

## Appendix 4

### **Meanings and Approaches towards Understanding Reflexivity**

Defining reflexivity is problematic not least because there is debate across disciplines within social science as to how the methodological approach should be interpreted and the value that it should be accorded (Berg and Smith, 1988; Steier, 1991; Pels, 2000). The range of meanings is highlighted by the positions taken by researchers and whether they situate themselves as 'practitioners'; 'role-holders'; 'campaigner as researcher'; or 'victim/survivor as researcher'. Within these roles, the application of reflexivity can mean the adoption of an autobiographic or heuristic methodology (Ellis, 1995; Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Moustakas, 1975, 1990). Although each of these paradigms has a specific emphasis, Scott-Hoy (2002: 276) describes auto-ethnography as a 'blend of ethnography and autobiographical writing that incorporates elements of one's own life experience when writing about others...' Post-modern and feminist epistemologies have encouraged auto-ethnographic research which attempts to blend and contextualise the personal experiences of researchers with those they are researching (Scott-Hoy, 2002). Within heuristic inquiry the researcher is expected to have a personal relationship with the research topic, although criticisms of this approach have sometimes focused on the weakness of some heuristic inquiry to question '...culturally embedded relationships between researcher and researched (Speedy, 2001: 71). What these approaches do share is a commitment to the collaborative nature of inquires that challenge practices which unnecessarily separate the researcher and participant. Additionally they question approaches which perpetuate unhelpful power differentials that effectively undermine the 'co-constituted' nature of the research (Finlay, 2003; Gough, 2003; Reason, 1994).

Etherington (2004: 31) defines reflexivity as '...the capacity of the researcher to acknowledge how their own experiences and contexts (which might be fluid and changing) inform the process and outcome of inquiry'. Bryman (2008: 683) suggests

that ‘...reflexivity has to be used with a degree of caution...’ citing (Lynch, 2000) who argues that even within the paradigm of methodological reflexivity there are a number of different sub-meanings. Proponents of the methodology suggest that whatever reflexive approach is used it should not lead to ‘...self indulgence and sloppy intellectual work’ (Leatherby, 2000). Maso (2003: 49) agrees and suggests that improvements in the quality of reflexive research can be fostered through engagement with the theoretical perspectives that underpin the research project. This in turn enables the researcher ‘...to acquire answers satisfying both to them and to the scientific community’. In this sense the reflexive researcher acknowledges their position for the purposes of improving the quality of the research and not as a piece of solipsistic navel gazing (Gergen and Gergen, 1991; Woolgar, 1989). Behar (1996: 14) develops this point by suggesting that:

The exposure of self, who is also a spectator, has to take us somewhere we couldn’t otherwise get to. It has to be essential to the argument, not a decorative flourish, not exposure for its own sake.

Within social science disciplines, reflexive methodologies have been used across feminist, phenomenological and ethnographic research projects. Different forms of reflexivity have emerged depending on the aims and focus of the research. As a response to these variants, typologies have been created to help categorise models of reflexivity to assist researchers make informed choices.

Marcus (1994: 569) distinguishes between four styles of reflexivity: (1) self-critique (‘playing on the subjective, the experiential, and the idea of empathy’); (2) objective reflexivity (which espouses a ‘...commitment to sustain objectivity’); (3) ‘politics of location’ (which emphasises ‘...the inter-textual or diverse field of representation that any contemporary project of ethnography enters and crosses in order to establish its own subject and define its own voice’); (4) feminist reflexivity (including standpoint epistemologies which focuses on ‘positioning’ and the ‘situatedness’ and partiality of all claims to knowledge). Lynch (2000: 29) suggests that methodological reflexivity can be divided in to three subgroups: philosophical self-reflection (an approach that focuses on a form of introspection whereby the

researcher examines their own beliefs and attitudes); (2) methodological self-consciousness (where the researcher acknowledges their relationship with the participant); (3) methodological self-criticism (a type of auto-ethnography which combines autobiography with ethnography). Wilkinson (1988) adopts a feminist perspective and suggests three distinguishing categories of reflexivity: the personal (prioritisation of the subjective); function (one's role as a researcher) and disciplinary (guided by the purpose of the research project).

Whatever categorisation or typology one adopts, researchers often move between models of reflexivity depending on the focus of their project and after reflection on the specific research journey they want to take. This point is examined by Finlay and Gough (2003) who attempt to map possible routes through reflexive practice in order to deconstruct its meaning. They argue that we should refer to the approach in the plural as 'reflexivities' in order to challenge the idea that one method can capture the multi-faceted nature of the subject. The approach we take will often depend on our values, philosophy and how we see and understand ourselves. As such we need to find ways that harmonise with the person we are (Etherington, 2004: 71).