered reflexivity—the turning back of one’s social experience on oneself—central to becoming a person. Arguing from a symbolic interactionist perspective, he understood that individuals gain self-awareness in and through interactions with others.
2. Giddens (1991), following Harré’s (1983) notion of “identity projects,” argued that identity has become a reflexive project in our postmodern (or late modern) age. He discussed how the construction of self is turned to as a source of both interest and meaning.
3. Habermas focused on the capacity of humans to be reflexive agents and on how through reflecting on our own history (as individuals and as members of larger societies) we can change the course of history. He argued that the more we can understand how structural forces shape us, the more we can escape from those constraints (Giddens, 1985).

Social constructionists argue against taking an inward approach to subjectivity, in which individuals look into themselves “in an infinite regress of cognitive dispositions” (Gergen & Gergen, 1991, p. 79). Instead, they invite the researcher to look outward into the realm of interaction, discourse, and shared meanings.

Social constructionists also emphasize that any qualitative research is a co-constituted account. They stress the need to explore the dynamics of the researcher-researched relationship, which is seen to fundamentally shape research results. A different researcher than the one involved will, they say, have a different relationship, responding differently, asking different questions, and prompting different replies. Social constructionists would also attend to the rhetorical function of the discourse being studied. The participants might be engaged in an exercise in presenting themselves to the interviewer, but the researcher is trying to persuade the wider academic community about the value of the research. Thus, reflexive analysis

is necessary to examine the impact of the researcher and participants on each other and on the research. This is a complex undertaking; the distinction between the observer and observed is problematic given their "emerging relatedness in the interview situation as each observes the other observing" (Jorgenson, 1991, p. 210).

*Psychodynamic theorists* explore how unconscious processes structure relations between the researcher, the participants, and the data gathered. They recommend the use of both introspection and self-reflection (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 concerned. Such reflections are also assumed to provide data regarding the social/emotional world of the participant. Hunt (1989) provided an illustration of why the researcher might experience feelings of helplessness, loneliness, and alienation in the early stages of fieldwork. She recommended reflecting on possible links with past experience: For example, the culture shock experienced as an "outsider" might be related to childhood experience of the birth of a younger sibling.

Psychodynamic theorists emphasize the need for us to explore how conversation or text affects us and to reflect on what we bring to it ourselves. They see unconscious needs and transferences as structuring the relationship between researcher and participant. Equally, the participant's transferences are seen to influence the stories they tell; the researcher might follow this up by asking "How does my participant's story move me?" As Parker (1997) reminded 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).

*Participative approaches* to research are found within a broad range of methodologies, from humanistic new paradigm and cooperative inquiry research (Heron, 1996; Reason, 1988) to more sociological, discursive, and feminist research (e.g., Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor, & Tindall, 1994; Potter & Wetherell 1995; Wilkinson, 1988). These wide-ranging research methodologies are linked by the way they seek to enlist participants as co-researchers. Recognizing research as a co-constituted account, adherents of participative research argue that the 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) cited an example of how using participants' interpretations resulted in the researcher's confronting, modifying, and honing his own interpretations. Co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996) 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.

Another characteristic of such participative approaches is that researchers openly acknowledge tensions arising from different social positions in relation to such factors as class, gender, and race. As Wasserfall (1997) explained, "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).

Researchers from these traditions are sensitive to the way they frame research questions, select participants, and interact with them to produce the observations and texts of analysis. Hertz (1997) argued,

Through personal accounting, researchers must become more aware of how their own positions and interests 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).

Reflexivity, then, can be understood in a multitude of ways according to which research traditions are adopted. It can be understood as a confessional account of methodology or as examining one's own personal, possibly unconscious, reactions. It can also mean exploring the dynamics of the researcher-researched relationship and how the research is co-constituted. In practice, it has been applied at different levels. At a minimum level, it means acknowledging the existence of researcher bias and explicitly locating the researcher within the research process. At a more active level, it involves a more wholesale embracing of subjectivity, for example, by exploiting researcher's/co-researcher's reflective insights and by engaging in explicit, self-aware meta-analysis throughout the research process.

## REFLEXIVE ACCOUNTING WITHIN THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Illustrations of how reflexive analysis can be applied within the research process—from the preresearch stage through data collection and data analysis—are offered below. In these illustrations, researchers demonstrate how they have probed the influence of their thinking and responses and how they have used reflexive analysis both to gain insight and as a tool for evaluation. Such analyses lay the research process open to public scrutiny and, although they do not prove anything, the researcher's being prepared to engage in careful, systematic, in-depth self-evaluation demonstrates a level of integrity. Noting that the validity of research is not only a matter of the methods used, Kvale (1996) identified the "moral integrity" of the researcher as "critical for evaluation of the quality of scientific knowledge produced" (pp. 241-242).

### Preresearch Stage

Ideally, the process of reflection and reflexive analysis should start from the moment the research is conceived. As the idea for a project is forming, researchers need to reflect on both the topic for study and their own relationship to that topic. This might involve the researchers' examining both the existing literature and the lived world itself as a means of clarifying the research questions. At this point, researchers could fruitfully examine their motivations, assumptions, and interests in the research as a precursor to identifying forces that might skew the research in particular directions.

This stage is a particularly crucial one in phenomenological research as the researcher prepares to approach the phenomenon to be investigated with openness and wonder—the attitude fundamental to this method. As can be imagined, it is not easy to enter into this way of being. As van Manen (1990) explained, the problem of phenomenological inquiry is that we know too much. Our commonsense "pre-understandings, our suppositions, assumptions, and the existing bodies of scientific knowledge, predispose us to interpret the nature of the phenomenon before we

have even come to grips with the significance of the phenomenological question" (p. 46).

The phenomenologist's first task, then, is to "bracket out" these beliefs so that he or she can enter the lived experience and attend genuinely and actively to the participant's view. Husserl (1970) named this change from the natural to the philosophical attitude "phenomenological reduction," the maxim being "back to things themselves." Before researchers can perform the reduction, however, they need to become aware of what needs to be bracketed by engaging in reflexive analysis. Only by bringing our implicit frameworks into relief do we stand a chance of becoming relatively independent of them.

Fischer and Wertz (1979) showed how they began this process in their report of how they embarked on their study of "being criminally victimized":

[We] agreed, as a sensitizing exercise, to jot down notes about our personal experiences of having been the victim of crime. Then we met to discuss, among other issues, what we thought we were likely to find. The recorded anticipations alerted interviewers to possible themes that might require clarification if alluded to by subjects. They also allowed us to become aware of our presuppositions regarding the phenomenon so that we could attempt not to impose them on our subjects. Later we found that some of our notions had been fulfilled (albeit always in special ways), some modified, and some disconfirmed. (cited in Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 46)

In my own research on the life world of occupational therapists, it was both an advantage and a disadvantage that I am an occupational therapist. Early in the research, I needed to work to unravel instances in which my participants and I shared understandings and ones in which we diverged. I had to guard against assuming that we shared the same language and saw the job in the same way; if I failed to do so, I might have missed the point that there were differences:

I started with an assumption (based on my mental health experience) that as therapists we have a fair amount of autonomy and that team relationships are reasonably egalitarian. It came as quite a surprise to me to find out how hierarchical some practices could be . . . [On hearing one therapist say,] "Because the doctor has requested it, it's prescribed, so I must do it." . . . I realised how big some of the differences in our professional experience were. (Finlay, 1998a, p. 454)

Willott (1998) reflected back on the individual, social-political, and research implications of being a feminist researcher studying 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)

These examples begin to show the role and value of reflexive analysis in clarifying the impact of the researcher's position and perspective. In the data collection phase, this analysis is elaborated to include an examination of research method.



## Data Collection Stage

Wertz (1984) argued for the researcher's need to reflect vigorously on their data collection process:

The researcher's use of descriptions is not based on a naïve acceptance of verbal data *per se*. Rather, she is forced to reflect rigorously on the particular problems each research project poses. . . . The same is generally true of the role of the researcher, whose presence, for example in observation and interviews, can be responsible for omissions and even fabrications which are mistaken as valid data. (p. 39)

These dilemmas confronted me as I interviewed therapists about their experience. Deep and sometimes painful reflection was required before I could begin to unravel the meanings of my participants' responses. Reflexive analysis (undertaken as I wrote my field notes before and after each interview) exposed how the process and outcomes of data collection depend fundamentally on how the research relationship evolves:

[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 (at both a personal and methodological level) . . . [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, p. 454)

In contrast to Paula, 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, p. 241)

A fascinating reflexive study of interactive interviewing by Ellis, Kiesinger, and Tilmann-Healy (1997) revealed similar insights about how the research relationship shapes the findings produced. In this exploration of the experience of bulimia, the researchers described their work as "sharing personal and social experiences of both respondents and researchers, who tell . . . their stories in the context of a developing relationship" (p. 121):

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. 127-128)

One particular concern for reflexive researchers is how to manage the power imbalance between researcher and participant. Drawing from a broader research project on "men, masculinities and discourse," Gough (1999) explored his use of humor to breach a "detached researcher" stance.

In the following extract, Gough (called Bren) uses his data to reflexively examine his sense of discomfort:

*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 defence in light of anxiety or discomfort around my "difference" (as researcher, tutor, outsider) and "using" the participants for data.

Thus, reflexive analysis enables the researcher to identify how the data collected has been forged by the methods used and the emerging researcher-participant relationship. (Gough, 1999)

### Data Analysis Stage

Examples taken from my own research and from Kleinman's (1991) anthropological study of an alternative health center illustrate the potential of reflexivity in the data analysis stage. Rich insights can emerge when one examines one's own ambivalent

responses—it is these ambivalent responses that alert the researcher to the need to be reflexive:

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, p. 454)

I was doing what other sociologists were doing: judging the sociological value of a study by the societal value of an organization, or its value to sociologists at a given time. What I came to realize much later was that my judgments and those of others (which were mostly negative) were actually data for rather than critiques of the study. Our negative reactions reflected the society in which the Center was located and with which it had to struggle. In coming to understand the members of the organization I recognized that what they were doing was similar to what I was doing in studying them. I wanted to study something “different,” something close to my ideological heart, but legitimate it through conventional means of research and publication. I could get points for scholarship, yet play in the process. Board members at the Wholeness Center also wanted to retain certain ideals from the 1960s while gaining modern-day conventional legitimacy. They wanted the best of both worlds. (Kleinman, 1991, p. 189)

Heron (1996), drawing on research by Traylen (1994) into the role of health visitors, offered an example of co-operative inquiry, in which 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 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)

Accounts like these disclose how, not unlike the therapeutic process, qualitative research can often be both painful and challenging. The personal and interactive exploration of bulimia offered by Ellis et al. (1997) illustrates just how the research process has the potential to transform both participants and researchers:

Listening to Lisa speak of her father, I am disappointed and ashamed. I feel much like I did in elementary school when my friends bragged about their “daddies.” I fear that she will turn the question back on me and I will lie, much like I did in third grade, proclaiming, “My daddy is the greatest!” My cheeks flush with shame. “Please, God, don’t let her ask me,” I pray. . . . I imagine Lisa as a little girl charming her dad. He scoops her up in his arms. She throws her head back, giggling. The image is too much to bear. Inside, I shrink. Lisa had a “daddy.” I feel ashamed

because . . . I did not. Later, I write: A daddy has strong warm hands and a soft, gentle smile. A daddy dries his daughter's tears, makes his daughter laugh, keeps her secure. A daddy takes away his daughter's pain; he is not the cause of it. My father indeed had strong hands, but he used them to hurt me.

Since I made sense of my bulimia in terms of my relationship with my father, one question burns inside as I listen to Lisa speak of her dad. If Lisa had a "daddy," how does she have bulimia too? . . . Confronting the neatness of Lisa's life forces me to delve more deeply into the mess of my own . . . I find myself remembering other things: a string of less-than-healthy romances, an abortion at 17, and an isolated and lonely adolescence. When I listen to Lisa's story, my own story deepens and takes new shape. (pp. 128-129)

Reflexive stories, such as the ones offered above, show how reflexivity can open a window on areas that in other research contexts would remain concealed from awareness. In this way, reflexive analysis can give voice to those normally silenced. Reflexive analysis also aims to expose researcher silences. In their probing account of researching the childbirth experience of Asian women, Marshall, Woollett, and Dosanjh (1998) acknowledged that they were centrally implicated in the representation of their research participants and that this involved some selective silence:

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 highground . . . this sort of "suppression" results in a misunderstanding of power . . . and hence, prevents opportunities for countering oppression which currently exist. (p.128)

## CHALLENGING REFLEXIVE ANALYSIS

### Reflexivity: A Difficult Path

Carrying out reflexive analysis is always problematic, as such understanding is difficult to unfold—our experience is invariably complex, ambiguous, ambivalent. Much commitment, care, time, and skill go into reflexive analysis, and to do it well takes practice. Immersing oneself in the types of analyses described in this article can prove a painful business. Personal insights, when they arise, can be uncomfortable. In the course of methodological evaluation, researchers might be forced to come clean about certain mistakes, such as asking misguided questions or choosing the wrong strategy. Researchers committed to the reflexive project need to be prepared for these eventualities and to probe their more disagreeable reactions. Although burdensome, as instruments of their own research, researchers need to engage in such analysis (Kleinman, 1991).

Being preoccupied by one's own emotions and experiences, however, can skew findings in undesirable directions. The researcher's position can become unduly privileged, blocking out the participant's voice. Clearly, we need to strike a balance, striving for enhanced self-awareness but eschewing navel gazing. Ultimately,

reflexivity should be “neither an opportunity to wallow in subjectivity nor permission to engage in legitimised emoting” (Finlay, 1998a, p. 455). Instead, with reflexive analysis, the self is exploited only while to do so remains purposeful. DeVault (1997) offered the following thoughts on this balance:

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)

In these terms, reflexive analysis is precisely the route to ensuring an adequate balance between purposeful, as opposed to defensive or self-indulgent, personal analysis.

Other researchers highlight the problem of the impossible and infinite regress of recording the conditions, under which I record the conditions, under which . . . (Heron, 1996). As Macmillan (1996) eloquently put it,

One of the imagined horrors of taking another turn on the reflexive spiral is that it will suddenly start spinning, with the researcher helplessly caught up in a whirlpool of analysis in which he [sic] writes about his studies of studies about studies about studies ad infinitum (ad nauseam), ending up with an analysis to which the reader shrugs and says “so what” as she closes the pages. (p. 30)

Although infinite regress is an undoubted danger, it is one that is avoided with effective reflexive analysis. The quality of reflexive analysis depends largely on the way the process is approached. If the researcher is sincere in maintaining a primary focus on the participants or texts involved, returning to the self only as part of increasing awareness and insight, the problem of regress is bypassed.

### Responding to the Criticism

Critics of reflexivity from within the qualitative research paradigm argue that the method presumes a critically self-conscious researcher who has unproblematic access to subjective motivations and feelings. To accomplish such a feat requires “superhuman self-consciousness,” which might be attainable only through intensive psychoanalysis (Seale, 1999). Self-awareness is further problematized in any postmodern deconstruction of subjectivity as socially constructed. How can researchers pin down a dynamic, emergent, multiple self that is embedded in language and social relationships? “Exposing the construction of a text,” argued Macmillan (1996), “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).

Such criticisms reinforce the point that the reflexive researcher’s task is fraught with ambiguity. In the end, reflexivity can only be viewed as one way to begin to unravel the richness, contradictions, and complexities of intersubjective dynamics. It is not the only way, and the process of bringing the self to the fore remains problematic. Any reflexive analysis can only ever be a partial, tentative, provisional

account. Different researchers will also approach it at different levels, according to the needs of the research at the time.

Objections to reflexivity from outside the qualitative research paradigm remain anchored in the denial that personal disclosure and subjective analysis can be legitimate research tools. Critics routinely dismiss reflexivity as "woolly, unscientific bias." For Frank (1997), however, "the challenge is not to eliminate 'bias' to be more neutral, but to use it as a focus for more intense insight" (p. 89). Reflection on oneself (in action, in relationship) is carried out to gain a new perspective and it is not an aim in itself. Taking the argument further, we can even challenge the idea that subjectivity means bias. This implies an unequivocal reality that is distorted by subjective interpretation. The alternative view is to recognize the relative and socially constructed nature of reality and how meanings are negotiated in particular contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). If multiple interpretations of the same event are possible, surely it is more desirable to hear these different voices? Surely, we must positively embrace subjectivity rather than habitually dismissing it as bias (Finlay, 1998a)?

In playful parody, Macmillan (1996) took up the cudgel:

When more traditional disciplines turn to reflexivity and state that it sees nothing beyond its own navel, they are, of course, talking about themselves. The traditional social scientist is restricted to a kind of theoretical circularity by the confines of his own approach and the assumptions that form the boundaries which he shall never cross. The discipline is a bit like a comfortable neurosis which will resist change at all costs. This is why there is such ferocious response to other approaches which might in some way contaminate the discipline if not repressed. Reflexivity, in some ways, is the worst threat of all, because it demands that the researcher confront her own moves and motives. (p. 22)

Although the above criticisms can be answered, the nature of the positivist hegemony still makes it difficult to disseminate or publish reflexive research. For one thing, reflexive exploration is usually strangled by the constraining word limits set by scientific journals. Researchers with an eye toward academic credibility and wider acceptance are forced to censor their work, giving lip service to subjective evaluation, perhaps adding on a section in an appendix. As Kleinman and Copp (1993) expressed it, researchers tend to "safely quarantine the confessional from the substantive story" (p. 17).

In counterchallenge, I suggest that the quality of research craftsmanship should result in "knowledge claims that are so powerful and convincing in their own right that they . . . carry the validation with them, like a strong piece of art. In such cases, the research procedures would be transparent and the results evident, and the conclusions of a study intrinsically convincing as true" (Kvale, 1996, p. 252). Indeed, to avoid reflexive analysis might even compromise the research itself.

It is possible for researchers to engage in reflexive analysis—embracing it fully at all stages of the research—without necessarily displaying the whole process in any one article. The researcher might simply choose to acknowledge his or her presence and position in a paragraph under "method," as the sensitizing exercise engaged in by Fischer and Wertz (1979) shows. Alternatively, researchers can use reflexivity explicitly as part of their methodological evaluation, as a way of demonstrating trustworthiness. An example here is the way I acknowledged how certain presuppositions might have influenced my data collection (Finlay 1998b). Both strategies, using reflexivity as method and in evaluation, can be accommodated in

most journal articles. And it is possible, sometimes, to go further. The examples within this article have shown how some qualitative researchers have celebrated the scope, depth, richness, and flexibility that reflexive analysis offers.

"Coming out" through reflexive analysis is ultimately a political act. Done well, it has the potential to enliven, teach, and spur readers toward a more radical consciousness. Voicing the unspoken can empower both researcher and participant. As more researchers grasp the nettle, the research in the future can move in new, creative directions. Are we ready to embrace the challenge?

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