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Doing Reflexivity in Psychological Research – What’s the Point? What’s the practice?

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Keywords:	Reflexivity, Qualitative Research, Psychology, Methodology, Critical Thinking and Evaluation
Abstract:	<p>Reflexivity is a fundamental expectation of qualitative work in psychology (and the wider social sciences) but what it looks like and how we do it, is frequently ambiguous and implicit. This makes doing reflexivity a challenging endeavour, particularly for those new to using qualitative methodologies. This paper explores reflexivity as a form of critical thinking and evaluation. It does so by demarcating reflexive activity in relation to other forms of critical thinking used in psychology. Using notions of perspectival location, we shed some practical light on the objectives and processes of reflexivity, from its significance in the identification of a research topic, through designing, conducting, and writing up the research report. The overarching question, “what is the point of reflexivity?”, is answered through an interrogation of common assumptions around producing ‘good’ research in psychology as well as through a series of key questions illuminating different steps in the research process. We conclude that reflexivity requires the unpacking of partial, positioned and affective perspectives we bring to the research. This process facilitates our questioning and moves us beyond our own taken-for-granted assumptions and sense-making of the social world.</p>

Doing Reflexivity in Psychological Research – What’s the Point?

Introduction

Over the last two decades, the use of qualitative methodologies has become increasingly mainstream in psychology. Nevertheless, it remains the case that the scientific method predominates in psychological research. Moreover, researchers tend to come to qualitative methodologies after disciplinary training in quantitative scientific methods. This history is important to answering the question posed in the title of this paper because it is this context which can make the task of engaging with reflexivity a challenging endeavour for researchers, particularly those new to using qualitative methodologies. This is often because an understanding of the scientific approach permeates early attempts by researchers to grapple with qualitative approaches. This produces confusion because there are subtle, as well as not so subtle, nuances between these approaches that require a shift in thinking.

This shift in thinking has brought with it the expectation that reflexivity should appear in final reports and a body of work has attempted to demarcate the concept. However, we would argue that in practice, the processes of doing reflexivity – how we do it, and how we know we are doing it purposefully, productively, and meaningfully - are frequently ambiguous and implicit. This paper seeks to map questions around reflexivity in order to shed some practical light on the objectives and processes of reflexivity in qualitative psychological research. Using examples from psychological, feminist and transdisciplinary research, we trace a path around the significance of reflexivity in the identification and selection of a research topic and through designing, conducting, and writing up the research report. In doing so, we suggest that the point of reflexivity is to scaffold critical thinking in order to make visible some of the connections between research questions and research conclusions, and open the way to critically different interpretations.

1. Why do we need to be reflexive?

Reflexivity is a form of critical thinking which aims to articulate the contexts that shape the processes of doing research and subsequently the knowledge produced. The point of it is to map the implications, possibilities and limitations afforded by approaching the study of a topic in a particular way (Finlay, 2002; Finlay and Gough, 2003; Tuval-Mashiach, 2016). Of course, reflecting, questioning and evaluation are common practices across the enterprise of doing psychological research (or indeed any research). However, what has been dubbed 'the reflexive turn' in the 1960s/70s (Shaw, 2010; Parker, 2015) opened up for critical scrutiny the question of exactly what was being reflected on and how. This question demanded an interrogation of scientific methods because these methods were and still are predominant in psychology.

The reflexive turn saw numerous critiques of the conceptualisation that subjectivity could be controlled through 'objectivity' held to be the hallmark of good scientific methodological procedure. These debates highlighted the impossibility of leaving subjectivity at the laboratory door in an aim to fulfil the requirement of neutral detachment. Gilbert and Mulkay's (1984) work on how scientists talk about doing research neatly illustrates tensions produced by objectivity/subjectivity. They identified two distinct patterns of talking or repertoires about doing research that scientists drew on to discuss this process. The first described research practice as a set of operations that are independent of any one researcher. What was implied is that objective knowledge can be produced through the application of neutral procedures. In contrast, scientists also drew on a second repertoire to describe the practice of doing research as a craft – developed through speculative insights, personal as well as theoretical commitments and the social network in which individual scientists were a part. These two distinct repertoires can be seen to reflect specifications in the scientific method that a clear boundary is set between objectivity and subjectivity. However, they also point to the difficulties of controlling for subjectivity in the research process, and indeed the

counterproductivity of doing so as we explore here. The second repertoire suggests research as an endeavour shot through with subjectivity (see also Parker, 2015).

The objectivity requirement is rooted within positivist epistemology of the scientific method. Positivism suggests that the aim of scientific enquiry is to observe and measure phenomenon in order to access an objective truth about it. Contemporary approaches to scientific psychological research acknowledge the difficulties in controlling subjectivity. As such, objectivity is recognised as an ideal goal that can only be realised imperfectly in practice (Ponterotto, 2002; 2005). Reflection, from this perspective, focuses on subjectivity as a source of bias that may interrupt the focus on the relationship between variables under study. This form of reflection, in which the researcher asks themselves “what is the research process and how am I influencing it?”, focuses on verification and accuracy; the point of reflection is to ensure as far as possible that the research taps into how things ‘really’ are (Woolgar, 1988).

Reflection circumscribed to the relationship between variables does not translate to qualitative research because this is neither the aim nor focus of such work. Instead, there is a broad concern with the exploration of meaning which presupposes that the phenomenon under study is not predefined in advance for the purposes of measurement and comparison. Reflexivity used in qualitative and mixed methods research often brings into focus the broader processes of knowledge production, including for example, wider social, political and historical contexts in which the research is conducted (Doucet and Mauthner, 2006). That said, what is important to note is that reflexivity in some form is done in all research whether it uses the scientific method or otherwise. Good experimental design must be highly reflective in that the researcher is seeking out any possible impact of the self in order to control for it. Good qualitative design seeks to understand the self in research for a different set of reasons; to unpack how subjectivity becomes relevant to producing certain knowledge. Reflection and reflexivity have been conceptualised as a continuum (see for example, Woolgar, 1988; Shaw, 2010) which avoids a straightforward split between

1
2
3 reflection/reflexivity, quantitative/qualitative, science/non-science. This is important because the
4
5 epistemological approach taken in research will shape the form of reflexivity used.¹
6
7

8 The idea that reflexivity permeates all research is a point that is not often well-articulated in
9
10 psychology's disciplinary training. Indeed, undergraduate degrees invest much time in teaching the
11
12 scientific method and associated evaluative reflection and much less time to qualitative
13
14 methodologies. Often very little training is devoted to reflexivity. Why are things set up this way?
15
16 Given that the scientific method is still the most used research procedure in psychology, it is not
17
18 surprising that so much time is spent teaching it. Qualitative research can be seen as a contrast case
19
20 (Taylor and McAvoy, 2015). However, this uneven split around methodological training promotes an
21
22 assumption that there is a straightforward division between scientific and qualitative research. This
23
24 is frequently translated as meaning that the former is more complex and important and the latter is
25
26 the subordinate 'other' (see Lazard, 2009, for review). It is not surprising that researchers may feel
27
28 both resistant to doing reflexivity when undertaking qualitative research and ill-equipped to deal
29
30 with it when it becomes presented as a requirement. This is neatly expressed by Braun and Clarke in
31
32 an interview with Jankowski (2017) who "wonder if people really understand what reflexivity is, if
33
34 they are bracketing it off from the rest of the text, which is written in the third person and the
35
36 objective and dispassionate voice of mainstream psychology" (p. 46).
37
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39

40
41 The point of reflexivity is to make visible specific personal, social, theoretical and/or political
42
43 influences that shape the research so that claims made and conclusions drawn can be understood
44
45 and evaluated in context. Because of this, reflexivity is central to establishing rigour in qualitative
46
47 and mixed method work (see, for example Henwood and Pigeon, 1992; Tuval-Mashiach, 2016).
48
49

50 **How can we make sense of reflexivity in psychology?**

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53 The process of stepping back from ambitions of objectivity and towards recognising subjectivity is
54
55 complicated by the idea that sound knowledge only emerges from perspectival distance between
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57 the researcher and the topic s/he is studying, unbiased from human emotion or attachments. Key
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questions that arise from this are how do you produce credible knowledge when you cannot control for subjectivity? How do you work with subjectivity? These questions have resulted in wide-ranging transdisciplinary scholarship (e.g. Wilkinson, 1988; England, 1994; Doucet and Mauthner, 2006; Faria and Mollet, 2016; Zienkowski, 2017). We have found some of these debates to be instructive when making sense of reflexivity in psychological work.

As discussed earlier, the reflexive turn made salient the difficulties of controlling for subjectivity and critiqued the characterisation of subjectivity as a barrier to sound knowledge. This problematisation occurred both in and outside of the discipline of psychology (for example, the sociology of science, feminist theory, critical race theory, disability studies to name but a few). Such work drew attention to how the prescriptions of *doing* science become interwoven with common assumptions about the way the world is, which typically inscribed the perspective of those working in academic fields, that is predominantly white and middle class. By way of illustration, feminist standpoint theorist Harding (1986) argued that science rests on a set of socially, politically and historically produced dualisms such as, objectivity/subjectivity, rationality/irrationality that links men to the former and women to the latter in each dichotomised pairing (see also Locke, 2011). Dualisms become shot through with power because of the tendency to privilege one half of the dichotomy over the other; objectivity, rationality, science and masculinity become privileged or seen as more worthy than, subjectivity, irrationality, non-science (qualitative methodologies) and femininity by virtue of their position in the pairing. These relations of power are important because, as Harding (1986) points out “these beliefs (from science) structure the policies and practices of social institutions including science [itself]” (p. 136). Critiques such as this created a legitimate basis for calls to work with subjectivity rather than against it (Parker, 2015).

In a similar vein, ‘the affective turn’ took to task the characterisation of affect, emotion and feeling as irrational and its treatment as secondary to reason and rationality (Wetherell, 2014). The predominance of the binary of reason/emotion (and its conflation with rationality/irrationality

respectively (Locke, 2011) coupled with several historical trajectories in the discipline of psychology saw feelings, affect and emotions subject to scholarly neglect. The affective turn in the social sciences sought to move beyond such binaries to consider the ways in which embodied unconscious intensities of feeling or affect become “enrolled in culturally-normative patterns of intention, performance, relationality and ethics” as emotion (Cromby, 2012). As Hoggert and Thompson (2012) note, in psychology in particular, the prioritisation of the individual has produced feelings as the ‘inner’ property of persons which seems at odds with the idea that feeling/emotion may be the property of groups or embedded in social processes. The affective turn has highlighted that although understood as individually experienced, feelings and emotion become embodied by and in social cultures. Organised feelings, for instance of anger or fear, contribute to the mobilisation of political action. In short, affect, feeling and emotion becomes understood as more than irrational peculiarity of the individual. The reflexive and then the affective turns in psychology have provided a legitimate grounding on which to engage with subjectivity in the research process.

Our starting point is perspectival location. The notion of objectivity is underpinned by the principle of neutrality and distance and subjectivity by the principle of inescapable situated embeddedness. A reflexive stance to research recognises that perspectival distance is not, in any straightforward sense, possible. Reflexive consideration of our role in our research, the investments we have in it and the relationships we have with our participants, texts, or the research field means that we become the objects of our own gaze. There is no total detachment since ‘I’ is both the subject and object, viewed and viewer, knower and known. The experience of distance produced by the position of viewer and viewed becomes a matter of perspective. We would argue that distance/closeness can be understood as a relational matrix, shaped temporally and spatially, which opens up different ways of ‘seeing’ or more appropriately understanding. Distance then is no longer necessarily privileged in processes of knowledge production because distance, alongside other points in the matrix, are always already “partial, provisional and perspectival” (Mauthner and Doucet, 2007, p. 416).

The matrix of distance/closeness can be understood as interwoven with affect, feeling and emotion. As the affective turn has underscored, rather than being a barrier to understanding, intensities of different feeling may provide a basis for insight on the research process, throwing open, for example, layers of context (those operating at as well as somewhere in between ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ levels) and processes that become relevant to understanding knowledge production in a given instance.

The value of ‘closeness’ is well illustrated by traditions focused to creating space for theorisation of marginal groups as something ‘other’ then problematic, unworthy of study or pathologised (e.g. Weisstein, 1993a; 1993b). Such work has sought to bring into view perspectives marginal to mainstream thought. For example, a number of scholars have documented women’s unequal treatment in the history of psychological study (Fox Lee, Rutherford and Pettit, 2016; Rutherford, 2015). This includes the underrepresentation of women in participant samples in early psychology which meant that psychology not only failed to speak to women’s experiences but also set male experiences as the norm against which women were judged (e.g. Crawford and Maracek, 1989; Tavris, 1993). These claims were interrogated often by those who were in some way close enough to identify as problematic these issues with women’s treatment. This tended to be, although was not exclusively, women psychologists (see Capdevila and Lazard, 2015 for further discussion). Thus, being close to a topic can be productive rather than a hindrance to ‘good’ research.

What do I need to consider when thinking about how to do reflexivity?

Feminist critiques of women’s treatment in (and outside) of psychology have often been advanced by women scholars who were in a position to ‘see’ the limits of particular theory. Such critiques opened up questions that are directly relevant to reflexivity; Who should study whom? What can we know about our participants, our topic area? Do marginalised groups hold a particular claim to knowing? How does this translate to research practice? Should or could we restrict our research to people like us? (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002).

Threaded through the substantial debates focussed on *what* or even *how* we can 'know' is a recognition of the dangers of the presumption of sameness which may serve to mask power differentials between members of a so-called homogenous groups. As a case in point, early feminist scholarship presumed the category of woman as an homogeneity, a view which was subsequently criticised on the basis that this work was carried out by predominantly white middle class women and as such overlooked 'other' women whose experience of discrimination overlapped and intersected with a range of trajectories of oppression based on, for example, (lower) social class, race, sexualities and so on (see, for example, work on intersectionality, Crenshaw, 1993). What this points to is that simplistic notions of sameness/difference does not necessarily move us forward for understanding the complexities of how power differentials play out in knowledge production. This can be seen in a reflexive account by McAvoy (2009) where she notes similarities between her own life and her participants in study of women in mid-life accounts of success and failure. However, she argues that:

I have a different agenda to the women who ... took part in this study. Inevitably I appropriate their words to my service. Therefore I am not precisely 'one of them': my multiple positions and intersubjectivities flow differently throughout the project. I am relationally distributed, being both a subject inside my subject; and simultaneously outside of my subjects" (pp. 11-12).

There are no simple solutions to these issues, however, reflexivity provides a means to engage with them by setting up in the process of study a requirement for a nuanced understanding of the limits of what researchers can see and understand from their partial and positioned perspective. Sameness and difference becomes an interpretative lens through which to explore.

Considerations of the researcher's partial and positioned perspective is central to personal reflexivity. This is a common form of reflexive thinking in psychology, which refers to the consideration of ways in which our identities and positions impact the research process (see, for

example, Wilkinson, 1988, for a discussion of strands of reflexivity) What constitutes the personal sphere is vast, Berger (2014), for example, suggests that “relevant researcher’s positioning include personal characteristics, such as gender, race, affiliation, age, sexual orientation, immigration status, personal experiences, linguistic tradition, beliefs, biases, preferences, theoretical, political and ideological stances, and emotional responses to participant” (p 2). This is not an exhaustive list but giving thought to what is both present and absent from such lists can be useful in terms of developing awareness of the relevance of certain identities over others in specific research projects or at specific moments in those projects.

Whilst personal reflexivity may appear to be a relatively straightforward process (in that it *might* be presumed that people ‘know’ themselves), we would argue that it is perhaps the easiest to fall short of in terms of developing a reflexive account which is linked sufficiently to the process of research. This can often take the form of listing personal characteristics (e.g. I am a woman, I am working class, and so on) and/or mimics the process of identifying extraneous variables in experimental research. It falls short of what is required in much qualitative work because it carries a residue of scientific objective processes which, as previously argued, do not translate into qualitative study (see also Hosking and Pluut, 2010). It can also take the form of a description of a life experience and/or some aspect of self without sufficiently articulating its impact on the research. For example, saying that 20 years teaching experience brought one to the topic of learning does not create specific links to the process of *doing* a specific research project (Doucet and Mauthner, 2006)

An epistemological focus helps to ground personal reflections in specific research studies. Epistemological reflexivity moves beyond the personal to concerns with the nature, scope and limitations of knowledge. All researchers take up an epistemological stance in their research studies through the theories they engage (or don’t engage) with and the methodologies they use to design their studies. As Willig (2013) notes, epistemological reflexivity refers to consideration of how the values and assumptions that are based in the researchers methodological and theoretical

commitments shape the knowledge produced in research. It is also possible to under-develop a reflexive account when using epistemological reflexivity. However, it is arguably harder to do so because research projects should already be framed by epistemology and methodology. There is an explicit requirement in qualitative reporting to discuss these frames in the method section which means that bare bones of the process are established. Linking the personal to epistemological positions can further help to develop insights between the self and the research study.

Regardless of the kind of reflexivity used, the process can become a Sisyphean task. A link between one aspect of self and the research process may become further linked to other features of one's personal and/or professional histories – potentially to infinite regress. Reflection on reflection risks one getting lost in the reflexive process and this may give way to excessive self-analysis (Finlay, 2002) and accusations of narcissism (Hosking and Pluut, 2010). Importantly, it risks producing research which fails to answer its own research question. A reflexive journey may well take one to particular life experiences but a detailed unpacking of this may not offer any more in terms of insight into the processes of knowledge production used to answer the question posed. Reflexivity must be deployed in the service of the research question, not instead of it.

What does doing reflexivity look like?

The reflexive process is predicated on the broad questions of “what is the research process and how am I influencing it?” The process itself might be seen as a form of Socratic questioning. This is a method of illumination, broadly characterised by a persistent questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions through conversational processes or dialogue. It has been used in psychotherapy and to teach critical inquiry for the purposes of producing self-knowledge (Carey and Mullan, 2004; Piro and Anderson, 2015). In research, it takes the form of internal dialogue as well as conversations with participants, colleagues and others, including those who may take different perspectives to that which frame the research. The latter is useful for opening up complexity and facilitating evaluation. A degree of caution should be exercised with Socratic questioning because it is rooted in

presumptions of ‘truth’ not dissimilar to the processes of doing objective science, already criticised as a barrier for working with subjectivity (Schultz, 2012; Boghossian, 2006). That said, the notion of persistence in and dialogue around scrutinising our assumptions, is nevertheless important to understanding how reflexivity can be done. This is because it highlights the need to revisit answers in order to unpack the limits of our reflections. The purpose of this is not to reveal a truth as such but to make visible complexities that shape doing research. Whilst there is no simple recipe for doing this, we hope to illustrate the process of doing reflexivity in relation to different phases of research. While the following questions or indeed the particular aspects of the research that we highlight below are by no means exhaustive, we aim to produce some insight into how reflexivity works in practice.

a. Why research that topic? Why ask those particular research questions? Why ascribe to that particular theoretical/epistemological position?

A common rule of thumb for answering such questions is through the rationale for a project in the introduction of a report in which the researcher explains a gap identified in existing literature. However, this on its own is not reflexivity. The reflexive process starts from a different position to this in the sense that it asks for an explicit consideration of why we research a particular topic and not another? Out of all possible gaps in the literature and all the possible research questions you could have asked, why those ones?

These sorts of questions underpin Shields’ (2016) reflexive consideration of a now classic paper she wrote early in her career in 1975. Whilst Shields does not explicitly label the forms of reflexivity used in her work, we would argue that her account combined personal (her discussions with her graduate school roommate) and epistemological (her explicit engagement with feminist theory) as well as disciplinary reflexivity (how certain topics or methods become seen as important or unimportant in academic disciplines at different times and places – see for example Wilkinson, 1988; Magnusson & Marecek, 2012).

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3 In her 1975 paper, Shields examined the history of sex difference research in psychology. At that
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5 time, she noticed that scholars in the 19th century (who were mostly white men at this time) often
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7 studied and theorised women as deficient in comparison to men. As she read this history, she also
8
9 noticed that scholars also made claims of white superiority. However, while she acknowledged that
10
11 problematic claims about race were also made, she did not analyse this in depth. Instead her focus
12
13 remained on the treatment of women in sex difference research. In her 2016 reflection, she noted
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15 that her focus on women was shaped by the fact that her 1975 published paper was developed from
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17 a term paper she had written for a women's studies course. The literature she read for this paper
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19 also structured her focus. This is because such literature rendered racial bias implicit. Race was held
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21 constant by comparing white women samples to white male samples in order to assess differences
22
23 between the two. Race and gender were seen as independent categories and so how gender and
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25 raced power dynamics came together to render, for example, black women as doubly subordinated
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27 (based on racism and sexism) was a theoretically underdeveloped area of explanation at this point in
28
29 psychology's history.
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34 In revisiting her focus on gender in her 1975 paper throughout her career, she was later able to "see
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36 that my [Shields'] critique of 19th century nature-based explanations of gender difference was
37
38 constrained by the fact that I was looking largely at a single intersection, that of privileged white
39
40 male scientists and the women in the white privileged world that these men inhabited" (Shields,
41
42 2016: 355). This later reflexive activity served as the bedrock for refocusing her original analysis to
43
44 explore how gender and race intersect to produce certain raced/gendered power relationships. For
45
46 example, she notes that white women and men of other races were often deemed subordinate to
47
48 white men but women were generally seen as slightly more subordinate to men of other races. In
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50 the race/gender hierarchy that was implicitly set up across early 'difference' research, it was women
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52 of other races who were set at the bottom. They were deemed subordinate to men as well as to
53
54 white women.
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Shields’ reflexivity illustrates well the connection between her academic background (as a scholar in the area of women’s studies/feminism), the literature focused on (white male scientists’ claims about sex differences) and the subsequent shape that her research questions and arguments took. Her reflexive journey generated new insights which allowed her to take her analysis in another direction. Of course, not all reflexive endeavours are informed by several years of work but this does not preclude one’s ability to establish the research in time and place or to generate insights.

b. How do our choices (and what we assume) about the methods we use shape knowledge production? How does the relationship between researcher and researched contribute to this process? How does this impact our analytic interpretations?

Methods are often conceptualised as a toolkit in which the researcher chooses the right one for the job. Although this can be useful for establishing a coherent thread between the research question and methods, it may also distract from the ways in which methods become deployed in specific ways depending on theoretical, epistemological and political positions which are shaping the research. For example, Roper, Capdevila, Lazard and Robert (2015), outline how their use of Q methodology is embedded in and meets specific aims of feminist political agendas. An explicit grounding of methods in theory and politics works not only to communicate the position of research but also to create space for working with the possibilities and constraints of using methods in the service of particular principles.

Similarly, how methods become interwoven with broader theoretical issues and power dynamics is described by Del Busso (2007) who used interviews to explore young women’s embodied experiences. Her reflexive journey flagged how her participants, who positioned themselves as ‘tomboys’, problematized Del Busso’s own heterosexualised feminine embodiment. Reflexive engagement, particularly around her aim to use interviews to create an empowering experience for her participants, opened up particular directions of reading the research encounter which subsequently impacted analysis of data. Del Busso reflected that this brought her to:

“the need to consider issues of power between women themselves, as well as between women and men in the context of heteronormativity. The majority of the women’s interview accounts of their embodied experiences in everyday life were explicitly related to their experiences of interacting with men. The researcher’s analysis of the interviews as embodied interactions, nevertheless, pointed to power relations between women as an important dynamic through which women experience their embodied selves, and this was subsequently considered in the analysis of the raw data”(p. 313).

Del Busso’s reflexivity makes explicit how particular experiences during the research process highlight assumptions made about participants, topics and methods (see also Medico and Santiago 2014; Goldstein, 2016). It also demonstrates how reflexivity can be used to generate insights which subsequently shape interpretations made and knowledge produced.

c. How do researchers position / identify themselves in their research?

The requirement for reflexivity during the process of doing and writing up research introduces some level of public disclosure which can be experienced by researchers as discomfiting. This requirement produces tensions around what we *should or need to* disclose about ourselves in research and how those decisions impact what we can say about the research process. Disclosure, we would argue, needs to be managed in relation to ethical treatment of ourselves as researchers (McAvoy, 2009). The question of what to disclose is, in our opinion, well-answered when grounded in the epistemological reflexivity described above. As argued earlier, an epistemological focus keeps the processes of reflexivity rooted in the processes of research and, as such, limits the tendency for reflexivity to become a confessional exercise. It must be managed in line with one’s own criteria for disclosure to a wider audience.

There are many examples in the literature of disclosures of researchers’ private lives for the purposes of understanding research issues in context. For example McMahon, Frankin and McGannon (2016) explored two of the authors’ experiences of fat oppression in aquatic athletics. Their piece uses collaborative auto ethnography to explore a range of fat oppressive practices two of

the authors’ experienced and the impact these practices had on selves which included body management through laxative abuse. The revealing of these experiences, we’ve interpreted, as intimately tied with their political decision to engage the audience with lived issues because “once the audience (readers) have engaged with others’ lived experiences, they cannot claim that they have not heard it” (p. 51). These political decisions seem to be interwoven with methodological ones in that the choice of using collaborative auto ethnography² was in part to give voice to these lived experiences and empower the authors as they make visible how body classifications in sport work to problematize particular kinds of feminine body. While specific projects that make certain political, methodological or theoretical points through the use of personal disclosure are valuable, not every reflexive journey needs to be entirely revealing of, what may be considered, one’s private life. In the following sections we describe two strategies – limited and withheld disclosure – that can be used to negotiate this tension.

Limited Disclosure

Dilemmas around how much to disclose may be tied to notions that we must faithfully lay ourselves open in order to say something meaningful about the research process. However, there are a number of ways particular reflexive stories can be told to make the point that needs to be made. For example, particular experiences and perspectives are shaped by broader contexts and unpacking those contexts rather than a specific private occurrence might fruitfully communicate social, historical and political issues brought to bear on the research. For example, Lazard (2009) in the write up of her analysis of sexual harassment makes brief reference to witnessing everyday acts of unwanted sexual attention. This reflexive piece does not detail specific instances but rather uses this reference to locate these events in a complex point in history where there appeared to be a public preoccupation with the issue of sexual harassment and the tensions this produced around questions of what constitutes sexually harassing behaviour. This limited disclosure allowed the reflexive piece to be grounded in specific micro contexts in which the researcher was located and to tie the

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3 relevance of these contexts to subsequent development of research questions and theoretical
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5 commitments. Whilst the details of these events are undoubtedly important, their absence from the
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7 account did not compromise speaking reflexively to research process.
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10 McAvoy (2009), in her use of limited disclosure, makes the distinction between “reflexivity as a
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12 profitable interrogatory tool to be used throughout the research process; and reflexive positioning
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14 as a versioned, public, autobiographical, invested, account” (p. 10). The latter, McAvoy questions in
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16 relation to the ethics of revealing oneself publically. McAvoy managed this in her study of mid-life
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18 women’s accounts of success or failure by making “reference to my own connected positions at
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20 different points in my analysis – but ...with a light touch” (p. 13). This allowed connections between
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22 self and the research process to be visible and for McAvoy to communicate the reflexive work done
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24 in the study without compromising her own privacy.
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27 28 *Withheld disclosure* 29

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31 What researchers choose to reveal or hide from view inevitably shapes the ways in which research
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33 processes play out with respect to how data is collected, what is said or not said during data
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35 collection and what is attended to during analysis. Rowe (2014) reflexively explored these issues in
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37 her explication of her presence as an ethnographic researcher undertaking participant observation in
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39 a women’s prison. In Rowe’s work, one salient issue was whether or not to disclose her position as a
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41 gay woman during her fieldwork. She notes that while her sexuality in other projects might well be
42
43 irrelevant, given the take up of LGBTQ identity positions by both prisoners and prison staff, here it
44
45 was relevant. The prominence of LGBTQ presence introduced a set of dilemmas around whether she
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47 should disclose her own sexuality during her fieldwork. These dilemmas included whether disclosure
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49 would impact her mobility in the institution in which she was conducting her research and whether
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51 LGBTQ stigma would present a barrier to doing fieldwork in some prison contexts.
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Rowe discusses the disclosure dilemmas she faced in her study by reflexively unpacking the reasons for her continual deferment of making a decision as to whether she should out herself. For example, Rowe points out that by not disclosing, she obtained data she may not have been given access to as an explicitly out gay researcher: “confidences from straight identified women about their shock and unease when they first came across lesbian activity among prison inmates; discussions about how the prison should manage prisoners’ intimate relationships.” (p. 413). The reflexive management of these issues allows for an exploration of what studies can or cannot tell us about the topic and why that might be. In the case of Rowe’s work, the dilemmas she explored also spoke to ways of “accessing, understanding, and organizing glimpses into the prison world, its powerful logics, practices, and emotional pressures “(p. 414).

Whilst there are no easy answers to these dilemmas of what to disclose and when, we would argue that practices around limited disclosure can be useful for deciding what connections between self and the research are useful for understanding the processes of producing knowledge. So, while Rowe did not disclose during her fieldwork, she chose to do so in her written work.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to make sense of reflexivity in psychological research by making explicit that reflexive activity is central to the research process. The researcher as a self in this process allows for interconnections between the processes of planning, methodological implementation and conclusion building with micro and macro contexts cross a number of related spheres (personal, political, social, historical and so on). Rather than a peripheral activity, reflexivity can be considered an integral to the generating insight about topics and the questions we choose to ask about them and as such becomes central to the exercise of building knowledge.

Developing insights in relation to research processes, often requires the bringing together of an epistemological focus with other forms of reflexivity, particularly personal forms. An epistemological

thread to reflexive thought, we have argued, guides and grounds reflexive questioning to the research process. This helps to circumvent reflexive activities that foreground the self to the detriment of unpacking the research process and/or risk falling into common traps that do not move us forward in terms of generating insight into the processes of knowledge building.

We have emphasised that reflexivity is about unpacking the partial and positioned perspectives we bring to research which often makes it difficult to see alternative interpretations of our work.

Working with these complexities require a persistence in reflexive questioning and dialogue with our participants, our colleagues and others who may see the world differently. This facilitates our questioning and move us beyond our own taken-for-granted assumptions and sense-making of the social world both professionally and personally and leads us towards interrogative lines of enquiry.

¹. Understanding nuances across methodological approaches requires familiarisation with the epistemological/theoretical approach used. For example, the analytic process of bracketing (the process of setting aside one's own assumptions) in phenomenological research arguably falls nearer the objectivist end of the continuum of reflexivity despite this methodology's location as a qualitative approach. However, the process of bracketing does not presuppose that other forms of reflexivity cannot be taken up in a phenomenological project. Similarly, the ways in which post positivism has been taken up by feminist empiricists in psychology does not preclude forms of reflexivity that are further away from the objectivist end of the continuum (see, for example, Eagly, 2016).

². Collaborative auto ethnography refers to a process in which two or more auto ethnographers work collaboratively to explore interconnections between the personal, social and cultural in and through stories of lived experiences.

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Doing Reflexivity in Psychological Research – What’s the Point? What’s the practice?

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Abstract

Reflexivity is a fundamental expectation of qualitative work in psychology (and the wider social sciences) but what it looks like and how we do it, is frequently ambiguous and implicit. This makes doing reflexivity a challenging endeavour, particularly for those new to using qualitative methodologies. This paper explores reflexivity as a form of critical thinking and evaluation. It does so by demarcating reflexive activity in relation to other forms of critical thinking used in psychology. Using notions of perspectival location, we shed some practical light on the objectives and processes of reflexivity, from its significance in the identification of a research topic, through designing, conducting, and writing up the research report. The overarching question, “what is the point of reflexivity?”, is answered through an interrogation of common assumptions around producing ‘good’ research in psychology as well as through a series of key questions illuminating different steps in the research process. We conclude that reflexivity requires the unpacking of partial, positioned and affective perspectives we bring to the research. This process facilitates our questioning and moves us beyond our own taken-for-granted assumptions and sense-making of the social world.

Keywords

Reflexivity, qualitative research, psychology, methodology, perspectival location, critical thinking, Socratic method

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For Peer Review Only

Doing Reflexivity in Psychological Research – What’s the Point? What’s the Practice?

Introduction

Over the last two decades, the use of qualitative methodologies has become increasingly mainstream in psychology. This is reflected in, for example, the establishment of a now well-recognised sections dedicated to qualitative methods in the discipline’s UK and US governing bodies, for example, the Qualitative Methods in Psychology Section of –the British Psychological Society (BPS). In addition, and Division 5 of the American Psychological Association (APA). Moreover, and it is a core curriculum requirement of British Psychological Society accredited qualifications. Coupled with the mainstreaming of qualitative methodologies is the increased expectation that researchers engage with reflexive processes because reflexivity is central to doing qualitative work.

Nevertheless, it remains the case that quantitative methodologies more traditionally associated with the ‘scientific method’- a term we will unpack shortly - predominates in psychological research (Clarke and Braun, 2013). Moreover, researchers in psychology tend to come to qualitative methodologies after disciplinary training in quantitative scientific methods (Braun and Clarke, 2013). This history is important to answering the questions posed in the title of this paper because it is this context which can make the task of engaging with reflexivity a challenging endeavour for researchers, particularly those new to using qualitative methodologies. This is often because an understanding of the scientific approach, a positivist hypothetico-deductive process of falsification, permeates early attempts by researchers to grapple with qualitative approaches. This produces confusion because there are subtle, as well as not so subtle, differences/nuances between these approaches that require a shift in thinking.

This shift in thinking has brought with it the expectation that reflexivity should appear in final reports and a body of work has attempted to demarcate the concept. However, we would argue that in practice, the processes of doing reflexivity – how we do it, and how we know we are doing it purposefully, productively, and meaningfully - are frequently ambiguous and implicit. This paper seeks to map questions around reflexivity in order to shed some practical light on the objectives and processes of reflexivity in qualitative psychological research. This includes consideration of broad reflexive processes that work across the wide array of qualitative methodologies, both those more established and newly developing methodological innovations. This paper seeks to map questions around reflexivity in order to shed some practical light on the objectives and processes of reflexivity in qualitative psychological research with its wide array of methods, both those more established and those newly developing across the turns to language, the visual and the affective. Using examples from psychological, feminist and transdisciplinary research, we trace a path around the significance of reflexivity in the identification and selection of a research topic and through designing, conducting, and writing up the research report. In doing so, we suggest that the point of reflexivity is to scaffold critical thinking in order to make visible some of the

connections between research questions and research conclusions, and open the way to critically different interpretations.

1. Why do we need to be reflexive?

Reflexivity is a form of critical thinking which aims to articulate the contexts that shape the processes of doing research and subsequently the knowledge produced. The point of it is to map the implications, possibilities and limitations afforded by approaching the study of a topic in a particular way (Finlay, 2002; Finlay and Gough, 2003; Tuval-Mashiach, 2016). Of course, reflecting, questioning and evaluation are common practices across the enterprise of doing psychological research (or indeed any research). However, what has been dubbed ‘the reflexive turn’ in the 1960s/70s (Shaw, 2010; Parker, 2015) opened up for critical scrutiny the question of exactly what was being reflected on and how. This question demanded an interrogation of scientific methods because these methods were and still are predominant in psychology.

The reflexive turn saw numerous critiques of the conceptualisation that subjectivity could be controlled through the ‘objectivity’ held to be the hallmark of good scientific methodological procedure. These debates highlighted the impossibility of leaving subjectivity at the laboratory door in an aim to fulfil the requirement of neutral detachment. Gilbert and Mulkay’s (1984) work on how scientists talk about doing research neatly illustrates tensions produced by objectivity/subjectivity. They identified two distinct patterns of talking or repertoires about doing research that scientists drew on to discuss this process. The first described research practice as a set of operations that are independent of any one researcher. What was implied is that objective knowledge can be produced through the application of neutral procedures. In contrast, scientists also drew on a second repertoire to describe the practice of doing research as a craft – developed through speculative insights, personal as well as theoretical commitments and the social network in which individual scientists were a part. These two distinct repertoires can be seen to reflect specifications in the scientific method that a clear boundary is set between objectivity and subjectivity. However, they also point to the difficulties of controlling for subjectivity in the research process, and indeed the counterproductivity of doing so as we explore here. The second repertoire suggests research as an endeavour shot through with subjectivity (see also Parker, 2015).

The objectivity requirement is rooted within the positivist epistemology of the scientific method, which in psychology, is predominately characterised by the hypothetico-deductive method.

Positivism suggests that the aim of scientific enquiry is to observe and measure phenomena in order to access an objective truth about them. The hypothetico-deductive method attempts to meet this aim through the process of attempting to falsify a priori hypotheses typically through

quantitative testing methods. Contemporary approaches to scientific psychological research acknowledge the difficulties in controlling subjectivity. As such, objectivity is recognised as an ideal goal that can only be realised imperfectly in practice (Ponterotto, 2002; 2005). Reflection, from this perspective, focuses on subjectivity as a source of bias that may interrupt the focus on the relationship between variables under study. This form of reflection, in which ~~the researcher~~_s asks themselves “what is the research process and how am I influencing it?”, focuses on verification and accuracy; the point of reflection is to ensure as far as possible that the research taps into how things ‘really’ are (Woolgar, 1988).

Reflection circumscribed to the relationship between variables does not translate to qualitative research because this is neither the aim nor focus of such work. Instead, there is a broad concern with the exploration of meaning which presupposes that the phenomenon under study is not predefined in advance for the purposes of measurement and comparison. Reflexivity used in qualitative and mixed methods research often brings into focus the broader processes of knowledge production, including for example, wider social, political and historical contexts in which the research is conducted (Doucet and Mauthner, 2006). That said, what is important to note is that ~~reflection/reflexivity in some form is done in~~ all research, whether it uses ~~the~~ hypothetico-deductive ~~methodthe scientific method~~ or otherwise, requires the researcher to reflect on the process of knowledge production. Good experimental design must be highly reflective in that the researcher is seeking out any possible impact of the self in order to control for it. Good qualitative design seeks to understand the self in research for a different set of reasons; to unpack how subjectivity becomes relevant to producing certain knowledge. Reflection and reflexivity have been conceptualised as a continuum (see for example, Woolgar, 1988; Shaw, 2010) which avoids a straightforward split between reflection/reflexivity, quantitative/qualitative, science/non-science. This is important because the epistemological approach taken in research will shape the form of ~~reflexive/reflexive/reflexive evaluation~~_{ity} used (Willig, 2013).²⁴

The ~~distinctive approaches of idea that~~ reflexive/reflexive ~~reflexive/reflexive evaluation~~_{ity} are permeates all research is a point that is not often well-articulated in psychology’s disciplinary training. Indeed, undergraduate degrees invest much time in teaching hypothetico-deductive quantitative methods (predominantly framed by hypothetico-deductive logic outlined earlier) the scientific method and associated evaluative reflection and much less time ~~to~~_{in} qualitative methodologies. Often very little training is devoted to reflexivity. Why are things set up this way? Given that the scientific hypothetico-deductive method ~~is~~ still the most used research procedure in psychology, it is perhaps not surprising that so much time is spent teaching it. Qualitative research can be seen as a contrast case (Taylor and McAvoy, 2015). However, this uneven split around

methodological training promotes an assumption that there is a straightforward division between ~~quantitative~~ ~~scientific~~ and qualitative research. This is frequently translated as meaning that the former is more complex and important and the latter is the subordinate ‘other’ (see Lazard, 2009, for review). It is not surprising that researchers may feel both resistant to doing reflexivity when undertaking qualitative research and ill-equipped to deal with it when it becomes presented as a requirement. This is neatly expressed by Braun and Clarke in an interview with Jankowski (2017) who “wonder if people really understand what reflexivity is, if they are bracketing it off from the rest of the text, which is written in the third person and the objective and dispassionate voice of mainstream psychology” (p. 46).

~~The standard use of the third person writing style-narrative in psychological publications is worth noting-important to note-because it effectively writes out the presence of the researcher and renders them invisible – there is no ‘I’ in such reports. This writing style reflects the overall aim of objectivity and as such the individual researcher should become, through good design, entirely irrelevant. Researchers in this sense are effectively interchangeable because good design should ideally protect the research from researcher bias.~~

~~it reflects the overall aim of objectivity mentioned above in such psychological research. The third person narrative effectively writes out the presence of the researcher and renders them invisible – there is no ‘I’ in such reports. In contrast, qualitative studies often use reflexivity- first person narrative to make explicit the role of the researcher in the production of research. The use of the first person is inextricably linked to reflexivity because it is one mechanism for highlighting, for example, the emphasises the researcher in the production of research by the active use of first person narrative. This is used to make~~ The point of reflexivity is to make ~~explicit~~ ~~visible~~ specific personal, social, theoretical and/or political influences that shape the research. ~~This allows research so that~~ claims made and conclusions drawn ~~to can~~ be understood and evaluated in context. Because of this, reflexivity is central to establishing rigour in qualitative and mixed method work (see, for example Henwood and Pigeon, 1992; Tuval-Mashiach, 2016 ~~for further discussion~~).

How can we make sense of reflexivity in psychology?

The process of stepping back from ambitions of objectivity and towards recognising subjectivity is complicated by the idea that sound knowledge only emerges from perspectival distance between the researcher and the topic s/he is studying, unbiased ~~by from~~ human emotion or attachments. Key questions that arise from this are: how do you produce credible knowledge when you cannot control for subjectivity? How do you work with subjectivity? These questions have resulted in wide-ranging transdisciplinary scholarship (e.g. Wilkinson, 1988; England, 1994; Doucet and Mauthner, 2006;

Faria and Mollet, 2016; Zienkowski, 2017). We have found some of these debates to be instructive when making sense of reflexivity in psychological work.

As discussed earlier, the reflexive turn made salient the difficulties of controlling for subjectivity and critiqued the characterisation of subjectivity as a barrier to sound knowledge. This problematisation occurred both inside and outside of the discipline of psychology (for example, the sociology of science, feminist theory, critical race theory, disability studies to name but a few). Such work drew attention to how the prescriptions of *doing* science become interwoven with common assumptions about the way the world is, which typically inscribed the perspective of those working in academic fields, that is predominantly white and middle class. By way of illustration, feminist standpoint theorist Harding (1986) argued that science rests on a set of socially, politically and historically produced dualisms such as, objectivity/subjectivity, rationality/irrationality that links men to the former and women to the latter in each dichotomised pairing (see also Locke, 2011). Dualisms become shot through with power because of the tendency to privilege one half of the dichotomy over the other; objectivity, rationality, science and masculinity become privileged and seen as more worthy than, subjectivity, irrationality, non-science (qualitative methodologies) and femininity by virtue of their position in the pairing. These relations of power are important because, as Harding (1986) points out “these beliefs (from science) structure the policies and practices of social institutions including science [itself]” (p. 136). Critiques such as this created a legitimate basis for calls to work with subjectivity rather than against it (Parker, 2015).

In a similar vein, ‘the affective turn’ took to task the characterisation of affect, emotion and feeling as irrational and its treatment as secondary to reason and rationality (Wetherell, 2014). The predominance of the binary of reason/emotion, and its conflation with rationality/irrationality respectively (Locke, 2011) coupled with several historical trajectories in the discipline of psychology saw feelings, affects and emotions subject to scholarly suspicion and neglect. The affective turn in the social sciences sought to move beyond such binaries to consider the ways in which embodied conscious-intensities of feeling or affect become “enrolled in culturally-normative patterns of intention, performance, relationality and ethics” as emotion (Cromby, 2012). As Hoggart and Thompson (2012) note, in psychology in particular, the prioritisation of the individual has produced feelings as the ‘inner’ property of persons which seems at odds with the idea that feeling/emotion may be the property of groups or embedded in social processes. The affective turn has highlighted that although understood as individually experienced, feelings and emotion become embodied by and in social cultures (Wetherell, 2012). Organised feelings, for instance of anger or fear, contribute to the mobilisation of political action. In short, affect, feeling and emotion becomes understood as more than irrational peculiarity of the individual. The reflexive and then the affective turns in

psychology have provided a legitimate grounding on which to engage with subjectivity in the research process.

Our starting point is perspectival location. The notion of objectivity is underpinned by the principle of neutrality and distance and subjectivity by the principle of inescapable situated embeddedness. A reflexive stance to research recognises that perspectival distance is not, in any straightforward sense, possible. Reflexive consideration of our role in our research, the investments we have in it and the relationships we have with our participants, texts, or the research field means that we become the objects of our own gaze. There is no total detachment since 'I' is both the subject and object, viewed and viewer, knower and known. The experience of distance produced by the position of viewer and viewed becomes a matter of perspective. We would argue that distance/closeness can be understood as a relational matrix, shaped temporally and spatially, which opens up different ways of 'seeing' or more appropriately understanding. Distance then is no longer necessarily privileged in processes of knowledge production because distance, alongside other points in the matrix, are always already "partial, provisional and perspectival" (Mauthner and Doucet, 2007, p. 416).

The matrix of distance/closeness can be understood as interwoven with affect, feeling and emotion. As the affective turn has underscored, rather than being a barrier to understanding, intensities of different feeling may provide a basis for insight on the research process, throwing open, for example, layers of context (those operating at as well as somewhere in between 'micro' and 'macro' levels) and processes that become relevant to understanding knowledge production in a given instance.

The value of perspectival 'closeness' is well illustrated by traditions focused to creating space for theorisation of marginal groups as something 'other' than problematic, unworthy of study or pathologised (e.g. Weisstein, 1993a; 1993b). Such work has sought to bring into view perspectives marginal to mainstream thought. For example, a number of scholars have documented women's unequal treatment in the history of psychological study (Fox Lee, Rutherford and Pettit, 2016; Rutherford, 2015). This includes the underrepresentation of women in participant samples in early psychology which meant that psychology not only failed to speak to women's experiences but also set male experiences as the norm against which women were judged (e.g. Crawford and Maracek, 1989; Tavis, 1993). These claims were interrogated often by those who were in some way close enough to identify as problematic these issues with women's treatment. This tended to be, although was not exclusively, women psychologists (see Capdevila and Lazard, 2015 for further discussion). Thus, being close to a topic can be productive rather than a hindrance to 'good' research.

What do I need to consider when thinking about how to do reflexivity?

Feminist critiques of women's treatment in (and outside) of psychology have often been advanced by women scholars who were in a position to 'see' the limits of particular theory. Such critiques opened up questions that are directly relevant to reflexivity; Who should study whom? What can we know about our participants, our topic area? Do marginalised groups hold a particular claim to knowing? How does this translate to research practice? Should or could we restrict our research to people like us? (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002).

Threaded through the substantial debates focussed on *what* or even *how* we can 'know' is a recognition of the dangers of the presumption of sameness which may serve to mask power differentials between members of a so-called homogenous groups. As a case in point, early feminist scholarship presumed the category of woman as to be an homogeneity, a view which was subsequently criticised on the basis that this work was carried out by predominantly white middle class women and as such overlooked 'other' women whose experience of discrimination overlapped and intersected with a range of trajectories of oppression based on, for example, (lower) social class, race, sexualities and so on (see, for example, work on intersectionality, Crenshaw, 1993). What this points to is that simplistic notions of sameness/difference does not necessarily move us forward for understanding the complexities of how power differentials play out in knowledge production. This can be seen is recognised in a reflexive account by McAvoy (2009) where she notes similarities between her own life and her participants in her study of women in mid-life accounts of success and failure from women in mid-life. However, she argues that:

I have a different agenda to the women who ... took part in this study. Inevitably I appropriate their words to my service. Therefore I am not precisely 'one of them': my multiple positions and intersubjectivities flow differently throughout the project. I am relationally distributed, being both a subject inside my subject; and simultaneously outside of my subjects" (pp. 11-12).

There are no simple solutions to these issues, however, reflexivity provides a means to engage with them by setting up in the process of study a requirement for a nuanced understanding of the limits of what researchers can see and understand from their partial and positioned perspective. Sameness and difference becomes an interpretative lens through which to explore action can be done.

Considerations of the researcher's partial and positioned perspective is central to personal reflexivity. This is a common form of reflexive thinking in psychology, which refers to the

consideration of ways in which our identities and positions impact the research process (see, for example, Wilkinson, 1988, for a discussion of strands of reflexivity). What constitutes the personal sphere is vast. Berger (2015⁴), for example, suggests that “relevant researcher’s positioning include personal characteristics, such as gender, race, affiliation, age, sexual orientation, immigration status, personal experiences, linguistic tradition, beliefs, biases, preferences, theoretical, political and ideological stances, and emotional responses to participant” (p. 220). This is not an exhaustive list but giving thought to what is both present and absent from such lists can be useful in terms of developing awareness of the relevance of certain identities over others in specific research projects or at specific moments in those projects.

Whilst personal reflexivity may appear to be a relatively straightforward process (in that it *might* be presumed that people ‘know’ themselves), we would argue that it is perhaps the easiest to fall short of in terms of developing a reflexive account which is linked sufficiently to the process of research. This can often take the form of listing personal characteristics (e.g. I am a woman, I am working class, and so on) and/or mimics the process of identifying extraneous variables in experimental research. It falls short of what is required in much qualitative work because it carries a residue of ~~scientific~~-objective processes which, as previously argued, do not translate into qualitative study (see also Hosking and Pluut, 2010). It can also take the form of a description of a life experience and/or some aspect of self without sufficiently articulating its impact on the research. For example, saying that 20 years’ teaching experience brought one to the topic of learning does not create specific links to the process of *doing* a specific research project (Doucet and Mauthner, 2006)

An epistemological focus helps to ground personal reflections in specific research studies. Epistemological reflexivity moves beyond the personal to concerns with the nature, scope and limitations of knowledge. All researchers take up an epistemological stance in their research studies through the theories they engage (or do ~~no~~’t engage) with and the methodologies they use to design their studies. As Willig (2013) notes, epistemological reflexivity refers to consideration of how the values and assumptions that are based in the researchers’ methodological and theoretical commitments shape the knowledge produced in research. Just as with personal reflexivity, it is also possible to under-develop a reflexive account when using epistemological reflexivity. However, it is arguably harder to do so because research projects should already be framed by epistemology and methodology. There is an explicit requirement in qualitative reporting to discuss these frames in the method section which means that bare bones of the process are established. Linking the personal to epistemological positions can further help to develop insights between the self and the research study.

Regardless of the kind of reflexivity used, the process can become a Sisyphean task. A link between one aspect of self and the research process may become further linked to other features of one's personal and/or professional histories – potentially to infinite regress. Reflection on reflection risks one getting lost in the reflexive process and this may give way to excessive self-analysis (Finlay, 2002) and accusations of narcissism (Hosking and Pluut, 2010). Importantly, it risks producing research which fails to answer its own research question. A reflexive journey may well take one to particular life experiences but a detailed unpacking of this may not offer any more in terms of insight into the processes of knowledge production used to answer the question posed. Reflexivity must be deployed in the service of the research question, not instead of it.

What does doing reflexivity look like?

The reflexive process is predicated on the broad questions of “what is the research process and how am I influencing it?” The process itself might be seen as a form of Socratic questioning. This is a method of illumination, broadly characterised by a persistent questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions through conversational processes or dialogue. It has been used in psychotherapy and to teach critical inquiry for the purposes of producing self-knowledge (Carey and Mullan, 2004; Piro and Anderson, 2015). In research, it takes the form of internal dialogue as well as conversations with participants, colleagues and others, including those who may take different perspectives to that which frames the research. It can also encompass our own an engagement with the embodied, affective responses to the research process and activities (Burns, 2008). All of these practices are ~~The latter is~~ useful for opening up complexity and facilitating evaluation. A degree of caution should be exercised with Socratic questioning because it is rooted in presumptions of ‘truth’ not dissimilar to the processes of doing objective science, already criticised as a barrier for working with subjectivity (Schultz, 2012; Boghossian, 2006). That said, the notion of persistence in and dialogue around scrutinising our assumptions, is nevertheless important to understanding how reflexivity can be done. This is because it highlights the need to revisit answers in order to unpack the limits of our reflections. The purpose of this is not to reveal a truth as such but to make visible complexities that shape doing research. Whilst there is no simple recipe for doing this, we hope to illustrate the process of doing reflexivity in relation to different phases of research. While the following questions or indeed the particular aspects of the research that we highlight below are by no means exhaustive, we aim to produce some insight into how reflexivity works in practice.

- a. **Why research that topic? Why ask those particular research questions? Why ascribe to that particular theoretical/epistemological position?**

A common rule of thumb for answering such questions is through the rationale for a project in the introduction of a report in which the researcher explains a gap identified in existing literature. However, this on its own is not reflexivity. The reflexive process starts from a different position to this in the sense that it asks for an explicit consideration of why we research a particular topic and not another? Out of all possible gaps in the literature and all the possible research questions ~~you~~we could have asked, why ~~these~~these ones?

These sorts of questions underpin Shields' (2016) reflexive consideration of a now classic paper she wrote early in her career in 1975. Whilst Shields does not explicitly label the forms of reflexivity used in her work, we would argue that her account combined personal (her discussions with her graduate school roommate) and epistemological (her explicit engagement with feminist theory) as well as disciplinary reflexivity (how certain topics or methods become seen as important or unimportant in academic disciplines at different times and places – see for example Wilkinson, 1988; Magnusson & Marecek, 2012).

In her 1975 paper, Shields examined the history of sex difference research in psychology. At that time, she noticed that scholars in the 19th century (who were mostly white men at this time) often studied and theorised women as deficient in comparison to men. As she read this history, she also noticed that scholars also made claims of white superiority. However, while she acknowledged that problematic claims about race were also made, she did not analyse this in depth. Instead her focus remained on the treatment of women in sex difference research. In her 2016 reflection, she noted that her focus on women was shaped by the fact that her 1975 published paper was developed from a term paper she had written for a women's studies course. The literature she read for this paper also structured her focus. This is because such literature rendered racial bias implicit. Race was held constant by comparing white women samples to white male samples in order to assess differences between the two. Race and gender were seen as independent categories and so how gender and raced power dynamics came together to render, for example, black women as doubly subordinated (~~biased on~~ racism and sexism) was a theoretically underdeveloped area of explanation at this point in psychology's history.

In revisiting her focus on gender in her 1975 paper throughout her career, she was later able to "see that my [Shields'] critique of 19th century nature-based explanations of gender difference was constrained by the fact that I was looking largely at a single intersection, that of privileged white male scientists and the women in the white privileged world that these men inhabited" (Shields, 2016: 355). This later reflexive activity served as the bedrock for refocusing her original analysis to explore how gender and race intersect to produce certain raced/gendered power relationships. For

example, she notes that white women and men of other races were often deemed subordinate to white men but women were generally seen as slightly more subordinate to men of other races. In the race/gender hierarchy that was implicitly set up across early 'difference' research, it was women of other races who were set at the bottom. They were deemed subordinate to men as well as to white women.

Shields' reflexivity illustrates well the connection between her academic background (as a scholar in the area of women's studies/feminism), the literature focused on (white male scientists' claims about sex differences) and the subsequent shape that her research questions and arguments took. Her reflexive journey generated new insights which allowed her to take her analysis in another direction. Of course, not all reflexive endeavours are informed by [a personal trajectory of](#) several years of work but this does not preclude one's ability to establish the research in time and place or to generate insights.

b. How do our choices (and what we assume) about the methods we use shape knowledge production? How does the relationship between researcher and researched contribute to this process? How does this impact our analytic interpretations?

Methods are often conceptualised as a toolkit in which the researcher chooses the right one(s) for the job. Although this can be useful for establishing a coherent thread between the research question(s) asked and methods chosen, it may also detract from the ways in which methods become deployed in specific ways depending on theoretical, epistemological and political positions which are shaping the research. For example, Roper ~~et al., Capdevila, Lazard and Roberts~~ (2015), outline how their use of Q methodology is embedded in and meets specific aims of feminist political agendas. An explicit grounding of methods in theory and politics works not only to communicate the position of research but also to create space for working with the possibilities and constraints of using methods in the service of particular principles.

Similarly, how methods become interwoven with broader theoretical issues and power dynamics is described by Del Busso (2007) who used interviews to explore young women's embodied experiences. Her reflexive journey flagged how her participants, who positioned themselves as 'tomboys', problematized Del Busso's own heterosexualised feminine embodiment. Reflexive engagement, particularly around her aim to use interviews to create an empowering experience for her participants, opened up particular directions of reading the research encounter which subsequently impacted analysis of data. Del Busso reflected that this brought her to:

“the need to consider issues of power between women themselves, as well as between women and men in the context of heteronormativity. The majority of the women’s interview accounts of their embodied experiences in everyday life were explicitly related to their experiences of interacting with men. The researcher’s analysis of the interviews as embodied interactions, nevertheless, pointed to power relations between women as an important dynamic through which women experience their embodied selves, and this was subsequently considered in the analysis of the raw data”(p. 313).

Del Busso’s reflexivity makes explicit how particular experiences during the research process highlight assumptions made about participants, topics and methods (see also Medico and Santiago 2014; Goldstein, 2016). It also demonstrates how reflexivity can be used to generate insights which subsequently shape interpretations made and knowledge produced.

c. How do researchers position / identify themselves in their research?

The requirement for reflexivity during the process of doing and writing up research introduces some level of public disclosure which can be experienced by researchers as discomfiting. This requirement produces tensions around what we *should or need* to disclose about ourselves in research and how those decisions impact what we can say about the research process. ~~Such disclosure~~, we would argue, needs to be managed in relation to ethical treatment of ourselves as researchers ~~it and must be managed in line with our one’s own criteria for disclosure to a wider audience.~~ (McAvoy, 2009).

The question of what to disclose is, in our opinion, ~~well best~~-answered when grounded in the epistemological reflexivity described above. As argued earlier, an epistemological focus keeps the processes of reflexivity rooted in the processes of research and, as such, limits the tendency for reflexivity to become a confessional exercise. ~~It must be managed in line with one’s own criteria for disclosure to a wider audience.~~

There are many examples in the literature of disclosures of researchers’ private lives for the purposes of understanding research issues in context. For example, McMahon, Franklin and McGannon (2016) ~~explored two of the authors’ experiences of fat oppression in aquatic athletics. Their piece uses~~ collaborative auto-ethnography³² to explore a range of fat oppressive practices two of the authors’ experienced ~~in aquatic athletics~~ and the impact these practices had on ~~themselves~~ which included body management through laxative abuse. ~~We have interpreted~~ ~~the~~ revealing of these experiences, ~~we’ve interpreted~~, as intimately tied with their political decision to engage the audience with lived issues because “once the audience (readers) have engaged with

others' lived experiences, they cannot claim that they have not heard it" (p. 51). These political decisions seem to be interwoven with methodological ones in that the choice of using collaborative auto-ethnography² was in part to give voice to these lived experiences and empower the authors as they made visible how body classifications in sport work to problematize particular kinds of feminine body. While specific projects that make certain political, methodological or theoretical points through the use of personal disclosure are valuable, not every reflexive journey needs to be entirely revealing of, what may be considered, one's private life. In the following sections we describe two strategies – limited and withheld disclosure – that can be used to negotiate this tension.

Limited Disclosure

Dilemmas around how much to disclose may be tied to notions that we must faithfully lay ourselves open in order to say something meaningful about the research process. However, there are a number of ways particular reflexive stories can be told to make the point that needs to be made. For example, particular experiences and perspectives are shaped by broader contexts, and unpacking those contexts rather than a specific private occurrence might fruitfully communicate social, historical and political issues brought to bear on the research. For example, Lazard (2009) in the write up of her analysis of sexual harassment makes brief reference to witnessing everyday acts of unwanted sexual attention. This reflexive piece does not detail specific instances but rather uses this reference to locate these events in a complex point in history where there appeared to be a public preoccupation with the issue of sexual harassment and the tensions this produced around questions of what constitutes sexually harassing behaviour. This limited disclosure allowed the reflexive piece to be grounded in specific micro contexts in which the researcher was located and to tie the relevance of these contexts to the subsequent development of research questions and theoretical commitments. Whilst the details of these events are undoubtedly important, their absence from the account did not compromise speaking reflexively to research process.

McAvoy (2009), in her use of limited disclosure, makes the distinction between "reflexivity as a profitable interrogatory tool to be used throughout the research process; and reflexive positioning as a versioned, public, autobiographical, invested, account" (p. 10). The latter, McAvoy questions in relation to the ethics of revealing oneself publically. McAvoy managed this in her study of mid-life women's accounts of success or failure by making "reference to my own connected positions at different points in my analysis – but ...with a light touch" (p. 13). This allowed connections between

self and the research process to be visible and for McAvoy to communicate the reflexive work done in the study without compromising her own privacy.

Withheld disclosure

What researchers choose to reveal or hide from view inevitably shapes the ways in which research processes play out with respect to how data is collected, what is said or not said during data collection and what is attended to during analysis. Rowe (2014) reflexively explored these issues in her explication of her presence as an ethnographic researcher undertaking participant observation in a women's prison. In Rowe's work, one ~~considerationsalient issue~~ was whether or not to disclose her position as a gay woman during her fieldwork. She notes that while her sexuality in other projects might well be irrelevant, given the take up of LGBTQ identity positions by both prisoners and prison staff, here it was both relevant and unsettling. She notes that:

managing my position as a gay woman researching in a setting in which sexuality was a salient and contentious theme felt at times like a form of emotional participation, perhaps invisible to others, but a powerful source of understanding for me. These were embodied encounters, emotionally marked by my own or others' responses. (p. 405)

~~One dilemma for Rowe The prominence of LGBTQ presence introduced a set of dilemmas around whether she should disclose her own sexuality during her fieldwork. These dilemmas~~ included whether disclosure would impact her mobility in the institution in which she was conducting her research and whether LGBTQ stigma would present a barrier to doing fieldwork in some prison contexts. Rowe discusses the disclosure dilemmas she faced in her study by reflexively unpacking the reasons for her continual deferment of making a decision as to whether she should out herself. For example, Rowe points out that by not disclosing, she obtained data she may not have been given access to as an explicitly out gay researcher: "confidences from straight identified women about their shock and unease when they first came across lesbian activity among prison inmates; discussions about how the prison should manage prisoners' intimate relationships;" (p. 413). The reflexive management of these issues allows for an exploration of what studies can or cannot tell us about the topic and why that might be. In the case of Rowe's work, the dilemmas she explored also spoke to ways of "accessing, understanding, and organizing glimpses into the prison world, its powerful logics, practices, and emotional pressures" (p. 414).

Whilst there are no easy answers to these dilemmas of what to disclose and when, we would argue that practices around limited disclosure can be useful for deciding what connections between self and the research are useful for understanding the processes of producing knowledge. So, while Rowe did not disclose during her fieldwork, she chose to do so in her written work.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to make sense of reflexivity in psychological research by making explicit that reflexive activity is central to the research process. The researcher as a an inescapably involved and implicated self, but one made visible in this reflexive process, enables allows for interconnections to emerge, between the processes of planning, methodological implementation and conclusion building, and with the micro and macro contexts crossing a number of related spheres (personal, political, social, historical and so on). Rather than a peripheral activity, reflexivity can be considered an integral to the generating insights about topics and the questions we choose to ask about them and as such becomes central to the exercise of building knowledge.

Developing insights in relation to research processes, often requires the bringing together of an epistemological focus with other forms of reflexivity, particularly personal forms. An epistemological thread to reflexive thought, we have argued, guides and grounds reflexive questioning to in the research process. This helps to circumvent reflexive activities that foreground the self to the detriment of unpacking the research process and/or risk falling into common traps that do not move us forward in terms of generating insight into the processes of knowledge building.

We have emphasised that reflexivity is about unpacking the partial, and and positioned and affective perspectives we bring to research which often makes it difficult to see alternative interpretations of our work. Working with these complexities requires a persistence in reflexive questioning and dialogue with our participants, our colleagues and others who may see the world differently. This facilitates our questioning and moves us beyond our own taken-for-granted assumptions and sense-making of the social world both professionally and personally and leads us towards interrogative lines of enquiry.

¹ The hypothetico-deductive method uses the principles of falsification in testing. This involves starting with a prediction or hypothesis which are outlined in advance or 'a priori'. Researchers then actively attempt to falsify predictions in order to ascertain whether the prediction is untrue or erroneous. By actively attempting to discredit predictions, hypothetico-deductive logic holds that researchers can be more confident that findings are plausible and robust. See Woolgar (1988) for further discussion of falsification.

² Understanding nuances across methodological approaches requires familiarisation with the epistemological/theoretical approach used. For example, the analytic process of bracketing (the process of setting aside one's own assumptions) in phenomenological research arguably falls nearer the objectivist end of the continuum of reflexivity despite this methodology's location as a qualitative approach. However, the process of bracketing does not presuppose that other forms of reflexivity cannot be taken up in a phenomenological project. Similarly, the ways in which post positivism has been taken up by feminist empiricists in psychology does not preclude forms of reflexivity that are further away from the objectivist end of the continuum (see, for example, Eagly, 2016).

³ Collaborative auto-ethnography refers to a process in which two or more auto-ethnographers work together collaboratively to explore interconnections between the personal, social and cultural in and through stories of lived experiences.

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