

Introduction to the Special Issue: European Contributions to Strong Reflexivity

Qualitative Inquiry
2016, Vol. 22(9) 699–704
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DOI: 10.1177/1077800416658069
qix.sagepub.com



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Abstract

This special issue is devoted to reflexivity as an epistemic tool in qualitative research. We suggest a distinction between epistemically weak and epistemically strong reflexivity and present examples for strongly reflexive research from the German-speaking countries and the United Kingdom. The issue pursues three major goals: First, it provides a vocabulary to deepen the discussion about the epistemic dimensions of reflexivity. Second, it intervenes in hegemonic discourses on the “threat of subjectivity” and shows that approaches often perceived as “more subjective” and therefore less valid use, in fact, an epistemically stronger concept of reflexivity. Third, it offers insight into some innovative areas of strongly reflexive research in Europe. A comparison of these methodologies shows that the use of reflexivity as an epistemic tool is compatible with a wide range of approaches.

Keywords

critical theory, epistemology, Europe, reflexivity, subjectivity

Introduction

Reflexivity is key. This short formula designates a remarkable success story of a concept that has been put on the methodological map of the European qualitative social sciences throughout the last decades (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009; Breuer, Mruck, & Roth, 2002; Kuehner, Langer, & Schweder, 2013; Mruck & Breuer, 2003). Most recent qualitative textbooks, journal articles, and dissertations in this field explicitly deal with reflexivity issues, and an increasing number of scholars address them in their teaching. The growing interest in reflexivity in European qualitative research can be linked to intersecting developments in academic discourse: (a) a wider “reflexive turn” in the social sciences (a late response to the diagnoses of a crisis of representation and legitimation after the postmodern deconstruction of grand narratives as well as an acknowledgment of research as an inevitably situated social practice); (b) the debate about quality criteria in, and for, qualitative social research (a call for legitimacy in an empirical research field, still dominated by quantitative approaches and their criteria of validity, reliability, objectivity, and representativeness); (c) an increased number of qualitative projects based on critical theories of gender, queer, postcolonial, and indigenous studies (emphasizing the significance of the researcher’s standpoint and requiring power-sensitive approaches that take into account the social and political implications of research); and (d) the rise of methodologies and methods such as autoethnography, psychosocial analysis, participatory and peer research (blurring the boundaries between

subject–matter and researcher–subject and the understanding of the subjectivity of the researcher as a privileged “tool” for collecting and interpreting data and presenting research findings).

Despite consensus on the relevance of reflexivity for qualitative research, the prevalent understandings of the term are quite diverse—in the European and U.S. debates alike (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009; Bronwyn et al., 2004; Davies et al., 2004; Day, 2012; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Langenohl, 2009b; Macbeth, 2001; Schweder, Langer, & Kuehner, 2013; Stronach et al., 2013; Stronach, Garratt, Pearce, & Piper, 2007). Some use it as a means of controlling subjectivity on (post-)positivist grounds, implying an understanding of subjectivity as “bias” (see Roulston & Shelton, 2015). Others aim at an awareness of political issues linked to qualitative research, as they are concerned with the power of research to contribute to social change or, vice versa, to the threats of abuse of findings in political struggles. Still others understand reflexivity as a strategy of using subjectivity to examine social and psychosocial phenomena, assuming that social discourses are inscribed in

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and social practices are embodied by the researcher. Crosscutting these conceptual meanings, reflexivity is also claimed to be a decisive element of research ethics (Bowtell, Sawyer, Aroni, Green, & Duncan, 2013; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Knight, Bentley, Norton, & Dixon, 2004). The listing of meanings could be continued.

Over the years, there have been several attempts to order this variety and distinguish types and understandings of reflexivity. Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) separate *reflective* research (a general awareness of the fact that every reference to empirical data is the result of interpretation) from *reflexive* research (a deeper reflection of specific aspects like the political character of research or a focus on the problem of representation and authority). Denzin (1997) distinguishes *self-reflexive realist texts* from *discourse analytical texts*. Macbeth (2001) differentiates *positional reflexivity* (focusing on the role of the author) from *textual reflexivity* (focusing on the text as a contestable representation). Langenohl (2009b) observes two prominent uses of the term: a rather pragmatic one, inspired by the textual turn in anthropology, and another one, referring to Bourdieu's notion of "scientific reflexivity" and his claim for an objectivation of the objectifier.¹

With this special issue, we hope to advance the debate with a focus on the *epistemological role of reflexivity in the research process*. We argue that the role of the researcher's subjectivity in the process of knowledge production is tagged by two contrasting positions: (a) *Epistemically weak reflexivity* aims at controlling the influence of researchers and their environment on the research process. It conceives the perspective and positionality of the researcher as a disruptive factor that should be kept to a minimum and needs to be controlled. From this perspective, the reflection of the relationship of the researcher to her field, her sympathies, prejudices, fears, emotional, mental, and physical reactions serve as a strategy to produce resilient findings *in spite of* this disruptive factor. These approaches often use methods of data production that minimize the visibility of the researcher (such as collecting texts or doing interviews where the researchers talk as little as possible) and try to standardize the process of interpretation. They use reflection to control the remaining subjective factors by making them explicit. Researchers try to reveal their relationship to the field, their pre-knowledge, and everything else they think might have influenced their research. Often, these considerations do not enter the research report as such, but remain part of the methodology section. These approaches can be highly reflexive, but in an epistemically weak sense.² (b) *Epistemically strong reflexivity*, however, appreciates the perspective of the researcher and her relationship to the field as a decisive source of data and interpretation. Sympathies, prejudices, fears, emotional, mental, and physical reactions of the researcher are not conceived of as inescapable problems, but as a highly valuable epistemic resource. In this perspective, the active involvement of the

researcher in the research process is not problematic, but a constitutive and valuable part of it. Her subjectivity is a legitimate source of knowledge and has a central epistemic function.³

Neither of these positions is new; there is, in fact, a large body of literature elaborating them, but their epistemological difference has hardly been stressed so far. Moreover due to the terminological intermingling of epistemically strong and weak reflexivity, one core dilemma has rarely been addressed⁴: Strong reflexivity often weakens the researcher's positions in academic discourse. The higher we value subjectivity as a resource for knowledge production, the more closely we tie the quality of research to the intensity of the researcher's subjective accounts. However, the stronger the subjective account of the researcher gets, the more difficult it becomes to argue for the validity (not to mention any "truth") of her position. The dilemma is obvious: Giving up the authoritative position of the sovereign researcher and acknowledging her decentredness disavows any claim of interpretative authority regarding the subject matter of the research that goes beyond the pure self-reflection of the researcher.

An Invitation to Frankfurt

This dilemma was at the very core of highly controversial, yet productive discussions at the international conference *On Meaning and Interpretation Authority: Claims in Qualitative Research* that marked the beginning of our work on the special issue at hand. The conference at the Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany, in May 2012, was intended to serve two goals: the examination of claims and practices of (self-)critical knowledge production and the discussion of methodological and ethical dilemmas of qualitative researchers who take their critical theoretical positions seriously and try to apply them to their methodological decisions.⁵ The German term *Methodenkritik*, which may be translated as "critical reflection of methods," was coined to emphasize the programmatic hope that the conference would become a site of self-critical reflection of research practices.

Hence, it was conceptualized not as a stage for presenting results and successes, but as a forum for exchanging doubts and dilemmas and even situational failures in the research process and how they feed decisions that finally have to be made. It pointed toward the gap between critical theory and critical inquiry that is often met but hardly discussed. As soon as we start doing empirical research, we are forced to make unanticipated decisions. The researcher gets involved in an open process, acts from a certain position, becomes (or remains) part of the power relations in the fields she enters, and has to leverage some power to get the research going—even if her goal is to critically examine the exact power relations she takes advantage of. In short,

empirical researchers always reproduce part of what they may sharply criticize as theorists.

There is a reason for the observed reluctance to address and discuss these important considerations in the academic public. Journals and conferences are not only sites of problem solving but also stages for the presentation and performance of the academic self. Hence, when we invited colleagues to Frankfurt to openly discuss problems and doubts about their own work, we had to expect reservations. In fact, we had some ourselves.

Eventually, and somewhat ironically, we acted just as psychoanalysis, one of our joint disciplinary points of reference, would expect us to: We got anxious and ambivalent about the project. Invitations to a conference always causes some sort of anxiety, especially when you conceive it, as we did, as a space to exchange difficult feelings and doubts that accompany our work. Thus, we felt a strong seduction to position ourselves symbolically in the Frankfurt tradition of critical thought. We felt tempted to use the “Frankfurt giants” (Adorno, Horkheimer et al.) as a reference point for the conference to feel stronger and make the meeting more attractive. At the same time, we felt the urge to resist this temptation; we realized that it was somewhat contradictory to name-drop institutional heavy weights as a remedy against anxieties, if our aim was to open up a space for sharing these anxieties. In this way, we perceived this contradiction as a typical conflict between competing desires: the wish to acknowledge feelings of *weakness*, doubts, and concerns and the wish to make a *strong* methodological statement. Thus, from the first moment on, different notions of “*weakness*” and “*strength*” accompanied this project.

Strong Reflexivity in the Contributions to This Issue

This special issue is devoted to epistemically strong reflexivity in qualitative research. It presents different approaches to epistemically strong reflexivity in Europe and traces the struggles of qualitative scholars who apply them. We focus on scholars from Germany, Austria, and the United Kingdom within their particular epistemological traditions of thinking about subjectivity and reflexivity, as well as their distinct methodological approaches to qualitative research. Each contribution argues from a different theoretical angle and against another methodological background. The engagement with questions of subjectivity and reflexivity in qualitative research can be fed by different convictions, commitments, and concerns. Among them are the following: (a) a theoretical commitment to poststructuralist or (neo-) psychoanalytic theory and the will to take the call for a decentering of the subject seriously; (b) the methodological conviction that evoking the research question, elaborating on the theoretical framework, presenting the data and interpretation, and discussing of findings need to go together; (c)

the ethical concern to take responsibility for the subjects of research; and (d) the epistemological necessity to clarify what kind of knowledge can (and should) be produced in a given subject–object constellation. In the research situation, (e) all these considerations culminate in decisions the researcher or her team has to make and needs to justify.

These considerations raise several questions on a theoretical, methodological, ethical, epistemological, and practical level: What follows methodologically, if we understand both the researching and the researched subject as “decentered”? How can researchers become “object” of research? How can research participants become “subjects” of research? And what happens if subject and object of research become indistinguishable?

Concepts of epistemically strong reflexivity typically blur the dichotomy between researcher and research participants, subjects and objects of research. If researchers see themselves as a source of valuable data, they call the classical role allocation in the research situation into question. This blurring often goes along with an epistemically productive disorientation, opening up a space for new insights for all members of the research process—including the recipients. Moreover, it creates a site for the negotiation of power relations in the research situation. This negotiation can take place during research, but it can also be a starting point for discussions in classes and among scholars and produce valuable contributions to the debates on research ethics and the relationship between social research and politics (see, for example, Ploder & Stadlbauer, this issue).

Working with the researcher’s own experiences is particularly useful when it comes to studies of emotions and bodily experience. Many aspects of these phenomena can only be approached from an introspective point of view—the researcher needs to experience them herself. This will become very clear not only in the contribution of Mueller but also in Ploder and Stadlbauer’s text on autoethnography. Still, strongly reflexive approaches can also teach us a lot when it comes to biographies, political participation, or fantasies—because they enable these research contexts to engage with aspects they might have neglected otherwise (see, for example, Lapping as well as Ruokonen-Engler & Siouti in this issue). Every text in this issue uses epistemically strong reflexivity from a different angle and against another theoretical, methodological, and disciplinary background.⁶ In comparing their approach to subjectivity and their epistemology, it becomes clear that the call for strong reflexivity has many sources and can be met within very different methodological backgrounds.

Sophie M. Mueller is interested in classical ballet as a social practice. She focuses on ballet as a practical *knowing how*, embodied in the *physis* of ballet dancers. In the beginning of her research, she realized that only a few aspects of the embodied practices of classical ballet can be observed within the scope of classical ethnography. A lot of aspects

she considered to be important could neither be observed nor addressed in interviews. As a consequence, she decided to actively and systematically use her own body as a research instrument and started to engage in serious ballet training. Throughout intense lessons, she recorded her emotions and thoughts and traced periods of tension and relief in her body and mind. Over weeks and months of exercise, she observed the gradual transformation of her muscles, changing in shape and physical tension. As a consequence of her practice theory approach, she uses a specific understanding of strong reflexivity.⁷ She starts from a classical interpretation of ethnography as an approach where the researcher herself is the central tool of research. Drawing from the tradition of Hirschauer and Amann (1997), who see sociological ethnography as a tool to develop an estranged perspective toward one's own culture, she uses her body and mind as a medium for experience and generates data on a practice that can hardly be seen nor explained to an "outsider." Her data stems from introspection, but her epistemology can be described as interpretative/ethnographic. Different from autoethnography, Mueller does not take subjectivity as a resource for insights but uses it as an instrument for discovery.

Claudia Lapping explores two different versions of strong reflexivity, both drawing on psychoanalytic notions of fantasy. Both approaches foreground the way the unconscious sets a limit on the researchers' control of the research process. However, she suggests that these approaches use different clues to guide their understandings of both their own and their participants' fantasies. Lapping contrasts work that focuses on affect and the role of fantasy as a defense against disturbing emotions with work that focuses on language and symbolic relations. She argues that the first approach risks imposing the researchers' interpretations onto the data. The second approach, in contrast, drawing on a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework, takes strong reflexivity a step further, by deliberately disrupting its own processes of interpretation. Any interpretation should be constantly put further into question: by noticing the way language is used to close down meaning and establish authority, the vulnerability of the researcher can be properly exposed. Lapping provides an example from a project that used a series of interviews to explore fantasies of pay and remuneration. Her analysis illustrates what it might mean to focus on language, and how a focus on the materiality of the signifier can open up new, speculative lines of analysis in a way that aims to avoid fixing the researcher in a position of authority.

Angela Kuehner examines ethnopschoanalysis's version of reflexivity. As early as 1967, the French anthropologist and psychoanalyst Georges Devereux had sharply criticized his colleagues (and social scientists in general) for creating and using methodologies that in his view served to avoid deeper insights instead of producing them. As a consequence of this critique, Devereux proposed to actively

use researchers' subjectivity as a means to create knowledge. In her contribution, Angela Kuehner re-examines this psychoanalytical version of "strong reflexivity": Within this framework, the research encounter is seen as a site of transference and countertransference, countertransference being the main source of inquiry. Thus, the emotional, physical, and mental reactions of the researcher to the research situation and the field are considered to be the most important, if not the only relevant data. Ethnopschoanalysis thus radicalizes the idea of introspection and subjectivity. Kuehner proposes a specific re-reading of Devereux in light of more general reflections on the (im)possibility of doing critical inquiry and then shows how contemporary researchers refer to and use both strong and "weak" versions of Devereux's approach in their arguments.

Phil C. Langer proposes a research vignette approach that in the succession of Laurel Richardson, programmatically understands writing as a method of inquiry and takes into account the researcher's often unconscious reactions in the research encounter as a privileged starting point for gaining interpretative insight into the very phenomenon to be studied. Starting from an ethno psychoanalytically informed reflection of the dynamics of social interaction and relation within the research process, he conducts an exemplary case vignette based on a peer research project on sexual risk behavior of gay men in Germany. The analysis of the irritating and provoking episodes in a particular interview is presented as a "reflexive account" of the research encounter that integrates elements of "thick description," psychoanalytic reflection, and literary storytelling.

Minna-Kristiina Ruokonen-Engler and Irini Siouti follow an interpretive epistemology and focus on the discussion of the importance of the reflection of the biographical entanglements of the researcher in the field of transnational biographical research and knowledge production. They introduce biographical reflexivity as a theoretical and methodological concept to work out the influence of the researcher in the construction of the research field as well as in the (re-)construction of the phenomena under research. To implement biographical reflection as a part of the research process, Ruokonen-Engler and Siouti develop a reflection scheme that induces narration and guides the reflection of the entanglements of the researcher's biographical experiences and the research topic. The reflection of the researcher's "own embodied biographical experiences"—the authors argue—can be used as a source for developing sensitizing concepts for the further research process. Thus, similar to Phil Langer's case vignette approach, Ruokonen-Engler and Siouti take the reflection of the experiences of the researcher as a productive source for the development of analytical, reflexive research concepts in the sense of strong reflexivity.

Andrea Ploder and Johanna Stadlbauer explore the reception and critique of autoethnography in German-speaking

social science and cultural anthropology. In autoethnography, the researcher is both subject and object of inquiry—with all her physical, emotional, and mental experiences. In writing about herself, the researcher produces a narrative that is meant to evoke epistemic moments on behalf of the readers. In this sense, the epistemology behind autoethnography is *performative*: Meaning is constituted in the course of the research process, and knowledge is produced by the recipients of the researcher's narrations. The goal of performative research is not to describe or reconstruct but to *change* social reality. The epistemological site, the site of knowledge production extends from introspection to the process of writing and into the process of reception.

The variety of these contributions indicates that there is more than one way to approach subjectivity by means of reflexivity. All these approaches go beyond the mere attempt to reflect on the position of the researcher.⁸ Instead, they all conceive—in one way or another—the research subject as a valuable object of inquiry and may therefore stimulate current methodological debates and empirical research practices in the field of qualitative inquiry.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Interestingly, both Macbeth and Langenohl (2009a) point to the ethnomethodological understanding of reflexivity as a possible “third reading” (Macbeth) or “forgotten tradition” (Langenohl) of reflexivity.
2. Alvesson and Sköldbberg's (2009) four dimensions of reflexivity, for instance, all remain within the framework of epistemically weak reflexivity.
3. The term ‘strong reflexivity’ was introduced by Sandra Harding as part of her approach to feminist standpoint theory (Harding 1993, 2004). In her understanding, “strong reflexivity demands that researchers actively acknowledge, and reflect on how their social locations, biographical histories, and worldviews interact with, influence, and are influenced by the research process.” (Brooks 2007: 79) She argues that considering the subject of knowledge as part of the object of knowledge and practicing strong reflexivity is a necessary condition for maximizing objectivity (Harding 1993: 69).
4. At least in the central European context; for the United States, see, for example, Denzin (1997); Davies et al. (2004); and Chawla and Rawlins (2004).
5. For detailed information about the conference, see www.methodenkritik.de
6. The authors have backgrounds in the social or political sciences, pedagogy and ethnology, literary research, critical

migration, gender and postcolonial studies, discourse-, and psychoanalysis.

7. One of the goals of practice theory is to shift the focus from the individual actor and her sensual actions toward non-individual and unintentional practices that are habitualized. In this respect, it is especially interesting to see how this approach seems to suggest the use of the researcher herself as the primary object of research.
8. The contributions to this issue do not exhaust the variety of epistemically strong reflexive research approaches in the German-speaking countries. Further examples are presented in the works of Gerhard Kleining, Thomas Burkart, and others on dialogical introspection (e.g., Burkart, Kleining, & Witt, 2010); Breuer, Mruck, and Mey (2011) on self-reflection in grounded theory methodology; or the work of Mruck and Mey on self-reflection in the work with biographical material (Mruck & Mey, 1998)—and the list could be extended. The landscape of epistemically strong reflexivity in the United Kingdom is even more developed. For example, a recent publication by Dean Garratt (2015) uses a combination of autoethnography and psychoanalysis.

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Andrea Ploder is a research and teaching assistant at the University of Graz. Prior to this, she was research and teaching assistant at the University of Salzburg (2012-2013) and at the University of Graz (2008-2012). She was a Visiting Scholar at the Technical University of Berlin (2013), University of California Berkeley (2014), and the University of Chicago (2015), and guest lecturer at the University Frankfurt am Main (2013 and 2014). In 2010, she and Johanna Stadlbauer founded the Network Qualitative Research Graz; in 2013, Andrea Ploder co-founded the Graz Methods Center. Her current research areas include qualitative research, history of the social sciences, cultural sociology, sociological theory, and science and technology studies.

Phil C. Langer is professor of psychoanalytic social psychology at the International Psychoanalytic University in Berlin, Germany. He was a junior professor of sociology and social psychology at the Goethe University in Frankfurt, Germany, a visiting professor at the universities of Ankara, Turkey, Kunduz, Afghanistan, and The College of New Jersey, NJ, and worked as a lecturer and researcher at the universities in Munich, Berlin, and Potsdam and the Social Sciences Institute of the German Armed Forces in Strausberg. He received two PhDs in German literature and psychology from the Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich in 2002 and 2009. His main areas of research include health issues, gender and queer studies, experiences of violence in war, and qualitative methodology and methods.