Reflexivity

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Reflexivity is practicing critical consciousness of one's location, actions, and power relations during a research process. It involves locating one's self and positionality both epistemologically and socially vis–à–vis research participants and research process. Reflecting upon and assessing how one is positioned can enable more conscientious and ethical engagement, be it with people, institutions, or texts. Reflexivity requires researchers to continually reassess how they themselves influence the research process and people's reactions and responses. Useful insights are gained through this process that can then further enrich and inform the research process. Increasing interest in and application of reflexivity by geographers, particularly feminist geographers, has produced a sizable scholarship on the topic in recent years (Rose 1993; Moss 2002). Reflexivity has become established as an important component of research. Being reflexive can be a transformative process whereby the researcher is not only aware of but accounts for power relations, changing subjectivities, and overall effects over time and space. These issues are increasingly becoming critically important in research methods, especially field methods, in human geography that involves qualitative research. It is also important throughout one's scholarship, which means being critical of not just the research process, but also about one's writing and reading.

Since field-based research is often unpredictable, an approach that is flexible and reflects on the process continually is able to respond to complexities and contingencies. While this may be contrary to fixed research objectives and goals, or institutionally regulated research permissions, many scholars find the need to navigate such constraints and challenges regularly. A reflexive research process enables scholars to assess and adjust thereby ensuring that pursuits are fruitful and meaningful. While they are mindful of their own location in the process, scholars are also able to respond to situations and relations as they arise with greater awareness and conscience. This is different from maintaining predetermined goals and detached methods that are common in positivistic research approaches. Reflexivity is often contrasted with modernist research that claims to be "objective" whereby the power relations between researcher and researched are erased. There is also often problematic extractive knowledge production, and concerns over gaze, objectification, and reductionism are not directly addressed. To be self-reflexive of the research process is to be cognizant of the situatedness of all knowledge and to recognize that knowledge is partial and always produced from vantage points that are shifting and involve power relations.

Situated knowledge aims for locally "objective" knowledge that is recognized to be partial and context-driven; it does not speak to any absolute truth and thus opposes detachment and modernistic notions of objectivity. Situated knowledge comes as a critique of both logical positivism and standpoint theory. Standpoint theory argues that voices of the marginalized, especially women, should be prioritized and thereby privileges epistemic positions (Harding 2004). Situated knowledge emerged out of poststructuralist engagements in feminist

methodology and espouses that no position is permanent and that all knowledge is partial (Haraway 1988). Situated knowledge can thus be produced through the practice of reflexivity, whereby one's location and positionality become part of the knowledge production process and evaluation of research outcomes, as well as being mindful of and accounting for the contingencies and partialities of all knowledge produced. Reflexivity is a research method of situating oneself and analyzing these complexities and challenges as well as the unequal social relations that infuse academic endeavors. Embracing situated knowledge means being critically conscious that power relations can produce "others" in the research process and that researchers are themselves part of the process that produces such differences. Self-reflexivity is thus a mindful way to situate the researcher themselves in this very process, to acknowledge the embodiments and scales involved, and to locate the researcher along a range of issues that can be social, political, economic, cultural, religious, or geopolitical. This acceptance of the location of variously situated subjects and the relational aspects of knowledge production thereby leads to an awakening toward the negation of epistemologies of all-knowing at all times or any absolute truths. Reflexivity thus is a critique of the God-trick (or the view from nowhere) (Haraway 1988) as it grounds the researcher and the research process in bodies, places, spaces, and scales. Embodied subjectivities of the researcher and all those who participate, or not (whether by choice or not), thus become central to the critical analysis of any research process and its outcomes.

There are many interpretations and uses of reflexivity and numerous personal and professional concerns that come with it. Scholars grappling with reflexivity are generally committed to maintaining a critical eye to the pitfalls and challenges while attempting to apply reflexivity

in productive and meaningful ways. Impacts of the researcher on the research situation and shifting identities become part of the accounting process in research where reflexivity enables researchers to respond to and analyze different aspects of fieldwork accordingly. Reflexivity requires not only assessing and accounting for the researcher's multiple locations across a series of intersections (race, class, gender, dis/ability, sexuality, nationality, etc.) in relation to others in the research process, it also raises questions of research ethics. Ethical research places importance on being conscientious, reflexive, and morally tuned. The intrinsic importance of critical thinking and ethical engagement are foundational to reflexivity as well as detailed methodological accounts and careful representation.

Since reflexive researchers attempt to demonstrate that research is about social construction and not purely representational, the process before, during, and after research becomes important. Social construction of experiences and interpretations are thus explicitly accounted for. Trying not to speak "for" others, but enabling collective construction of research data and output is often central in reflexive research. Reflexivity can foster rigorous research and encourage critical engagement with one's methodological choices and outcomes. As such, thorough and rigorous documentation and evaluation of methods and techniques become necessary as well as multiple forms of capturing experiences, narratives, and voices. How people and places are documented and constructed become critical moments of being reflexive about texts and writing. This sheds light on silences and absences as well as any hyper-visibility or overstating of any particular issue at the expense of other issues in the research. By sharing a reflexive research process, the researcher opens it up for reinterpretation and scrutiny by others. Readers are able to judge

and assess methods, content, findings, and the production of knowledge. This public nature of reflexivity can be empowering as well as can open up further conversations and analyses. Validity of data produced or claims made can be gauged against the process through which knowledge was produced.

Being reflexive can also be a political act. This often means a conviction to making a difference in the lives of those involved in the research process rather than simply producing academic outcomes. Such political overtures of reflexivity can be complex and protracted. While being self-conscious does not necessarily rectify problems of representation and power, and the process may or may not result in meaningful research for the peoples and places involved, it has the potential to be so. What becomes important in undertaking reflexive research is to critically account for the research process historically, socially, and spatially. This enables upfront analyses of issues such as racialization, gendering, post/coloniality, geopolitics, and power relations that are intersectional. Being critically mindful of colonial legacies, imperialism and empire, politics of development, controversies of globalization, and other broader cross-scalar and historical issues enables researchers in "other" places to locate themselves on a broader canvas that then enables more comprehensive understanding of situations and contexts. Reflexivity thus should not just be about interpersonal relations but also about a range of cross-cutting and cross-scalar issues that constitute the researcher's subjectivity (Sultana 2007).

Despite reflexivity having become a key aspect of qualitative research processes, concerns have been raised along multiple lines. While an unreflexive research process would not be encouraged or espoused by most human geographers, emerging concerns raise important questions about theorizing and practicing reflexivity. One concern is that it can become a superficial apology for being of the dominant group that usually has authority and power. While acknowledging being privileged through gender, race, class, ability, nationality, or any other axes of difference may signal a reflexive consciousness, a simple acknowledgment does not necessarily address issues of power and privilege (e.g., noting the researcher as white, male, able-bodied, American or British academic − the largest demographic within the discipline of geography − does not necessarily change anything). This is particularly troublesome when the voices, opinions, and realities of the less powerful or "others" are subsumed into the dominant narrative. This can end up reifying differences and reinforcing dominance as it reasserts attention to the researcher.

Refocusing on the privilege of the researcher has thus become a concern in overly subjective and insufficiently analytical narratives. If this actively shifts conversations and relations of power then this emplacing of the researcher may be more productive; however, it can also tend to silence and marginalize others while reinforcing the privilege of the researcher, however conscientious and ethical the desire may be. This dilemma has been a topic of debate for quite some time among feminist and postcolonial scholars (England 1994; Wolf 1996; Bondi 2003; Domosh 2003). Thus, reflexivity has the risk of being apolitical. It can also obfuscate analytical purchase of a research process if it is mired in auto-ethnographical minutiae. This may end up reinforcing the position of dominance of the researcher thereby absolving them from meaningful engagement, or end up reproducing an authoritative voice that actually can silence others. Reflexive acts can be misused to justify a research process or writing thereby negating the actual goal of reflexivity.

Another area of concern has arisen out of the growing number of publications by researchers who reflect upon their research experience in a way that can range from navel-gazing to tortured autobiographies. This self-indulgence can deflect attention to the positionality of the researcher without sufficiently accounting for a reflexive research process or contributing to debates around reflexivity. It has become increasingly common for geographers in recent years to produce such publications, some with greater success in moving scholarship forward than others. Merely recounting one's research experience does not necessarily contribute to debates around reflexivity or demonstrate reflexivity. But the reflexive turn in human geography has resulted in scholars seeking acknowledgment of their research process through production of post facto auto-narratives that often lack self-examination or a transformation of the research process.

Beyond the problematic uptake of reflexivity and concomitant proliferation of publications, what is also of concern is that enforcing reflexive accounts of research may result in surveillance and domination by more powerful scholars, especially senior colleagues over junior colleagues. Unequal power relations outside of the research process can thus impinge on the extent and usefulness of reflexivity for emergent scholars and students as consequences can have deleterious impacts on the trajectory of the scholar. This raises some dilemmas for rising scholars who may be in precarious positions or liminal roles. Thus, reflexivity can be a double-edged methodological and scholarly device in that there is increasing pressure to demonstrate one's reflexivity while at the same time it can have problematic outcomes for the scholar involved. Beyond academics, reflexive research and writing can also pose risks to research participants if sensitive material is inadvertently disclosed or hinted at. The emotional labor involved in reflexive practices can also be a discouragement to those who wish to employ it. Furthermore, the partiality of reflexivity should be acknowledged in that it may not be possible to be fully reflexive. There are thus many ongoing challenges to practicing reflexivity.

However, reflexivity can be very productive of political acts and collaborations and is generally espoused in order to make a difference not only to the research process but beyond it (Rose 1997; Bondi 2002). The simultaneous nature of being reflexive and living in the moment, and adapting and responding to insights generated, can produce useful information beyond the research project and foster relationships that can be generative. Thus, reflexivity does not have to be a self-indulgent or cathartic act, but rather must move beyond methodological tools to improve one's research and the outcomes of the research process toward more meaningful impacts in the long run. For instance, it can encourage instances or events to be reinterpreted and rethought and thus generate new insights on hidden aspects of a situation that may be fruitful to explore or challenge. It can also have the potential to be politically and socially relevant when research data and experience are carefully and consciously analyzed and processed. Action research that engages the researched as researchers is increasingly being pursued in order to address concerns of privilege, voice, representation, and power. Reflexivity can be the basis of engaged activist scholarship and not just a corrective measure in the research process. Radical vulnerability and radical empathy can be cultivated out of reflexive praxis and thereby enable scholars to become scholar-activists that foreground politics, context, and situations. Collaborative endeavors can emerge from reflexive research and writing and new avenues of collectivization, solidarity, and empowerment

can result, for instance, around issues of social justice (e.g., Sangtin Writers and Nagar 2006). Such formations and relationships can only be sustained when all participants engage in reflexivity through the process and thereafter.

Practicing reflexivity can be complex and challenging, and there are limits to the insights gained from it. One of the key challenges involves sustaining reflexive relationships and research processes over time, space, and life cycles. Another is the location of this practice within the academy amid growing pressures to produce large volumes of research output and publications quickly. The pitfalls of the extensive need of continuity of engagement and connection can discourage academics from engaging in such scholarship. Similarly, the commitments of time, energy, and taking risks can also discourage research participants from being involved as they may have other priorities of survival and life. As a result, while reflexivity can generate insights and foster relationships to address inequities not only in the research process but also in the wider world, the logistics of undertaking and sustaining reflexive work that has the potential to be politically and socially relevant may be curtailed by a range of factors. Constraints may be overcome depending on the context and people involved, and offer great potential for transformative politics, but continue to pose challenges that may be difficult to resolve in increasingly neoliberalized academic contexts where rapid publication outputs are often valued over other forms of scholarship and engagement. Despite such challenges, reflexivity is a critically important aspect of research and an important skill in which students and scholars should be better trained so that they can incorporate such practices in their own work. Reflexive research and praxis needs greater engagement and acknowledgment within academia and beyond.

SEE ALSO: Feminist methodologies; Fieldwork in human geography; Positionality; Power; Subjectivity

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