

Confession, catharsis, or cure? Rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research

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Reflexivity is commonly used in qualitative research and has been posited and accepted as a method qualitative researchers can and should use to legitimize, validate, and question research practices and representations. This paper closely examines the role of reflexivity as a methodological tool as it intersects with debates and questions surrounding representation and legitimization in qualitative research, within modernist and postmodernist ideologies, and pays close attention to how reflexivity is being defined and used in present-day research. Specifically, the author identifies and discusses the problematics of four common trends in present-day uses of reflexivity: reflexivity as recognition of self, reflexivity as recognition of other, reflexivity as truth, and reflexivity as transcendence. The author argues for a move away from comfortable uses of reflexivity to what she terms uncomfortable reflexive practices and provides an overview of the work of three authors who practice reflexivities of discomfort. Practicing uncomfortable reflexivity interrupts uses of reflexivity as a methodological tool to get better data while forefronting the complexities of doing engaged qualitative research.

Introduction

All ethnography is part philosophy and a good deal of the rest is confession. (Geertz, 1973)

The problem is not that we tailor but that so few qualitative researchers reveal *that* we do this work, much less *how* we do this work. (Fine, 1994)

At present, in my view, we are spending much too much time wading in the morass of our own positionings. (Patai, 1994)

This paper is situated out of and within the conflicts and tensions of the work of doing representation in ethnographic and qualitative research during a time in which as Clifford Geertz (1988) describes it our “epistemological foundations have been shaken by a general loss of faith in received stories about the nature of representation” (p. 135). Indeed since Geertz’s pronouncement debates concerning the foundations of our research practices have proliferated and existing structures for validating and legitimizing qualitative research have been called into question (Lather, 1993, 1995; Marcus & Fischer, 1986; Rosaldo, 1989). These critiques raised initial questions surrounding the “politics of the gaze” in qualitative research. Who benefits from our representations? Are our representations valid?

Do they matter? Who can research whom, when, and how? Recent discussions of the development and use of race-based methodologies and epistemologies have further challenged responses to these questions (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Parker, Dehyle, & Villenas, 2000; Villenas, 1996) and continue to forefront the complexities of what it means to do qualitative research after poststructuralism (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000).

In this paper, I examine the role of reflexivity as a methodological tool as it intersects with debates and questions surrounding representation and legitimization in qualitative research and pay close attention to how reflexivity is being defined and used in present-day research. Reflexivity is invoked in almost every qualitative research book or article and has been posited and accepted as a method qualitative researchers can and should use to both explore and expose the politics of representation, represent *difference* better (Wasserfall, 1997), and establish “ethnographic authority” (Britzman, 1995, p. 229). Reflexivity is also used by a wide range of scholars. Qualitative researchers using critical, feminist, race-based, or poststructural theories all routinely use reflexivity as a methodological tool to better represent, legitimize, or call into question their data. Most researchers use reflexivity without defining how they are using it, as if it is something we all commonly understand and accept as standard methodological practice for critical qualitative research.

One of the most noticeable trends to come out of a use of reflexivity is increased attention to researcher subjectivity in the research process – a focus on how does who I am, who I have been, who I think I am, and how I feel affect data collection and analysis – that is, an acceptance and acknowledgment that “*how* knowledge is acquired, organized, and interpreted is relevant to *what* the claims are” (Altheide & Johnson, 1998). Such thinking, influenced by poststructural theory, has yielded further questions about a researcher’s ability to represent, to know another, and questions the construction of our ethnographic and qualitative texts. Can we truly represent another? Should this even be a goal of research? Whose story is it – the researcher or the researched? How do I do representation knowing that I can never quite get it right? Discussion of these questions is now often a part of the qualitative research project and researchers who engage in asking these questions cite a need to forefront the politics of representation by making visible, through reflexivity, how we do the work of representation (Britzman, 1995; Fine, 1994; Lather, 1993,1995).

However, some scholars see the proliferation of reflexivity talk as at best self-indulgent, narcissistic, and tiresome and at worst, undermining the conditions necessary for emancipatory research (Kemmis, 1995; Patai, 1994). Denouncing what she describes as a proliferative reflexivity of the self that has sprouted “like mushrooms” in the academy, Daphne Patai (1994) provides a scathing critique of what she sees as “academic fads” in face of the “crisis of representation” stating that “notwithstanding, babies still have to be cared for, shelter sought, meals prepared and eaten” (p. 64). Patai situates “people who stay up nights worrying about representation” (p. 64) as privileged academics engaged in the erotics of their own language games. She also asks the “one question that the new methodological self-absorption seems not to ask . . . : Does all this self-reflexivity produce better research?” (p. 69).

Working out of the challenge of Patai’s question, “does self-reflexivity produce better research?” I analyze and trace the roles and present-day uses of reflexivity in

qualitative research. While I agree with Patai's (1994) account that "we do not escape from the consequences of our positions by talking about them endlessly" (p. 70), I do not believe that the solution is then to stop talking about our positions. Rather, in this paper, I explore *how* it is we go about talking about our positions, that is how we practice reflexivity, and how these practices impact, open up, or limit the possibilities for critical representations. Specifically I ask: How has reflexivity been figured as important and necessary to qualitative research? How is reflexivity used and what roles and purposes does reflexivity play in qualitative research? How have uses of reflexivity shifted within modernism and postmodernism¹ and how can we continue to use reflexivity while acknowledging its limits?

My goal in asking these questions is not to dismiss reflexivity but to make visible the ways in which reflexivity is used, to be as Gayatri Spivak (1984–85) states, "vigilant about our practices" (p. 184). This vigilance from within can aid in a rethinking and questioning of the assumptive knowledges embedded in reflexive practices in ethnographic and qualitative research and work not to situate reflexivity as a confessional act, a cure for what ails us, or a practice that renders familiarity, but rather to situate practices of reflexivity as critical to exposing the difficult and often uncomfortable task of leaving what is unfamiliar, unfamiliar.

What is reflexivity?

Before beginning to explain how reflexivity is used in qualitative research it is necessary to first ask: What do we mean by reflexivity? This is a question I am faced with every semester I teach qualitative research methodology – "What is reflexivity? How do I do it?" and "How do I know I am doing it right?" While I can respond to these questions, I must admit that I do remain puzzled by how to teach students how to be reflexive. Is reflexivity a skill, a set of methods that can be taught? If so, what are the methods of reflexivity – is it keeping a research journal or the inclusion of a questioning researcher voice in the text? What should we be reflexive about? The other? Ourselves? The place? Who gets to be reflexive? How does one write reflexively? How or should the reader judge whether the researcher was too reflexive or not reflexive enough? Can we avoid the morass of ourselves that Patai warns against?

To address these basic questions it is useful to consider how reflexivity has been incorporated and discussed in qualitative research. The ability of humans to reflect (on the past and the future) has a long intellectual history and heritage growing out of Enlightenment belief in the ability of "man"² to reason in a reasonable manner about "his" fate, impact the future, and transcend the present. Dewey (1938) wrote that "to reflect is to look back over what has been done so as to extract the net meanings which are the capital stock of intelligent dealing with further experiences. It is the heart of intellectual organization and of the disciplined mind" (pp. 86–87). While reflexivity may trace its roots of dependency to this idea(1) of reflection, it is necessary to differentiate this form of reflection³ and its use in the philosophical sciences from the use of reflexivity and self-reflexivity as methods in social science research. For the purposes of this paper, I rely on Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater's (1996) distinction between reflexivity and reflection: "to be reflective does not demand an 'other,' while to be reflexive demands both an other and some self-conscious awareness of the process of self-scrutiny" (p. 130).

Discussions of the use of reflexive methods in anthropology, generally beginning in the 1970s, were a response to critiques of classical, colonial ethnographic methods and initially emphasized the role of reflexivity in situating the researcher as non-exploitative and compassionate toward the research subjects (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Rabinow, 1977). However, with the “interpretive turn” in the social sciences, that is, when the objectivity of research is brought under question and issues of power in research relations begin to be acknowledged, reflexivity takes on an even larger and more significant role in the production of research. For example, Thomas McCarthy (1994) situates the point of rupture and contrast between traditional and critical theory as “the reflexivity . . . of social inquiry” (p. 7). In explanation of the role and importance of reflexivity in this shift, McCarthy (1994) notes how traditionally the social sciences were dependent upon offering a “view from nowhere’ with all of its rights and privileges” (p. 15) while critical theory challenged the “privileged non-position of social-scientific knowledge by analyzing the modes of its production, the roles it played in society, the interests it served, and the historical processes through which it came to power” (p. 15). To be reflexive, then, not only contributes to producing knowledge that aids in understanding and gaining insight into the workings of our social world but also provides insight on how this knowledge is produced.

When objectivity became open to question, the researcher’s subjectivity also became open to scrutiny. Thus, reflexivity, as Rosanna Hertz (1997) notes, has also focused upon the “what I know” and “how I know it” and entails “an ongoing conversation about experience while simultaneously living in the moment” (p. viii). This focus requires the researcher to be critically conscious through personal accounting of how the researcher’s self-location (across for example, gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality), position, and interests influence all stages of the research process. Reflexivity then “becomes a continuing mode of self-analysis and political awareness” (Callaway, 1992, p. 33). The result of all of this reflexivity is to produce research that questions its own interpretations and is reflexive about its own knowledge production towards the goal of producing better, less distorted research accounts (Hertz, 1997). Reflexivity thus is often understood as involving an ongoing self-awareness during the research process which aids in making visible the practice and construction of knowledge within research in order to produce more accurate analyses of our research. As Charlotte Davies (1999) states, “reflexivity, broadly defined, means a turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference. In the context of social research, reflexivity at its most immediately obvious level refers to the way in which the products of research are affected by the personnel and process of doing research” (p. 4).

Feminist theory and feminist researchers have furthered discussions of reflexivity by situating reflexivity as primary to feminist research and methodology (Clough, 1992; Fonow & Cook, 1991). Reflexivity under feminism is not only about investigating the power embedded in one’s research but is also about doing research differently. The need to do research differently arises from the ethical and political problems and questions raised by feminists about traditional research methods (Oakley, 1981). These questions include: How can one be a non-exploitative researcher? How does one produce research that is useful and empowering to women? How do we make research that is linked with political action? How would our research practices be different if we were reflective at each step of the research process (i.e., from forming our research questions, gaining

access, conducting interviews, to analyzing data)? Feminist research points out that there are multiple places for reflexivity to work and work differently in the research process.

One example is a focus upon developing reciprocity with research subjects – hearing, listening, and equalizing the research relationship – doing research “with” instead of “on.” In this way, reflexivity is also used to deconstruct the author’s authority in the research and/or writing process. Interest in this practice has led to “multivocal” texts and explorations of attempts to let the data, the subjects, speak for themselves. Researchers have tried differing writing and representation styles to accomplish this including writing data as a play, as a literary story, or as a split multivoiced text (Eisner, 1997; Lather & Smithies, 1997; Richardson, 1994; Sanders, 1999) and developed metaphors such as “witnessing” (Ropers-Huilman, 1999) or “troubling” (Lather & Smithies, 1997) to explain their research methodology. These “textual reflexivity”⁴ (Macbeth, 2001) practices attempt to address and at times problematize the work of writing representations.

Perhaps because of its multiple uses, reflexivity has also become associated with or used as a measure of legitimacy and validity in qualitative research. Listening and writing with reflexivity are often described as tools to help situate oneself and be cognizant of the ways your personal history can influence the research process and thus yield more “accurate,” more “valid” research (Altheide & Johnson, 1998; Ball, 1990). Although discussions of validity have been questioned and troubled in qualitative research (Kvale, 1989; Lather, 1986a, 1993; Maxwell, 1992) these debates have if anything situated self-reflexivity as even more important to the doing of qualitative research. If traditional measures of validity are not useful to qualitative researchers, then what are we left with to discuss and determine whether our data and analyses are “accurate?” Thus, reflexivity becomes important to demonstrate one’s awareness of the research problematics and is often used to potentially validate and legitimize the research precisely by raising questions about the research process. As Macbeth (2001) notes, “by most accounts, reflexivity is a deconstructive exercise for locating the intersections of author, other, text, and world, and for penetrating the representational exercise itself” (p. 35).

However, as Vivien Burr (1995) notes, the distinctions between the differing roles of reflexivity are rarely made and while “reflexivity is a term which is widely used in social constructionist writing . . . (it) is not necessarily used in the same way by different writers” (p. 160). Burr (1995) does find that the most common usage of reflexivity is researchers “analyzing their own writing, reflexively discussing how their own accounts have been constructed” (p. 160). Macbeth (2001) terms this type of validity “positional validity” (p. 38). This form of reflexivity is often equated with a form of self-disclosure or exposure termed self-reflexivity. The use of reflexivity in this sense not only raises questions about the politics of how we go about the doing of our research but also engages the researcher herself in *self*-reflective practices. Self-reflexivity acknowledges the researcher’s role(s) in the construction of the research problem, the research setting, and research findings, and highlights the importance of researcher becoming consciously aware of these factors and thinking through the implications of these factors for her/his research. In this way, the problematics of doing fieldwork and representation are no longer viewed as incidental but can become an object of study themselves.

For example, Williams (1990) considers her use of reflexivity a form of additional fieldwork: “My notes constitute the field, and my attempt to understand

them is in a very real sense fieldwork” (p. 255). Williams (1990) equates reflexivity with the task of analyzing her own experiences in the process of fieldwork: “Understanding emerges out of interaction between me as a researcher and the situation within which I find myself – out of the questions that emerge from my response to the situation” (p. 254). Van Maanen (1989) characterizes such work as the “confessional tale” and notes that confessions may take place around oneself, others, the field, or the data.

In this way, reflexivity in qualitative research has been characterized as growing beyond the relationship of the researcher to the data. Several writers have attempted to identify varying types of reflexivity and identify where reflexivity occurs. According to Anderson (1989) reflexivity involves a dialectical process consisting of:

- the researcher’s constructs;
- the informants’ commonsense constructs;
- the research data;
- the researcher’s ideological biases; and
- the structural and historical forces that shaped the social construction under study.

Norm Denzin (1997) identifies five differing types of reflexivity in use in qualitative research: methodological, intertextual, standpoint, queer, and feminist reflexivity (pp. 218–223) and George Marcus (1998) describes “four styles of reflexivity” (p. 394).

While these typologies are useful, I want to explore further how reflexivity is being used, how it has been linked with producing “better” more “accurate” research (Wasserfall, 1997), and question what is supposed and assumed in reflexivity as a methodological tool. What gestures of neutralization operate in reflexivity – leaving it unmarked even as we think we are marking it so that reflexivity becomes “reduced to a question of technique and method” (Trinh, 1991, p. 46)? Below I discuss four common practices of reflexivity; four “validated strategies” (Trinh, 1991, p. 57), that identify a prevalent trend in qualitative research. This trend is marked by a desire to use reflexivity to write our research subjects, issues, or settings as familiar. I argue that using reflexivity to write toward the familiar works against the critical impetus of reflexivity and thus masks continued reliance upon traditional notions of validity, truth, and essence in qualitative research.

The four strategies of reflexivity also highlight the difficulties and tensions in shifts from modern to postmodern understandings of doing qualitative research. For example, reflexivity as a methodological practice is dependent on a subject or subjects to reflect on and how the subject is thought is key then to how reflexivity is practiced. For instance, as explained below, many researchers are utilizing reflexivity in ways that are dependent on a modernist subject – a subject that is singular, knowable, and fixable. Thus, if my subject, either myself or an “other,” is knowable the possibility that I can then know this subject through better reflexive methods is attainable. On the other hand, an understanding of a subject as postmodern, as multiple, as unknowable, as shifting, situates the purposes and practices of research, and the uses of reflexivity, quite differently.

However, it is important to note that postmodernism operates within its own discursive limits, so that a turn to postmodernism in research does not fix the

problematics of doing research and may even institute its own set of “validated” practices. As Derek Jinks (1997) notes, “the point is that as long as the pre-theoretical commitments of any field retain some currency among its practitioners, the theoretical landscape will invariably conform to these discursive limits” (p. 522). Thus, I consider each of the four validated strategies of reflexivity below as having present-day currency among qualitative researchers and in some instances currency that also works across research that is situated as postmodern. In the last section of the paper, I take up the idea that the critical work of reflexivity under postmodernism remains its ability to enable the researcher “to experiment within the confines of [these] pre-theoretical commitments” (Jinks, 1997, p. 522) and provide examples from researchers who do reflexivity differently under postmodernism – incorporating a reflexivity that accounts for multiplicity without making it singular and that acknowledges the unknowable without making it familiar.

Validated reflexive strategies – reflexing toward the familiar

Here I describe four reflexive strategies – reflexivity as recognition of self; reflexivity as recognition of other; reflexivity as truth; reflexivity as transcendence – which are broadly and commonly used in qualitative research. The four strategies work together, are dependent upon each other, and as I argue they work together to provide the researcher with a form of self-reflexivity as confession that often yields a catharsis of self-awareness for the researcher, which provides a cure for the problem of doing representation. The first strategy, which incorporates self-reflexivity, is discussed at length as each other strategy builds from this usage. My identification of these four broadly used strategies is deeply influenced by my teaching qualitative research courses and repeatedly struggling with students attempting to identify how reflexivity is being used in qualitative research and what it is that is working or not working in such usages. In identifying these four strategies, I have also been able to find myself and my writing styles in each and see how attached and invested I remain to these ideologies, however much I may think I work against each.

Reflexivity as recognition of self/“researcher know thyself”

This use of reflexivity, “researcher know thyself,” imbues the researcher with the ability to be self-reflexive, to recognize an otherness of self and the self of others. Reflexivity as recognition invokes the Cartesian belief in a unified, essential self that is capable of being reflected on and is knowable. For example, Alan Peshkin (1988) argues that researchers should “systematically seek out their own subjectivity” while their research is in progress, and that you should be “aware,” and “observe” yourself through the use of reflexive notes to yourself (p. 17). Peshkin (1988) observes that subjectivity operates during the entire research process, not just in the writing stage. Although Peshkin (1988) states that “subjectivity is not a badge of honor, something earned like a merit badge” (p. 17), he pursues and remains attached to the ability of the researcher to know her(him)self through careful “monitoring of the self” (p. 20): “if researchers are informed about the qualities that have emerged during their

research, they can at least disclose to their readers where self and subject became joined. They can at best be enabled to write unshackled from orientations that they did not realize were intervening in their research process” (p. 17).

The ability to “disclose” one’s own subjectivity and write “unshackled” depends upon the researcher’s ability to mark where her(him)self ends and another begins through the use of self-reflexivity. There also is an invested ideology here that the researcher can be honest about her(him)self, particularly in relation to an “other.” But how do we do this in our research? How much do we need to know from or about the researcher to trust or believe what she/he is reporting? Where does the researcher/author begin and end in relation to the research and research subject? A review of qualitative research articles and texts shows that researchers are handling their subjectivity in myriad ways – some accept like Peshkin that they can know who they are and thus state it up-front;⁵ others blur the line between themselves and the research subject(s), other texts collapse under the weight of the confessional tale – but all are attempting to account for how their selves interact and impact the research process.

Here it is important to note that the problematics related to researcher subjectivity were initially focused upon instances where the researcher who is differently privileged in relation to the research subject attempts to come to terms with his/her privilege and represent the other in a less ethnocentric, subjected way. However, many researchers now have chosen, and perhaps have more freedom to choose, to research their own cultural, sexualized, and racialized communities. What does reflexivity mean for researchers who research “themselves”? Is the practice of self-reflexivity different when it is performed by an “insider”? As “insider” researchers have noted, being part of the community or having racial commonalities with the subjects of your research does not automatically yield the research egalitarian (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Johnson-Bailey, 1999; Villenas, 1996, 2000). Embedded within the research process are relationships of power that all researchers must face. However, insider/outsider researchers do point to how their own dual identities, their own dual positions of power and subjugation in the academy and in their community, and how what Dolores Delgado Bernal (1998) refers to as “cultural intuition” further shape and challenge the research process (Brayboy, 2000; Chaudry, 2000; Motzafi-Haller, 1997; Villenas, 1996, 2000).

I want to differentiate “cultural intuition,” which impacts the research by providing historical and personal cultural insight into the research process, thus impacting the formation, doing, and analysis of research, from practices of self-reflexivity, which attempt to account for how the self is involved in the research process.⁶ Here, I am particularly concerned with how self-reflexivity may result in a simple identifying of oneself or a telling of a confessional tale, which certainly continues to work to identify and define the “other,” and how the use of self-reflexivity is often used to situate oneself as closer to the subject. This can lead to a specific form of self-reflexivity – a reflexivity that falls into seeking similarities between the researcher and the subject, a reflexivity that seeks to make “your” self closer to “your” subject. This desire to be close to the subject, to write ourselves as close to our subjects, and to “affirm oneness” (Patai, 1991, p. 144) is evident in many research examples and may include such strategies as the author using her/his own life experiences to find similarities with the research subject(s).⁷ As Iris Marion Young (1997) notes, “we often think that understanding another person’s point of view or situation involves finding things in common between us” (p. 52).

For example, Laura Ellingson (1998) uses the format of the “confessional tale” to reflect on how her own experiences with cancer created empathy and understanding with the patients in an oncology clinic where she was doing fieldwork. She states that she does not write the confessional tale to offer reassurance to the reader of a more valid tale, but rather “to reassure the reader that my findings are *thoroughly* contaminated. This contamination with my own lived experiences results in a rich, complex understanding of the staff and patients of the clinic in which I am observing (and of my own cancer experience)” (emphasis in original; p. 494). Likewise, Christine Kiesinger (1998) forefronts how the difficulties of writing about the “lived, emotional experiences” of a woman struggling with bulimia reflects on her own life history as a bulimic woman, leading her to “reflexively connect our experiences in ways that use Abbie’s life story to challenge and deepen my understanding of my own life, and my own experiences to heighten my comprehension of hers” (p. 72). Ellingson and Kiesinger both situate the understanding of their research out of similar personal experiences with their subjects.

In a differing example, Becky Ropers-Huilman (1999), who does not pull upon a similar personal experience with her subjects, relies on the metaphor of “witnessing”⁸ to guide her research practices and to point to the “obligations that researchers have when we interpret others’ lives, using our own words and paradigms to present stories of our experiences with the Other” (p. 22). Ropers-Huilman (1999) states that as researchers “our accounts, or translations, as witnesses can be powerful in a poststructural world for they supplant both truth and alternative translations” (p. 24) and that “as witnesses, there is a sense that our knowledge from participation in a research situation is useful . . . that our constructed meanings might be worth listening to as we seek to improve our worlds” (p. 24).

What the above examples share is an acceptance that coming to know oneself will aid in knowing, understanding, “witnessing,” the other (and in Ropers-Huilman’s case that through “witnessing” she will better know herself). While Ellingson and Kiesinger both state they are not seeking the more valid tale, and Ropers-Huilman notes that “we will never know all the reasons for our own actions and interactions” (p. 29), none of the authors further troubles his/her own notions of knowing but seem to assume that by putting her(him)self into the text, by questioning her/his ways of knowing, she/he has taken on the messiness of representation.⁹ Thus the data stories they tell, while seemingly influenced by postmodernism, are also presented with a transparent linearity and a dependency on modernist ideologies of subjectivity. However as Spivak (1988) states, “making positions transparent does not make them unproblematic” (p. 6) and John Van Maanen (1989) notes that “confessions, endlessly replayed, begin to lose their novelty and power to inform” (p. 99, note 12). Additionally, it is interesting that such texts, which engage in personal self-reflexivity that is rendered as self-knowledge and truth, are often difficult to discuss and critique because to do so feels like an attack on the author. Thus, to critique such texts seems crass and unfeeling. Yet, I take the risk here because I want to ask of all texts what they open up or close off in terms of what more we understand and question after reading the text – did I need the author’s confessional tale to read the data? Did the use of “witnessing” as a metaphor for the researcher aid in my understanding of the research or close off my reading (for who can critique what another has “witnessed”)? And specific to such uses of this form of self-reflexivity, I want to ask what it (re)produces and what it limits.¹⁰

I am not calling for a move away from authors acknowledging themselves in the text, particularly because one of the reasons for paying close attention to researcher subjectivity arises from critiques of colonial and colonizing practices of ethnographic research. There is a need many argue for the researcher, often a person in a privileged position by gender, race, class, and nationality, to define him/herself; and a specific need for “white ethnographers” as Karen Kelsky (2001) states, “to account for their own ‘nativeness’ in their practice of representation” (p. 429). Kelsky rightly points out that there is a continued racialized marking of raced researchers who are “identified with those they study” (p. 429), while leaving the “Western, particularly White” researcher unmarked. Thus to somehow move beyond researcher subjectivity would perpetuate “white” researcher privilege. Furthermore, Russely Rodríguez (1998) notes that the “practice of drawing from personal experience is both rejected and accepted” (p. 33) and this rejection and acceptance often differ according to the racial identification of the researcher.¹¹ Russel y Rodríguez reminds us that who we want to know about, who we are willing to hear from, and who we construct and want the author to be continue to be impacted by the ideologies and practices of our field and who we, the reader, assume the author is.

I discuss this issue further at the end of this paper but here I want to return attention to my critique of practices of (self-)reflexivity that seek to demonstrate how the researcher truly knows her/his self. I suggest that a self-reflexivity that is predicated upon the ability of the researcher to know her/his own subjectivity and to make this subjectivity known to the reader through disclosure is limited and limiting because such usages are necessarily dependent on a knowable subject and often collapse into linear tellings that render the researcher and the research subject as more familiar to each other (and thus to the reader). Such usages have also equated the knowing researcher as somehow having “better,” more “valid” data perpetuating a use of self-reflexivity as a methodological tool to get better data.

Reflexivity as recognition of the other

This form of reflexivity as recognition is endemic to qualitative research and has been situated as key to legitimization and validity claims. If the basis of why we do research is predicated upon being able to know, to understand the other, the subject of our research, then how well we are able to do this is vital to producing good research. Knowing the other is important not only to produce a compelling text but also how well we come to “*capture the essence*” of the other(s) and “*let them speak for themselves*” (Trinh, 1991, p. 57) has become a measure of the validity and quality of our work. Such stances are dependent upon the belief that there is some “ontological intact reflexivity to the subject which is then placed within a cultural context” (Butler, 1992, p. 12). While some feminist researchers have problematized such validity claims and point to the impossibility of representations (Lather, 1986a), within this critique remains the desire and the necessity to represent. Thus while reflexivity here may be used to point to the limits of recognition of the other, the focus is still upon representing recognition.

This form and use of reflexivity has certainly been challenged by those who are aligned with those who have typically been on the “other” side of representation (hooks, 1990; Varadharajan, 1995). These theorists regard the ability to reflexively

discuss the problems of representation as a privileged space from which to work. For example Butler (1993) speaks of the “*limit* of recognizability, a limit conditioned by the limits of representability” (p. 6), yet she couches this “limit of the very notion of recognition” as a “gesture of humility” (p. 6). This characterization of the research relationship maintains a colonial relationship of one person with power, the researcher, who will then demonstrate humility and generosity toward the research subject. As Britzman (1995) asks: “But how, exactly, is identification with another to occur if one is only required to tolerate and thereby confirm one’s self as generous” (p. 159)?

One validated strategy to approach this problematic has been to “make evident how this Other has participated in the making of his/her own image” (Trinh, 1991, p. 67). Thus, as discussed above, there is much written about in research methodology that focuses upon how voice is given to the subject and by authors who seek to demonstrate how power is shared by researcher and researched. This may include discussions of co-development of the research focus and analysis, use of extensive member checks, “sharing the data” with the subjects, and co-writing. However, as Trinh (1991) points out, this share of power is “*given*” to the research subject, “not taken” (p. 67). Thus, in our research we have to continually question the capability of the subject to define her/his self or even the desire of the subject to do so. Reflexivity then always occurs out of an unequal power relationship and, in fact, the act of reflexivity may perpetuate a colonial relationship while at the same time attempting to mask this power over the subject.¹² As Young (1997) notes, “when people obey the injunction to put themselves in the position of others, they too often put *themselves*, with their own particular experiences and privileges, in the positions they see the others. When privileged people put themselves in the position of those who are less privileged, the assumptions derived from their privilege often allow them unknowingly to misrepresent the other’s situation” (p. 48).

For the insider/outsider researcher this can be particularly problematic with the added recognition that what the field/the academy wants from him/her is to “represent the Other for the Master, or comforts, more specifically, the Master’s self-other relationship in its enactment of power relations, gathering serviceable data, minding his/her own business-territory, and yet offering the difference expected” (Trinh 1991, p. 68). Villenas (1996, 2000) speaks to this problematic in her research, describing herself desiring to find and tell the critical tale, told through conflict, “for this is how the West defines identities and differences” (Trinh, 1991, p. 66), because this is what she had been trained to find. Villenas (2000) speaks to the need to find a different “homeplace” for her work, where “knowing” her subjects both exceeds and does not fit into what the academy wants and expect of her as a “Latina” researcher (I discuss Villenas’s work in further depth at the end of this paper). Work like Villenas’s reminds us of how much we are invested in “knowing the other” and how in particular we want to know that critical, exotic, outlandish subject.

Reflexivity as truth

This form of reflexivity supports the idea that the researcher can “get it right.” In this way reflexivity “seems to guarantee the notion that in the spoken word we know

what we mean, mean what we say, say what we mean, and know what we have said” (Johnson, 1981, p. viii as quoted in Lather, 1993, p. 685). Is reflexivity used to authorize our texts, to make our research more legitimate, more valid, more truthful? Reflexivity has been linked with validity and in many cases reflexivity seems to be approached and implemented as a science where “‘reflexivity’ is elevated to that status of scientific rigor” (Trinh, 1991, p. 46). For example, my students often assume if they engage in a series of “reflexive” techniques or a set of methods that are devised for the purpose of exposing the “context” of production of their research and as long as the required techniques are soundly and methodologically carried out, they can be assured that “reflexivity” has occurred and thus that their research is more valid, more truthful, and that they have captured the voice of their subjects. However, again, we must return to the question of what role reflexivity plays in “truth gathering.” How is reflexivity reconfigured when we (re)think reflexivity as an instrument of the production of truth?

It is important, then, to explore how reflexivity acts in the interests of “discourses of truth” which “operate in relation to the dominant power structures of a given society” (McNay 1992, p. 25). Trinh (1991) characterizes “truth” as an “instrument of mastery which I exert over areas of the unknown as I gather them within the fold of the known” (p. 12) or as Britzman (1995) states, a valorization and “insistence upon the real” (p. 156). It is such an “insistence upon the real” and a gathering of our data into the “fold of the known” that I wish to question and be vigilant about.

Feminist and poststructural critiques of “truth” as a goal in research have led to experimentation with various approaches and practices to forefront “voice” and the construction of our research texts. Feminists’ commitments in particular have led to practices where the researcher seeks to “relinquish control” by working mutually with the research subject(s). However, as Patai (1991) cautions, “the researcher’s desire to act out feminist commitments, relinquish control, and involve the researched in all stages of the project runs the risk, however, of subtly translating into the researcher’s own demand for affirmation and validation” (p. 147). In other words, practices of reflexivity, however mutual, which are still based on some form of truth gathering, work to continue to situate the researcher’s own need and desire for “truth” as primary.

Reflexivity as transcendence

Once the researcher knows herself, an other, and truth now she/he needs to transcend this. Prominent in much qualitative research is the idea that the researcher, through reflexivity, can transcend her own subjectivity and own cultural context in a way that releases her/him from the weight of (mis)representations. Self-reflexivity can perform a modernist seduction – promising release from your tension, voyeurism, ethnocentrism – a release from your discomfort with representation through a transcendent clarity. As Cixous (1994) notes, “Telling you is the most minor attempt at loyalty, it is the most elementary form of candor. But can I not suspect in confession a hope for absolution” (p. 97). Reflexivity as a form of “confession” and “absolution” situates it firmly within the Enlightenment ideals of “truth and understanding” which require “the transcendence of one’s web of situated positionality” – to “free oneself” (Ilter 1994, 63). Self-reflexivity can in this

way perform a modernist seduction – promising release from your tension, voyeurism, and ethnocentrism – release you from your discomfort with the problematics of representation through transcendent clarity. However, if as Patia (1991) notes we accept that “in an unethical world, we cannot do truly ethical research” (p. 150), how do we do research knowing this?

Interrupting comfortable reflexivity – reflexivities of discomfort

If, as I suggest, we are currently taking comfort in common usages of reflexivity in the postmodern – relying upon reflexivity as methodological power and listening to and desiring only certain kinds of reflexive stories – how can we interrupt these common practices? How can we also then continue to engage in a “possibility of critique beyond a certain kind of paralyzed reflexivity” (Varadharajan, 1995, p. xi)? Lather’s discussion of validity and reflexivity in qualitative research are particularly helpful here. In Lather’s work reflexivity is imbued as a form of validity and has been discussed by Lather (1986b) as reciprocity, “a mutual negotiation of meaning and power”; “research as praxis” – research geared to help those being researched to understand and change their situation – “empowering the researched” and catalytic validity which “represents the degree to which the research process reorients, focuses, and energizes participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it . . .” (p. 272). Lather acknowledges reflexivity’s use as a methodological practice but she also attempts to work against the work of reflexivity becoming too set. For example, Lather posits that through the use of reflexive writing the researcher attempts to determine the filters through which she/he is working and thus works to keep the critical framework from “becoming the container into which the data are poured” (Lather, 1986b). Lather’s work highlights the negotiated construction of meanings between the researcher and the researched but we are still left with few details on how to negotiate these meanings. As Lather (1993) herself states, there are “few guidelines for how one goes about the *doing* of it, especially in a way that is both reflexive and yet notes the limits of self-reflexivity” (p. 685).

Denzin (1997) suggests that a “responsible, reflexive text announces its politics and ceaselessly interrogates the realities it invokes while folding the teller’s story into the multivoiced history that is written . . . no interpretation is privileged” (p. 225). However, such texts are very difficult to write and Denzin (1997) mentions the “multiple risks” of such a strategy: “narcissistic texts, texts preoccupied with their own reflexivity, good and bad poetry, politically correct attitudes, too much concern for language, and utopian impulses predicated on the belief that the recovery of the previously repressed self can produce liberation and freedom” (p. 226). How, then, do we as Trinh (1989) asks: “inscribe difference without bursting into a series of euphoric narcissistic accounts of yourself and your kind” (p. 28)?

Such a focus refigures reflexivity beyond a methodological exercise to a questioning of “whether and how differences are constructed and the way in which these constructions are linked to processes of domination” (Moors, 1991, p. 122). Marcus (1998) moves toward a “reflexive, messy text . . . aware of my own narrative apparatuses, that are sensitive to how reality is socially constructed, and that understanding that writing is a way of framing reality. Messy texts are many sited, intertextual, always open ended, and resistant to theoretical holism, but always

committed to cultural criticism” (p. 392). Likewise, while Lather (1993) acknowledges that “to attempt to deconstruct one’s own work is to risk buying into the faith in the powers of critical reflection”, she goes on to state that “rather, than take refuge in the futility of self-critique . . . I want to attempt it as aware as possible of its inevitable shortcomings” (p. 685). What remains, then, after the interpretive turn and after postmodernism, is “how to deal with the fact of reflexivity, how to strategize about it for certain theoretical and intellectual interests (Marcus, 1998, p. 394).

What would it mean to be rigorously self-aware – rigorously reflective about the workings of power and the desire to perform and achieve at the validated strategies listed above? I briefly present what I find to be three examples of research reflexivity which work within and against parameters of comfortable research, moving toward what I would term “reflexivities of discomfort.” I present these examples not in support of holding up some taxonomical models for all researchers to follow but rather as a means of beginning/continuing a conversation about what it means to use reflexivity now, through postmodernism, in our research practices.

I review the work of three authors who are interrupting reflexivity – rendering the knowing of their selves or their subjects as uncomfortable and uncontainable. These authors are engaging in what I would term uncomfortable reflexivity – a reflexivity that seeks to know while at the same time situates this knowing as tenuous.¹³ Britzman (1995) notes that this form of “exceeding selves” enacts “something far less comforting” (p. 158). The three examples are very different in their styles, in what they are reflexive about, and what they are working within and against. Yet, all three work against the modernist assumptions entailed within practices of reflexivity discussed above. These works acknowledge, find, discuss, and challenge the limits of existing notions and understandings of what is acceptable research practice while at the same time forefronting the necessity of engaging in critical reflection about how it is we do the reflexive work of subjectivity and representation. What is similar across the examples is the necessity, from their research, of exceeding the boundaries of ideological theory and practice (whether the field of study is anthropology, cultural criticism, feminism, or postmodernism).

First, I read Lubna Chaudhry (2000) through and with Kamala Visweswaran (1994), whom Chaudhry also reads. Amidst recent calls for multivoiced texts, dialogical works, and text that “let the voices be heard,” Visweswaran (1994) opts to see the research “text as overdetermined, becoming something like an omniscient narrator” (p. 75). Visweswaran’s (1994) situates herself as one who is “suspicious of feminist and ethnographic desires to ‘know’ the other” (p. 75) and she is critical of the assumption that “‘better’ methodology will mean better accounts” (Visweswaran 1994, p. 98). Reflexivity for Visweswaran is used not as a confrontation to come to represent the other “but to learn to represent ourselves” (p. 77). Chaudhry (2000), reading Visweswaran, characterizes this move as a move from “a politics of identity to politics of identification” (p. 109). This representation should not I believe be read as a simplistic, coherent telling – reflexivity is not in Visweswaran’s or Chaudhry’s hands a coming to know who the author is but a critique of the disciplinary practices of ethnography and continual exposure of power relations, to, in Visweswaran’s words, “confront plays of power in our processes of interpretation” (p. 79).

To do this Visweswaran differentiates between reflexive and deconstructive ethnography in her work. The reflexive ethnography – “normative, declarative” seeks to impart “knowledge to a reader whose position is stabilized by invisible claims to a shared discourse” (p. 78). The deconstructive, or interrogative ethnography, “disrupts the identity of the reader with a unified subject of enunciation by discouraging identification” (p. 78). Visweswaran further states that the “self-reflexive anthropology questions its own authority; deconstructive anthropology attempts to abandon or forfeit its authority, knowing that it is impossible to do so” (p. 79); the “reflexive mode emphasizes not what we know, but how we think we know, the deconstructive mode again emphasizes how we think we know what we know is neither transparent nor innocent” (p. 80). Thus, for Visweswaran, reflexivity and the reflexive text not only trace and challenge the constructs of the author but also challenge the reader – pushing the reader to analyze, question, and re-question her/his own knowledges and assumptions brought to the reading.

Likewise, Chaudhry’s (2000) essay focuses upon her own shifting subjectivities and highlights the many tensions and contradictions in her research in a style that continuously challenges the reader. Chaudhry’s use of reflexivity, influenced by but differentiated from Visweswaran’s and Lather’s use of the term as synonymous with deconstruction, is more closely aligned with Trinh’s (1989) characterization of reflexivity as a “relationship that defines both the subject written and the writing subject” (p. 76). This focus interrupts any notion of construction of a seamless and objective text and makes visible the personal construction of the text while taking “responsibility for the knowledge being produced as well as to study the so-called postcolonial self itself as a site where multiple centers of power inscribe” (p. 109). Working within and against the colonizing gaze of her own role as ethnographer, Chaudhry in one vignette writes of how her dependency on a Western feminism led to “tragedy” with one of her research subjects. Chaudhry describes her attempts (in this essay a pastiche of hybrid subjectivities told through narratives, notes, poems, accounts, and personal thoughts which can leave the reader feeling like a voyeur of stories too personal for telling) to “problematize my positionality as a Pakistani Muslim woman ‘studying’ other Pakistani Muslims as well as my bid to contextualize the research project within those aspects of my self that are for the most part denied voice in mainstream academic discourse” (p. 109).

Chaudhry does not, indeed cannot, pretend to “know” herself or her subjects, as each attempt at knowing spins her into “compulsive questioning.” Nor does Chaudhry seek truth or transcendence in her writing – there is no easy story here to tell, nor for the reader to hear, but a whirling of voices, figures, and histories. Chaudhry asks:

How far back in time and space should I go when talking about the hybridization of meaning systems and identities? How do I date the rupturing of my own ethnic identity? Could I just trace that rupturing to when my village-born father became the first person in his family to attend the school set up by the British government, or did it all begin more recently just before I was born when my father received the award for a PhD in the United States? Or did my hybrid state come into being when my paternal great-grandfather, who was born a Sikh, converted to Islam because a voice in the fields told him to go to Makkah? Or was it more significant that my maternal Hindu great-grandfather

chose to migrate to the Punjab from Persia and became a Muslim to avoid going to trial after being accused of murder? What about my great-grandmothers and their stories? Why does not one talk about them? (2000, p. 105).

Such reflections in Chaudhry's work lead to reflexivity that confronts the problematics in her research without a bemoaning of or a "discovery" of her researcher/researched positions/subjectivities. What is compelling in Chaudhry's work is that, for all of its confessional markers, the writing does not collapse into a simplistic storyline, formation of an innocent author, or a familiar reading of postcoloniality. What is helpful from examples like Chaudhry (and Visweswaran) is a baring of the ethical questions central to the doing and writing of qualitative research and practices of reflexivity that allow readers to "speak back" to the text and engage in questioning that is different from the dialogue possible in simple confessional-tale or truth-claim accounts. Through exposure of the impossibilities of doing this work, "I give up looking at the transcripts" (Chaudhry, 2000, p. 108), Chaudhry's text pushes us to think and write through the impossibilities raised in our research.

Similarly, Elizabeth St. Pierre's (1997) essay also works within and against the limits, failures, and *impossibilities* of the language, ideology, and knowledge of postmodern qualitative research asking, "if we wish to engage in this risky poststructural practice of redescribing the world, where do we begin?" (p. 177). Focusing specifically upon the configuration and use of the word "data" in research practices and writing, St. Pierre confronts the issue of how to "think differently" when we must both use and reject the categories/language available to us. By putting data under erasure, St. Pierre identifies what she terms "transgressive data" including "emotional data, dream data, sensual data . . . and *response data*" (p. 177). St. Pierre's foray into these types of "out of category" data came about through her unsatisfactory attempts at writing up her research and offer a challenging use of reflexivity through data that we do not normally discuss in our research reports.

Like Chaudhry, St. Pierre herself is integrally caught up with the subjectivities of the "older, white, southern women who live in my hometown" whom she interviews as part of her ethnographic study (p. 177). St. Pierre describes her subjectivity as a "folded subjectivity," both similar and dissimilar to these women, who, St. Pierre notes, "had taught me how to be a woman, and I heard myself as I listened to them" (p. 178). Yet, when she attempted to write about her methodology and write up her data stories, St. Pierre "encountered all sorts of problems, many of which dealt with issues of language and linearity" (p. 178). Specifically, St. Pierre began to trouble the signifier *data*, noting, "We are very concerned that we have pieces of data, words, to support the knowledge we make. Yet how can language, which regularly falls apart, secure meaning and truth? How can language provide the evidentiary warrant for the production of knowledge in a postmodern world?" (p. 179). For St. Pierre, "the categories, the words, simply did not work; and I knew that, in order to continue writing and producing knowledge, I had to find a different strategy of sense-making" (p. 178).

Thus, working out of the limits and the impossibility of escaping the mother tongue of her theories and the "categories provided by the grid of traditional qualitative methodology – categories like *data*, *method*, *peer debriefing*, and *member check*" (p. 178) and working against a desire to simplify her data stories out of these complexities, St. Pierre turned to "local, strategic subversions of self-evidence" (p.

186). In this way, St. Pierre turns her attention to “data that escaped language” (p. 179) – emotional, dream, sensual, and response data. Her use of reflexivity also yields a discussion of ethics, which “is not abandoned in poststructural critiques, but rather demands a specific reinscription” (p. 185). St. Pierre resituates ethics as the responsibility of researchers and readers, stating: “we might consider why we read and respond in the ways we do. This process is about theorizing our own lives, examining the frames with which we read the world, and moving toward an ongoing validity of response” (p. 186) while acknowledging that as we acknowledge and are reflexive about the shifting boundaries of our subjectivities, we “will find that much else begins to shift as well” (p. 178).

Sofia Villenas (1996, 2000) also works out of and problematizes understandings and desires to position and know the researcher who is insider *and* outsider, and her subjects. Villenas (1996) reflexively forefronts how her research was as much for a Eurocentric, white audience to know/claim her own self as for her subjects. Villenas writes herself as researcher – colonizer – colonized without resorting to a linear telling of a victim/resistance tale. Villenas (1996) defines her space as a researcher as “a fluid space of crossing borders and, as such, a contradictory one of collusion and oppositionality, complicity, and subversion” (p. 729). In Villenas’s 2000 essay, “This ethnography called my back,” the research stories are situated theoretically out of how “Mr. Anthropology meets Ms. Postpostivism who’s going out with Mr. Feminisms but Re-encounters her Ex-otic who is now Critically married to a Xicana” and told through vignettes “performing theories of the flesh” and concludes methodologically with “a Xicana files for divorce from her Ex-otic.” This play of words is more than mere playfulness. These section headings signal Villenas’s concern and attention to how “as women writers of culture, we often struggle against our own complicity in adopting and gazing through Western male eyes – eyes of objectivity, eyes of reason, eyes that are accustomed to taking pictures of the Other bare-breasted woman” (p. 75) while forefronting how this “we” of women anthropologists “are not all the same ‘we’ ” (p. 75). Rather, Villenas notes how “as a Xicana and indigenous woman, I cannot escape my own experiences of marginalization and dislocation . . . at the same time, I cannot escape the privilege afforded to me as a university professor. Yet precisely because we are not the same ‘we’ anthropologists, our interrogations, revelations, and vulnerabilities in a feminist praxis generate intriguing insights and creations” (pp. 75–76). Like Chaudhry, Villenas notes how “as a ‘native’ ethnographer, how I make sense of my mother’s life has everything to do with my own experiences, journeys, spiritualities, and struggles” and in this chapter she “narrate(s) my own experiences as a Xicana, a mother, and an ethnographer of Latino communities, who attempted to write about and represent Latina mothers in text” noting that “like many women of color who reach the pinnacle of the academy, I find that being ‘officially’ sanctioned to do critical ethnography is a bittersweet triumph” (p. 76).

Thus Villenas uses reflexivity to “expose and interrupt the representations of the Other . . . by addressing my own complicity in textually framing the lives of Latina mothers I worked with so they would fit the anthropological tradition of the exotic” (p. 76). She is wary of how she found herself “privileging exotic performances of resistance” (p. 91) and asks, “how do I keep myself grounded in collective struggle, mindful of the politics of representation, and critical of the concealment of power in the construction of the discourse of a crisis of representation” (p. 91)? This is key in Villenas’s reflexive work – everything gets

questioned and problematized in multiple ways including Villenas's self as a researcher, categories of "Latina-ness," the doing of ethnographic research, the reader, etc., but issues of social injustice, in this case involving Latina mothers, remain at the core of her theory, research, writing, and practice. Villenas performs a reflexivity that neither collapses under her questioning into a narcissistic text nor obliterates the impetus for her research, while continually challenging the reader.

Living with a reflexivity of discomfort

The above examples forefront the challenge of continuing to ask how reflexivity can act not as a tool of methodological power but a methodological tool interruptive of practices of gathering data as "truths" into existing "folds of the known" to practices which "interrogate the truthfulness of the tale and provide multiple answers" (Trinh, 1991, p. 12), and to what I suggest are unfamiliar – and likely uncomfortable – tellings. Such uses of reflexivity acknowledge the critiques that Patai (1994) raises without shrugging off reflexivity, while at the same time interrogating reflexivity's complicit relationship with ethnocentric power and knowledge in qualitative research. Indeed, Chaudhry and Villenas's work points out how experimental methods of reflexivity often reproduce ethnography's last grasp of the "other." Yet, an awareness that usages of reflexivity, particularly the four common validated strategies of reflexivity I review, may reinstitute and reproduce exactly the hegemonic structures many of us are working against, does not mean that we need to throw out reflexivity for some other methodological tool. Rather, what I am hoping for is more discussion and a closer look at how we are using and reproducing reflexivity now and a move to work towards critical usages of reflexivity, which I believe may be aided by suspicion of reflexivity which leads us too easily and too closely to the familiar (whether that familiar is a familiar standard or a familiar exotic).

Thus a reflexivity that pushes toward an unfamiliar, towards the uncomfortable, cannot be a simple story of subjects, subjectivity, and transcendence or self-indulgent tellings. A tracing of the problematics of reflexivity calls for a positioning of reflexivity not as clarity, honesty, or humility, but as practices of confounding disruptions – at times even a failure of our language and practices. However, a reflexivity of discomfort is not simply a call for practices of proliferation for proliferation's sake for, as St. Pierre (1997) reminds us, "neither a deliberate obfuscation nor the desire for clarity and accessibility is innocent" (p. 186).

In the same way, writing up our data as a failure is not to be read as a simplistic tale whose storyline concludes with a "success-in-failure" interpretation – a form of "sanctioned ignorance" (Visweswaran, 1994, p. 98). Nor should the opposite of failure be assumed in a "successful" interview. What I am advocating is the necessity of an ongoing critique of all of our research attempts, a recognition that none of our attempts can claim the innocence of success (even in failure) – with the realization that many of us do engage in research where there is real work to be done even in the face of the impossibility of such a task. This is a move to use reflexivity in a way that would continue to challenge the representations we come to while at the same time acknowledging the political need to represent and find meaning.

Uncomfortable reflexivity, then, is not about better methods, or about whether we can represent people better but, as Visweswaran states, “whether we can be accountable to people’s struggles for self-representation and self-determination” (p. 32) – including our own selves. This is not easy or comfortable work and thus should not be situated as such. The qualitative research arena would benefit from more “messy” examples, examples that may not always be successful, examples that do not seek a comfortable, transcendent end-point but leave us in the uncomfortable realities of doing engaged qualitative research.

Notes

1. This tracing specifically examines how reflexivity has been utilized within modernism and then refigured within postmodernism, emphasizing one of the present-day challenges for qualitative researchers: if we want to hold on to the work that reflexivity is supposed to do in modernism in postmodernism, what would it look like? What is at stake in this debate are issues of truth, the work of representation, the representability of the subject, and the construction and meaning of our texts. Put simply, one view sees the research subject as a modernist subject, knowable and containable. Thus, as Patai (1994) captures in her sentiment, we can see what is wrong so enough is enough and let’s get on with our work. Another view works from a postmodern view of the subject. That is, the research subjects (both the researcher and the researched) are subjects who are multiple, complex, and proliferative and thus our research methods, methodologies, and writing strategies should attempt to reflect such complexity. The consequences of containing subjects can be seen in a history of social science research that has often situated subjects as unified and fixed, thereby limiting our theories, policies, and practices by perpetuating Eurocentric and patriarchal ideologies. The challenge remains how to write and do our work knowing the challenges and critiques of feminism, poststructuralism, and race theory. See St. Pierre & Pillow (2000) for further discussion on doing research in postfoundational times.

2. The subject of the Enlightenment was “man” – specifically European man and the ability to reason and engage in reflective thought was situated with this man. Other persons like women, indigenous, and racialized individuals were not considered to possess full subjectivity and thus could be subjected to unequal status legally, economically, and morally and in many cases treated as less than human (encountered, enslaved, and conquered) precisely because they were deemed to be *unenlightened* and incapable of reflective thought.

3. Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon (1998) provides a useful overview of this form of reflection as characterized by Dewey.

4. Macbeth (2001) offers a close, critical reading of Lather & Smithies’s (1997) text as a “carefully crafted exemplar” (p. 44) of textual reflexivity. Macbeth makes similar arguments and critiques of reflexivity to those I advance in this paper, and these would be well read beside this paper to provide a rich account of uses of reflexivity in qualitative research.

5. Often, however, this desire for “honesty” dissolves into an up-front listing of the researcher’s situated identities – a naming and marking of the researcher self (i.e., Caucasian of Scottish descent, working class, heterosexual feminist) with the assumption being that now the reader knows who the author is, where she/he is working out of, and can now read the text understanding the researcher’s identity.

6. Obviously cultural intuition and self-reflexivity may occur together but there is a specific history, a history of racialization and colonization, that is linked to Delgado Bernal’s usage of cultural intuition that I do not want to delimit by linking it with or placing it under a rubric of self-reflexivity

7. I am not suggesting that we can or should keep our personal experiences out of our research, nor do I think this is possible or even desirable. I also know that many of us have been limited in what we can or should research by being told we are “too close” to our research topic. But I do want to question where the necessity to demonstrate we are “close” to our subjects arises, how such “closeness” has become linked with “valid” or good research, and what practices of “closeness” produce, that is, what kind of data stories are told and heard through the use of confessional tales.

8. While I have empathy with and appreciate Ropers-Huilman’s attention to the ethical and theoretical dilemmas in doing qualitative research, I have several concerns with Ropers-Huilman’s use of “witnessing” as a term to explain her ideology and describe her research experiences. Related to this paper’s focus on reflexivity, I particularly want to question what the work of “witnessing” is. Who is witnessing whom and who is the witnessing for? Witnessing, especially given its historical, spiritual, and cultural usages, also signifies the witness as someone benevolent, helpful, and trustworthy – one does not trust everyone to be a witness and the role of witnessing arises from *shared* historical understandings and trust of how one’s witnessing will be used. Indeed, Ropers-Huilman turns to indigenous, American

indian women writers to define and conceptualize witnessing, yet does not question her appropriation of a witnessing that is epistemologically tied to history, spirituality, and culture, for her own use. In this way, I would argue that assigning the researcher the label of “witness” works to write the researcher as an “innocent” observer, masks power relations embedded in the research process, and vastly oversubscribes the researcher relationship. I believe many of us as researchers would like to believe we are “witnesses” and “witnessing” for and with “our” research subjects but I suggest we come closer to the role of an “eye-witness” in our work. Living with this, our own subjected and perhaps minimal roles in our research when for us the research is often so meaningful and our writing so personal, is difficult knowledge to reconcile ourselves to and reflexivity is at times used to ease this pain and tension. What I am interested in is how we can use reflexivity to forefront these tensions without seeking to absolve ourselves.

9. I do not deny that, as Ellingson finds, the confessional text puts the researcher in a vulnerable position but I want to (re)turn attention to what the work is of such telling. Does the confessional tale interrupt hegemonic knowings or proliferate them? I also find that the use of reflexivity in such works is more similar to “reflective” thinking than critical reflexivity.

10. I am suggesting that many self-reflexive tales are written more for the author than for the reader or the subject(s). My critique of this practice is when such self-reflexive tales are written, used, or read as evidence of the researcher’s ability to be truly knowledgeable about the research subject(s).

11. Russely Rogríguez (1998) continues, “the point is clear: autoethnographic writing and writing about one’s own community is marked as interesting but not ‘real’ work. Furthermore, such practices are only afforded those who have already established themselves as ‘legitimate’ non-Native scholars in ‘legitimate’ ethnographies” (p. 33).

12. I am not naively situating the research subject(s) as without power. For a discussion of the power of subjects in research setting see Wax (1971). The statement by a subject of Wax’s 10-year ethnographic work at beginning of this paper points to the ongoing problematic in qualitative research – how do I get the [right] story from these individuals? In this paper, I am focusing upon the role of reflexivity in this process. See Judith Stacey (1991) for further critique and commentary on the impossibilities of feminist ethnography.

13. In providing examples here I do not mean to situate the field as void of many other researchers who equally highlight and trouble the complexity of issues of self, subjectivity, and representation in ethnographic research. See for example Behar (1993); Kondo (1990).

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