Reflexive Qualitative Research

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Summary and Keywords

This article examines reflexivity as part of a continuous research practice. Qualitative researchers work within and across social differences (e.g., cultural, class, race, gender, generation) and this requires them to navigate different layers of self-awareness—from unconscious to semiconscious to fully conscious. Because researchers can be aware on one level but not on others, reflexivity is facilitated by using an eclectic and expansive toolkit for examining the role of the researcher, researcher-researched relationships, power, privilege, emotions, positionalities, and different ways of seeing. Over the past fifty years, there has been a progression of reflexive practice as well as disciplinary debates about how much self-awareness and transparency are enough and how much is too much. The shift can be traced from the early practitioners of ethnography who did not reflect on their positions, power or feelings (or at least make these reflections public), to those who acknowledged that their emotions could be both revealing and distorting, to those who interrogated their multiple positionalities (mostly in terms of the blinders of Western/race/class/gender/generation), to those calling for the mixing and blurring of different genres of representation as important tools of reflexivity. Reflexivity is not a solitary process limited to critical self-awareness, but derives from a collective ethos and humanizes rather than objectifies research relationships and the knowledge that is created.

Keywords: reflexivity, qualitative research methods, ethnography, narrative inquiry, autoethnography, research relationships, participatory action research, feminist social research, research ethics, decolonizing research methods

Beginnings

Following the lead of sociologist and narrative theorist Catherine Riessman (2015), this article on reflexivity opens with a caveat. Writing about her reluctance to craft a chapter for a methods handbook on the topic of reflexivity, Riessman captures the contradictions of the task: “Chapters typically review topics in neat disembodied packages, rarely tied to the biography of the investigator, or the social and political conditions of a study or its setting – the very opposite of reflexivity in practice” (Riessman, 2015, p. 219).

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Reflexivity in practice makes writing a synthetic summary a special challenge. The topic is vast enough to fill volumes, yet chapters enforce unforgiving boundaries. My focus here examines reflexivity as it relates to the qualitative research process. It's important to note that this is not "the whole story" of reflexivity in the field of education. Additional entries might be written on reflexivity in learning, teaching, reading, and so on—each with its own body of literature. The perspective I describe here must therefore be understood as partial and particular, necessarily grounded in my own experience, developed over many years of observation and reflection, and offered as a methodological orientation that may be of use to others. In this article, then, reflexivity is at once subject, method, and product.

Riessman's chapter provides a model based on reflexive "beginnings" in her own professional life, in the field of anthropology, and as tied to the second-wave feminist critique of the "absent investigator in social science writing" (2015, p. 221). My beginnings were the same, as I confronted that absence explicitly, embracing the first-person "I" to acknowledge myself as the human instrument of research and to signal that my subjectivity (sometimes called bias) is not something to be rooted out, but to be acknowledged and made transparent as part of the inquiry. Riessman cites numerous early feminist sociologists as important guides (e.g., Krieger, Oakley, Reinharz, Smith, Stacey, Stanley & Wise). In my own journey and those of my generation of white feminist scholars who studied under the guidance of our elders, I was also profoundly shaped by *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Moraga & Anzaldua, 1981), and "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought" (Collins, 1986). Feminists of color made reflexivity a collective project, born from an outsider stance within second-wave feminism, the academy, and sometimes their own communities. The authors in *This Bridge Called My Back* used a mix of writing genres—poetry, fiction, critique, autobiography, intersectional analyses (before "intersectionality" was a term)—to reflect on and theorize their experiences and systems of exclusion, marginalization, colonization, slavery, domination, patriarchy, and heteronormativity. I saw the mixing and blurring of genres as important tools of reflexivity, tools that I would come to develop through visual, arts-based methods.

As Riessman argues, in disciplinary terms, the field of anthropology had an earlier embrace of reflexivity than other fields (e.g., sociology and psychology) in large part because ethnography is the coin of the realm in anthropology and because of the field's critique of ethnocentrism. As a practice, ethnography is based on immersion in an "other"/strange/exoticized society that the anthropologist aims to make "familiar" for readers. This feature of anthropological knowledge (making the "strange" familiar) shifted once Western anthropologists turned their gaze upon their own societies and indigenous anthropologists took up the skills of ethnography as a means to protect and enhance indigenous language, culture, and resources (Smith, 1999). As written texts, ethnographies are themselves reflexive products, even if not fully recognized as such by their authors or their readers. Whether explicitly stated or not, ethnographies are mediated by a researcher's own background and position; the theories and techniques used; the historical moment

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and political context in which the research is conducted; and the anthropologist's own actions and feelings.

The debate about how much of an anthropologists' feelings and personal experiences should be made public is decades old. Traditionally speaking, anthropologists' "feelings" and personal experiences of conflict or contradiction tended to be relegated to private journals or field notes, excluded from tidy published accounts and thus impervious to public view. In this regard, *Never in Anger: Portrait of an Eskimo Family* (Briggs, 1970), a classic ethnography, proved to be groundbreaking, shifting from the more surface issues of researcher positionality to a deeper exploration of emotion. Briggs made her feelings explicit, because, as she wrote, "my empathy and my experience of contrasts between my feelings and those of my hosts – were all invaluable sources of data" (1970, p. 6). She describes, for example, a well-intentioned decision to bring with her a large quantity of "kapluna" (European) food when arriving at her field site in the spring. The nomadic Utku normally eat such food only in winter, and Briggs looked forward to sharing the delicacies with the community throughout the lean summer months. But her host saw this generosity differently, as more of a burden for him to transport and for the community to store. His decision to abandon the supplies made Briggs challenge her assumptions about the Utku's "improvidence" or "poverty" when it came to summer food supplies. Instead, she realized that what she saw in deficit terms (going without certain foods) had more to do with the "counterproductive task of carrying it around with them" (1970, p. 247). Even so, full comprehension was slow to dawn—it wasn't until Briggs returned home and saw photographs of her towering sled that she realized just how burdensome her gear had been. "At the time," she notes, "I was blind" (1970, pp. 246–247). These photographs proved to be a vital visual prompt for her reflexivity in practice.

Briggs's ethnography was unique in its careful attention to how her own emotional responses could be in equal measure insightful, misleading, and distorting. Indeed, some anthropologists viewed her deep reflection on feelings and actions as being more about her story as a researcher than about the subjects of her research (Salzman, 2002). This critique was part of a larger debate bubbling within the field of anthropology and among others using ethnographic methods about the creative license inherent in the ethnographic enterprise. Clifford Geertz had advocated creativity and imagination as the "tableau" of ethnographic writing, associating the ethnographic method to painting a likeness of a culture (1973, p. 16). His depiction of "thick description" as "the researchers' constructions of other people's constructions of what they are up to" (p. 9) and his acknowledgement of anthropological writings as "fictions" (p. 15) shone a powerful light on the interpretative hand of the ethnographer. These debates were taking place in other fields as well, pushing researchers and theorists across disciplines (sociology, feminist studies, critical theorists, race/ethnic studies) to wrestle with vexing questions—whose story is this? Is the practice of ethnography fundamentally an art or a science? How much self-awareness and transparency are enough and how much is "too" much?

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While in graduate school, I heard about a symposium at the American Anthropological Association's annual meeting in 1978 that took up this topic. It was entitled "Portrayal of Self, Profession, and Culture: Reflexive Perspectives in Anthropology," and it resulted in an influential edited volume, *A Crack in the Mirror: Reflexive Perspectives in Anthropology* (Ruby, 1982). The introduction to that book (Myerhoff & Ruby, 1982, p. 1) remains one of the clearest accounts of the evolving definition of reflexivity. Among other themes, the authors address the difference between "true reflexiveness" and the "self-centeredness" that concerned certain social critics of the time, who lamented the "Me Generation's" narcissistic prioritization of self over community (e.g., Lasch, 1979).

An article by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1996) changed the directionality of reflexivity and self-awareness; it had a profound effect on my thinking and my work, as it did for many others in my field. Bourdieu suggested that the social distance between interviewer and interviewee need not get in the way of "true comprehension." He characterized a reflexive sociology as a "sort of spiritual exercise, aiming to attain, through *forgetfulness of self*, a true transformation of the view we take of others in the ordinary circumstances of life" (1996, p. 24). I began thinking about reflexivity as a bidirectional process, as a means to see others through a forgetfulness of self and to see the self through the mirror of ethnographic encounters and the emotions evoked. That dual understanding has remained central to my research practice over time, which I will describe in more detail later.

Gender Play (Thorne, 1993), an ethnographic study of a fourth-/fifth-grade classroom, brought to light additional layers of reflexivity as Thorne highlighted the role gender played in the social life of the children as well as her own comprehension and attunements as an adult, female researcher. Thorne described her multiple identifications and emotions as they related to the female teachers and other school staff; her own maternal feelings toward the kids; and memories of herself as a schoolgirl—and all of this became data that she mined for meaning. She wrote about how her multiple selves helped shape what she paid attention to, what she discovered, and how she organized her ideas. These disclosures were important developments for the sociology of childhood and education, because they challenged the traditional ethnographic script of taking the "strange" and making it "familiar." Thorne drew a profound contrast: whereas (most typically white) Western ethnographers who enter an unfamiliar culture find themselves "in the humbling stance of a novice" (1993, p. 12) adult researchers studying children in their own culture are blocked from thinking this way. Ethnographers of childhood (like me) face significant challenges, for we must contest the prevailing notion that children are incomplete or less competent than adults; and at the same time, we must resist our own sense that because we were once children ourselves, we already know what children are like. For adults studying children, the "challenge is to take the closely familiar and to render it strange" (1993, p. 12). Thorne struggled to lessen the power differential and social distance between herself and the children, trying to avoid being positioned as an authority figure and trying not to move into allegiances with teachers who might catch her eye "and smile or shake her head in a moment of collusive, nonverbal, and private adult com-

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mentary" (1993, p. 19). These moments made Thorne feel a keen sense of herself as an adult as well as a "mild sense of betrayal" to the kids (1993, p. 19).

Thorne writes about the "tugs of memory and the child within" (1993, p. 23), and she relates a story about her fascination with the most popular girl in the classroom, Kathryn. As she read over her field notes, she recognized her "obsession" with documenting Kathryn's popularity and social status and began to question the emotions behind it. Thorne recalled how, as a schoolgirl of "middling social status" herself, she had once envied a popular girl in her class. Thorne was reminded of how she had carefully watched the popular girl as a means to figure out her own place in a peer network she was trying navigate. Moreover, Thorne realized that her reckonings with her own schoolgirl past, experienced through moments of identification and avoidance of kids, happened only in relation to the girls she observed. Describing the role gender played in her intersubjective encounters, Thorne observed: "With boys, my strongest moments of identification came not through regression to feeling like one of them, but from more maternal feelings. . . . But I generally felt more detached and less emotionally bound up with the boys" (1993, p. 25).

Thorne wrote with a clear self-awareness about her particular vantage point: *writing as a woman* examining gender dynamics in action, and *writing as an adult* studying children. She described her different emotional attunements with individual children as the source of insight into the topic of her research—how children "play out" gender dynamics in their social relationships.

These three scholars—Briggs, Bourdieu, and Thorne—highlight different layers of self-awareness that have been foundational in my research journey. As qualitative researchers working across and within different "contact zones" of differences (e.g., cultural, class, race, gender, generation) we navigate different layers of self-awareness—from unconscious to semiconscious to fully conscious, and we can be aware on one level but not on others. I benefited from thinking through these layers: with Briggs tending to unconscious, psychodynamic reflexivity in a cross-cultural contact zone; Bourdieu's embodied notion of self-forgetfulness in a cross-class contact zone; and Thorne's attention to multiple social dimensions and personal memories in a cross-age contact zone.[1]

Beyond Whose Story Is It?

By the time I was finishing my first research project, the vexing question of "whose story is it?" had morphed into more explicit questions of power—who has the power as well as the right to tell another's story, for whom, and with what consequences? These questions galvanized my worries at the time I was completing my first book (Luttrell, 1997). The pathbreaking book *Women Writing Culture* (Behar & Gordon, 1995) put a name to the twin dilemmas I sensed. The volume was written in response to what Behar called a "double crisis" in anthropology and in feminism. The crisis in anthropology was grounded in calls for a "new ethnography" that would be more innovative, dialogic, and experimental, and more self-consciously aware of itself as an interpretation rather than as an objective

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facsimile of a people, places, and web of cultural meanings.[2] *Women Writing Culture* pushed this argument further by acknowledging the imposition of the “male gaze” and the need to learn to “resee” realities through gendered lenses (Behar, 1995, p. 5). The crisis in feminism was the enduring “othering” of “Third World” and “minority” women in ethnographic accounts. To grapple with both themes, contributors offered several correctives, including retelling the story of American anthropology in more inclusive terms, with explicit attention to the contributions of women left out of the canon (e.g., Zora Neale Hurston) and to the invisible labor and intellectual contributions of countless unnamed women (e.g., wives of male anthropologists) who had gone unrecognized. Following *This Bridge Called My Back*, the volume was collaborative and multivoiced and included an array of “blended texts” (Behar, 1995, p. 7) that included historical, biographical and literary essays alongside poetry, theater, life stories, travelogues, fieldwork accounts and fiction, calling forth different forms of reflexive writing. More genres of representation were being added to the ethnographic toolkit.

In “Good Enough Methods for Ethnographic Research” (Luttrell, 2000), I lent my voice to the discussion of the “double crisis” of representation. I imagined my audience, qualitative researchers-in-training who, like me, were wrestling with the demands of reflexivity and feeling caught between a rock and a hard place. To embrace the paradox and politics of reflexivity is profoundly anxiety-producing. It can lead people to feel as if there is no way out of the dilemmas posed by unequal power relations that configure research with human subjects. To address and it is hoped reduce researcher anxieties, I offered a version of reflexivity grounded in vulnerability and relationality rather than in mastery. I made a case that reflexivity is something to be learned and practiced in terms of degrees more than absolutes and is a process to be made transparent in and through writing. To address the sense of vulnerability and anxiety this practice requires, I spoke of reflexive praxis as needing to be “good enough” to fend against the idealized fantasy of the “perfect” self-aware researcher. I drew a comparison between being a “good enough” researcher navigating ethnographic encounters and relationships and “good enough” mothering that had been advocated by pediatrician and child psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott (1965). Just as the perfect mother is a fantasy—a set of individual and cultural wishes and expectations that cannot be met by any *real* woman/person—the same could be said for researchers. Good enough researchers accept that mistakes will be made, inevitably arising out of the intensity of social, emotional, and intellectual engagement with people, out of unequal power relations and the demands of face-to-face relationships, and out of the competing desires and agendas that make up ethnographic research. Human relationships (in research, just as in families, schools, communities, organizations, and politics) are fraught with imperfections, complexities, and mistakes—but these can be compensated for by the many times that things will go well. Conflicts will be acknowledged and addressed even if not resolved, connections will be made, and lessons will be learned. My call for “good enough” was embedded in a progression of reflexive practice that I have outlined: from the early practitioners of ethnography who did not reflect (or at least make these reflections public) to those who acknowledged that their emotions could be both revealing and distorting to those aware of their multiple positionalities (mostly in terms of

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the blinders of Western/race/class/gender/generation) to those who called for a deepening critique of power, most especially around institutionalized racism and patriarchy, to (predominantly white) researchers seeking to do it and coming up short to fears of engaging in research "contact zones" of difference at all.

Almost two decades later, the demands of a reflexive practice are no less pressing, especially for white researchers. As critical psychologist Michelle Fine writes,

> Those of us who are White researchers walk in a long and shameful history of story-lifting, hawking stories of Black/Brown pain and pocketing the profits. We must be exquisitely careful about over-borrowing and under-crediting—stealing—the words, stories, or metaphors of others, especially people of color. Those of us who are White have an obligation to excavate critically our own her/his/their stories of privilege to understand how we sit in tragic dialectics with structures of oppression, and how we might replace ourselves within solidarity movements of resistance. (2018, p. xiv)

I am not sure that the notion of "good enough" adequately taps into the obligations Fine sets out in her call for critical inquiry that democratizes knowledge and demands justice. But embedded with my earlier call for a "good enough" approach are elements and principles for getting the work of research *done* that I wish to lift up for consideration; what we could call a pragmatic reflexivity in unjust times.

Elements of a Pragmatic Reflexivity

There are seven elements in the recursive practice of reflexive qualitative research. These elements are interwoven throughout the research process, analysis and writing. I offer them as springboards for considering how reflexivity is continuous, facilitated by collaboration, and lacks an end point.

Element 1: A Flexible Research Design

A pragmatic reflexivity is oriented toward practice and process rather than perfection and paralysis. It begins with crafting a flexible research design. But by design, I do not mean a blueprint that is drawn up in advance and set in stone but a plan that evolves and can even be scrapped if necessary. As sociologist Howard Becker put it, qualitative research is "designed in the doing" and "leaves room for, indeed insists on, individual judgment" (Becker, 1993, p. 219). Of course, there is preparation—an immersion in and engagement with literature about one's topic, a clear sense of one's purpose, positionality, and power, all of which guide individual judgment. That said, I have found the individual judgment piece of research to be part of the anxiety and vulnerability that researchers face, especially beginners who might wish for a "researcher-proof" plan (analogous to "teacher-proof" curriculum) (Luttrell, 2010, p. 5). There is an inevitable anxiety that comes with learning and discovery; expecting to make design revisions can help to allay those worries. Pragmatic reflexivity means paying attention to evolving research re-

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lationships and their emotional registers; changes in research sites and conditions; surprises and failures; and even the need to change course as I describe next.

Element 2: Being in Relation

In my first *research* project, I opened my interviews with black and white working-class women who had left high school and then returned later in life to get their high school diplomas, with the question, “Why did you decide to return to school?” I was surprised by the repeated refrain, “You want to know about my life? I could write a book about that.” This life-story-oriented response to my much narrower research interest was my induction into the world of reflexive qualitative research. These encounters taught me the importance of paying attention not only to my own research agenda but also to what research participants themselves might want from the research. I was struck by the women’s sense of urgency when speaking about their childhoods and lives, as well as the unexpected memories and feelings that would sometimes interrupt the flow of a woman’s account that I viewed as “tangents.” To receive these stories and do them analytic justice, I had to change course.

Once I realized that the women were telling life stories, I had to take stock of my role as an interviewer, the questions I was asking, and the analytic tools I was prepared to use. My methods changed, as did my thinking about them. I stopped “collecting interview responses” to pre-selected questions that evolved through a grounded-theory type of approach; instead I began to work within a narrative-inquiry frame, in which I became more attuned to how these conversations were co-constructed.

I learned to not only be open to but to pay close attention to the women’s unanticipated tangents and associations—oftentimes to do with their mothers. I also came to realize how much I was avoiding *my own feelings* about the pain, anger, and frustration the women were expressing and to reexamine my own tendency to avoid or skim over these issues.

With more self-awareness, I returned to all the interview material and uncovered a general pattern of maternal images and mixed feelings about mothers as well as teachers. The women had repeatedly acknowledged and referenced these complex images and feelings, but I had minimized them in my analysis. A new line of questioning emerged from this finding: why had school memories evoked such compelling maternal images and conflicts? What model of schooling was being brought into play as of result of these co-constructed interviews?

To answer these questions I developed new transcription and coding strategies for analyzing narrative excerpts related to schooling and childhood. I deliberated about what would be my unit of analysis: I felt torn between reporting individual life stories (which could not so easily be reduced to a main point) and writing about the cross-cutting schooling and identity conflicts that had been repeatedly narrated by the women (for example, being or not being “school smart” or a “teacher’s pet”). In deciding to focus on the patterns and not the individuals, something was lost and something else gained. Insofar

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as a woman's individuality and the *personal* context of her story would be lost (or lessened), the emotional resonance and formative social, cultural, and psychological dynamics of the *schooling* context would be gained and heightened (Luttrell, 2000). My research journey tacked back and forth from group comparisons to individual lives and feelings (including my own—a topic I had preferred to avoid) to comparing school contexts back to individual lives and then to the racially segregated and patriarchal organization of schooling. Again, I came to understand an important element of reflexive practice is to calculate what is lost and gained rather than what is ideal.

Element 3: Exposing and Challenging Assumptions

Formulating research questions and attending to embedded assumptions is a springboard for researcher reflexivity. As I've written elsewhere, these small details or what seem like procedural issues with the research process offer key opportunities to reflect critically on self, other, and the potential relationships between the two:

> Say you wish to interview "high school dropouts" to understand their perspectives on school. Why does this population stand out to you? Where will you find these students? How will you introduce yourself? What will you say is the purpose of your study? Why will these students want to talk with you? Are these questions better asked in a face-to-face interview or on a survey instrument, and why do you think so?
>
> (Luttrell, 2010, p. 6)

Answering these questions (which might seem procedural) helps to flesh out not only one's own stakes and interests but also the possible stakes and interests of research participants. The forms of data collection establish the relational contexts within which researchers work (from more to less intimate) and this will shape the demands placed on researchers to be critically aware of their subjectivities. Formulating research questions can also expose the already preconceived yet unexamined categories/labels. For example, what happens if research participants are referred to as "high school dropouts" as opposed to "high school push-outs," "high school leavers," or "high school resistors"? How might these labels be perceived by participants or (later) by various audiences? These different labels reflect what is sometimes called the *research stance*—the underlying assumptions, values, and intellectual, moral and ethical considerations that undergird the project. An important part of reflexive practice is recognizing that taken-for-granted problems, categories, concepts, and theories are themselves created by systems of power and privilege and patterns of inequality (see DeVault, 1999).

Within the field of education, great attention has been paid to avoiding deficit- and damage-centered assumptions and research framings. Too much educational research has documented failure, brokenness, pain, and loss rather than successes, goodness, desire, and pleasure (see Ladson-Billings, 1997; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Tuck, 2009). In my own research, I learned that working to avoid deficit-based representations of people who are often lumped together under value-laden labels can mean making reflexivity

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itself the topic of study. In my second research project in a self-contained public school teenage pregnancy program serving predominantly African Americans (they called themselves black and "girls"), I wanted to work outside the dominant sociological frame of analysis about teenage pregnancy as "deviant" (not something that "normal" girls do), "wrong" (not something that happens to "good" girls), and racialized (the public image of a pregnant teenager as poor, black, and urban) (Luttrell, 2003). In search for an alternative way of framing the inquiry, I wanted to know what it was like to be identified as a "problem" in a school setting, and how, if given the chance, the girls would wish to portray themselves. How did they want to be seen by others? Thus, engaging the girls in reflecting upon their own *reflexivity* about being the object of others' gaze (which the girls felt was stigmatizing and blaming) became the focus of the inquiry. Asking the girls to make, share, and analyze their own self-representations through arts-based forms (self-portraits, media collages, and theatrical skits) was reflexive practice in action, especially regarding the racial politics of representation. I learned through this research that having an image or a skit to contemplate and, if necessary, to alter became an important vehicle of both personal and collective reflexivity, as well as an opportunity for the girls to speak against stereotypes they felt hemmed in by (Luttrell, 2003; Restler & Luttrell, 2018).

This created a shift in my researcher role. My agenda began to focus on nurturing creativity and self-expression among the girls, and on providing them "opportunities for appearing" (borrowed from anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff, 1992) as a means to imagine new possibilities. I wanted the research to provide a space for the girls to not only respond to stereotypical images others held about them but to create images of their own design, imbued with their own meanings.

Participating in these creative activities with the girls also transported me (a form of forgetfulness of self). For example, as a participant in one of the role-plays, I was assigned to play the character of a girl at her first clinic visit. In the skit I was harshly treated and demeaned by the "nurse," which took me by surprise, put me on edge, and made me tearful. I described the multilayered insights I had from this dramatic encounter (Luttrell, 2003, pp. 120–123) and the various ways my play-acting and the girls' reception of it could be interpreted: as a test, an invitation to enter the girls' punitive world, an initiation of sorts, a twist on or re-positioning of racial dynamics, an attack on a stigmatized self which I had been unable to defend, and which led to conversations about the importance of my need for a tougher armor, and finally, a keen awareness of my whiteness and white privilege.[3] My embodied *participation in* the play—as opposed to mere attentive observation—resulted in my refusal to settle on any one interpretation and to hold the possibility of multiple and conflicted emotions.

Element 4: Ethical Considerations

A flexible reflexive practice requires ethical considerations that go beyond "do no harm," as well as the prescriptions of universities' institutional review board (IRB) rules and regulations. A notable example is found in an article by psychologists Halse and Honey

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(2005), who chart their ethical dilemmas and uneasy resolutions in preparing an ethics application for an interview study with "anorexic" teenage girls. The account features how the positivist biomedical model of research ethics was at odds with their research goals. Was it ethical and/or moral to invite young women to share their experiences of living with anorexia if they didn't believe that they were anorexic? To label a girl anorexic without her consent was to negate her self-definition. At the same time, to include only girls who acknowledged their diagnosis would alter the point of the research, which was to capture the complex continuum of "anorexic" experiences. Ethics board officers, funders, and some colleagues were impatient with their moral deliberations and encouraged the researchers to take "just fill in the forms and do it." Developing strategies in the recruitment and consent procedures helped to address what the researchers saw as their own complicity in "othering" anorexic girls but ultimately left them uncomfortable and unsatisfied. Their account of the process—from how to label the population to how best to recruit to formulating consent forms—sheds important light on how a research context and institutional regulations can undermine sensitivity, collaboration, and the advancement of knowledge.

Like reflexivity, ethical practice in research is an ongoing process, not a one-off accomplishment. The job of a researcher is not done simply because the researcher has secured consent forms. The formal conventions of ethics review processes do not exempt researchers from doing the hard, exacting practice of reflexivity, analyzing the politics, ethics, and morality of their research decisions and actions. Indeed, ethical and reflexivity obligations continue into the writing process. Questioning the politics of academic writing and publishing is important, as many researchers are concerned about "voicing over" or burying the perspectives of research participants. Barrie Thorne was acutely aware of this tension when she wrote that despite her best intentions, by the "very act of documenting children's autonomy, I undermined it, for my gaze remained, at its core and in its ultimate knowing purpose, that of a more powerful adult" (1993, p. 27; also see Walkerdine, 1990).

Thorne's concern finds correlates in postcolonial critiques. In recent years, calls have been made to interrogate implicit settler-colonial logic within education and educational research. Leigh Patel describes the need for an anticolonial (rather than a decolonial) stance that challenges the basis of knowledge production in terms of property and ownership. She introduces a concept of "answerability" that intertwines with reflexive practice. Considering the role that educational research has played in perpetuating slavery, settler-colonialism, and institutional racism, she suggests that educational researchers "have responsibilities as speakers, listeners, and those responsibilities include stewardship of ideas and learning, not ownership" (2014, p. 372). Stewarding rather than owning knowledge expands the parameters of reflexivity, opening up new possibilities that go beyond the (important but not sufficient) guideline for researchers to "give back" (a common phrase to denote researcher responsibilities to her/his/their research subjects). Many researchers have written about their fraught sense of social responsibility in qualitative research (see Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000). In the spirit of a pragmatic reflexivity in unjust times, I encourage novice researchers to find ways to harness their predisposi-

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tions, imaginations, empathy, and solidarity with others, to find particular forms of "answerability" that can be accomplished within the scope of their project.

Element 5: How Might I Be Wrong?

The answer to this question *also* invites *reflexive practice*. The answer will vary depending upon the epistemological perspective taken by the researcher. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz frames this topic in terms of the "problems of verification" or, as he prefers, an "appraisal" of "how you can tell a better account from a worse one" (1973, p. 16). Geertz's suggested appraisal has to do with how closely the ethnographic account "brings us into touch with the lives of strangers" and is able to sort "winks from twitches and real winks from mimicked ones" (1973, p. 16). Qualitative research specialist and anthropologist Joseph Maxwell (2005) frames this topic in terms of "validity threats" that can be addressed by utilizing an array of strategies, including intensive, long-term involvement in a fieldwork site and collecting "rich" data. Many qualitative researchers are uncomfortable or reject the concept of "validity." As a feminist researcher influenced by the disposition of intersectionality I think of validation in terms of *authenticity* (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) and *reciprocity* established through my research relationships. I have been most concerned about three things: the extent to which the research participants with whom I work have a hand in how their lives and experiences are represented; how they come to see themselves and others in new ways as a consequence of participating in the research, however small or fleeting; and how I can offer a line of analysis and social critique that is grounded in the perspectives and perceptions of participants. That said, I believe the answer to the questions of "how might I be wrong" is not a solitary endeavor as I discuss next.

Element 6: Collaborative and Creative Reflexivity

It is not enough for solitary researchers to delve into their own emotions (unconscious or conscious), responses, identifications, and positionalities. Pragmatic reflexivity is facilitated by both collaboration and creativity. In this regard, team research and cross-disciplinary involvement may be not only useful but also necessary, enabling the perspectives and insights of research team members to inform, challenge, and extend research findings. Sandra Harding (2015) makes this case building on the foundational feminist concept of standpoint theory, arguing for team approaches that build diverse ways of seeing into a project, deliberately acknowledging that our standpoints delimit what and how we see, and that collectively we can see more fully.

Feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan (1982) developed an early example of team-based reflexivity as an outgrowth of her work on gender, identity, and moral development. She gathered a team of graduate students who were diverse in gender, race, sexual orientation, and age, and the team worked together for a decade. During this time, Gilligan and her team developed a voice-centered methodological *Listening Guide* to analyze narratives with girls and women (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2006). Among the multiple steps in the listening guide, researcher reflexivity was explicitly built in. During

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the first step, alongside listening for the plot in a narrative (i.e., what was going on and in what context), each team member was to document her own response to the person speaking and to what was being said. Members reflected on their ideas, associations, feelings, and (dis)connections, and they questioned themselves about what might be shaping their reactions, including their own social locations compared to the speakers.[4]

This method was further enhanced by bringing multiple, diverse listeners into "interpretative communities" (McLean Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995) where listeners shared their responses with each other. The idea was not to reach consensus or to determine inter-rater reliability as much as it was to pry open and sustain multiple lines of interpretation based on different members' perspectives.

Another example of the use of collaborative reflexivity in practice is found in the work of Dodson and Schmalzbauer (2005) whose research explored poor families and their survival strategies in the wake of welfare reform. They were concerned about how "othered people exercise caution in speaking about their lives" and how this can distort findings in poverty research and/or promote misrepresentations of low-income people (2005, p. 949). Critical of how the knowledge of people in poor and marginalized communities is often portrayed, the authors made a point to incorporate participants as "thinkers in research about their lives rather than data producers for experts" (2005, p. 957). In what they call "interpretative focus groups," the researchers organized participatory and improvisational sharing sessions with community members and researchers to discuss the interview data and to respond to preliminary analyses. These focus groups included research team members and low-income mothers from communities where they were conducting research. The focus groups did not necessarily include the particular low-income women who had been interviewed; they were meant as opportunities for diverse low-income mothers to speak about, reflect upon, and build a collaborative analysis of the array of survival strategies to make ends meet. Sometimes the researchers presented excerpts from interviews and asked for comments. Other times they brought in graphics and pie charts, and still other times they "play-acted" exchanges between interviewers and interviewees. The goal was to draw out the contradictions, to challenge researchers' selections of themes, and to correct mistaken interpretations ("that's what she said, but it's not what she meant"). From this participatory interpretative approach they learned about certain "habits of hiding" from punitive authorities (employers, social service workers, school personnel) that might otherwise have gone unreported and misunderstood. Again, the process did not always result in a consensus or a unified collective analysis, but it did shed new light on the data that had been collected. In both uses of collaborative reflexivity, the goal is not to identify *the* true or authentic story but rather to expose the many relations and dynamics that influence the construction of the knowledge being produced.

Participatory action research (PAR) is a model of research that is premised on yet another form of collaborative reflexivity. This is because PAR is collectively defined with participants at each stage of the process—from shaping the research questions and identifying what audience it should address to collecting and analyzing the data to framing the interpretations and making collective decisions about how best to represent and disseminate

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the findings in ways that can lead to social action (see Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Fine & Torre, 2006). PAR is meant to develop research skills and capacity among its members, but it doesn't mean everyone will make the same contribution to the research. Reflexivity in PAR projects is most often characterized in terms of critical consciousness, with philosophical roots in the work of Paulo Freire (1970). With critical consciousness, people can see themselves in a world that is not fixed but in process, able to be transformed.

Makes Me Mad, a PAR project focused on young women's experiences growing up in the Lower East City of New York City, provides an example. Caitlin Cahill, a white researcher who had grown up in the neighborhood and witnessed its gentrification worked with six young women (ages 16–22) of Chinese, Puerto Rican, Dominican, and African American backgrounds to explore their everyday lives and concerns. As part of researching available community resources, the team came across a report that had been written by a community-based organization serving young people in the community. The report included a hypothetical profile of a young Latina woman living in the neighborhood whose future was presented as "bleak," cast as a "high school drop-out, unemployed single mother with HIV *[with]* no job prospects who is caught shoplifting" (Cahill, 2007, p. 330). As an "at-risk" young woman, she could surely be rescued by the activities, services, and interventions offered by the community-based organization. Aside from the troubling stereotyping and culture of poverty perspective embedded in the report, it was clear to the members of the research team that this report was not meant to be read by the very people being served by the organization. *Makes Me Mad* was thus formulated as a "response" project, as a way to speak back to stereotypes, misrepresentations, and misunderstandings, including how young women of color internalize racism and sexism. The team decided to write for an audience like themselves—writing about "us" for "us." They considered a range of research products and artistic presentations (including a sticker campaign) that provoked thinking and/or laughter, such as Adrien Piper's "business card," My Calling Card #1: For Dinners and Cocktail Parties (1986–1990). The team developed a website to highlight the many aspects of the research team's work and their research products (see http://www.fed-up-honeys.org/mainpage.htm and one in Chinese, http://www.fed-up-honeys.org/cn/).

PAR methodology is not without complications; it doesn't erase differences between diverse team members or result in consensus. As one of the participants put it:

> What we realized was that not all differences of opinions need to be resolved. Not everyone has to think like you and you don't have to think like everyone. It's okay to disagree and express opposition because it helps others to see things from every angle possible. This was one of our biggest accomplishments, the ability to see the world through someone else's eyes and to let others see the world through ours.
>
> (Cahill, Arenas, Contreras, Jiang, Rios-Moore, & Threatts, 2004, p. 239)

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This project is a good example of reflexivity being the subject (refuting the “at risk” label), method (researching about us for us), and products (materials meant to provoke reflexivity).

There is a spectrum of collaboration and participation within qualitative research that is useful to recognize. I do not believe that the participatory nature of *research* alone determines its emancipatory possibilities or its capacity for reflexive practice. Again, I encourage novice qualitative researchers to situate themselves within a spectrum rather than seeking *absolutes*.

Most recently I have written about a critical visual methodology of “collaborative seeing” that falls along this spectrum (Luttrell, 2010, 2016; Fontaine & Luttrell, 2015; Luttrell & Clark, 2018; Restler & Luttrell 2018). It is a reflexive and flexible frame of engaging photographs and videos produced by a group of diverse children growing up in culturally, racially/ethnically and linguistically diverse, working-class communities in Worcester, Massachusetts. The project was meant to deepen and expand on “giving kids cameras research” that has burgeoned in the past 20 years (Luttrell, 2010; Luttrell & Chalfen, 2010). My practice of collaborative seeing is committed to making sense of the images produced by the young people over time (at ages 10, 12, 16, and 18) and in multiple relational groupings (individual interviews between a child and adult research team member; small groups of children without adult direction; in conversations where the young people planned to publicly exhibit their work; and as teenagers reflecting on their childhood images). Tracing and analyzing these dialogues have made clear the importance of preserving the multiplicity of meanings that the young people attach to their images depending on their audiences, context, and moments in time. I have also used the young people’s images to invite a reflexive practice among adults working with youth—prompting viewers to notice their identifications with and projections onto the young people’s images, to consider carefully what they see and interpret, and why they have come to this reading.

This reflexive practice and self-discovery process (coming into awareness about assumptions and judgments being made) has been facilitated by having a photograph to look (not stare) at closely, following sociologist Howard Becker’s guidelines for a visual sociology. Becker cautions the viewer not to “stare and thus stop looking; look actively . . . you’ll find it useful to take up the time by naming everything in the picture to yourself and writing up notes” (1986, p. 232). This advice is followed by an invitation to engage in “a period of fantasy, telling yourself a story about the people and things in the picture. The story needn’t be true, it’s just a device for externalizing and making clear to yourself the emotion and mood the picture has evoked, both part of its statement” (1986, p. 232).

Again, reflexivity in the thinking and discovery process is facilitated when it takes a form that is available for reflection (e.g., the story told about the people and things in the picture) so that the recursive cycle of reflexivity can begin again.

I have extended this practice to collage making as a form of reflexive analysis. Cutting around the edges of the photographic details, focusing on what I can see, touch, and be affected by has been a way of slowing down my looking and feeling. My tactile immersion

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in this way of “knowing” the photographs took me back to the children’s own ways of looking and touching the photographs—for example, the tender ways a child caressed the edges of a picture he had taken of his mom in the kitchen, the sigh in his voice as he spoke of his explosive love for her. This creative process has heightened my awareness of the intimate, yet separate, sense of my own looking at and responding to the children’s ways of looking that has been so hard to put into words.

Element 7: Looking Back

As a practice, reflexivity is continuous and lacks an end point. Indeed, many scholars who have revisited their earlier research findings have drawn new conclusions based on historical as well as personal changes. Catherine Riessman (2002) writes of one such case, re-analyzing an interview she had conducted in the early 1980s with a woman named “Tessa” about her difficult divorce (the topic of her research). Tessa described being repeatedly raped by her husband, which, at the time, was legally permissible and not grounds for divorce. In her original analysis Riessman (1990) documented her own role in the co-construction of the narrative and its meaning, with Tessa emerging from a victim to a triumphant survivor who was able to force her husband to leave. The violence within Tessa’s marriage had been especially hard for Riessman to listen to, a fact she alluded to in the first analysis but stopped short of interrogating. In revisiting the interview years later, Riessman recognized how the heroic portrayal of Tessa’s survival was historically situated, grounded in the politics and “victim discourse” of feminism in the 1980s. As times had changed, not only had legislation passed prohibiting marital rape, but so had feminist critiques of binary thinking (e.g., problematizing the dichotomy of classification as either victim or survivor). Meanwhile, Riessman had attained additional materials (including Tessa’s diary and drawings), which added more layers of information about the level of violence within the family that complicated the picture of Tessa’s hardships, as well as her heroism. A scheduled follow-up visit with Tessa had not turned out the way Riessman had expected, making her question the terms of their relationship and whether Tessa had benefited from the research in the ways Riessman had hoped. Riessman’s willingness to revisit and revise is yet another form of reflexivity in practice—a way of bringing intellectual labor, historical and theoretical changes, and personal lives into closer relation. (See Burawoy, 2003, for his discussion of researchers returning to visit their sites of research and revise their findings.)

Conclusion

Thus Riessman ushers me back to where I began: to the caveat that reflexivity in practice lies precisely on the blurry edge of experience, where research intersects with biography, history, ethics, politics, and revision. The pragmatic reflexivity and its elements that I have offered are meant to help researchers get the work done so that revision can indeed take place. As I reflect on the works discussed here and on the arc of my own research trajectory, I am inclined to conclude that a pragmatic reflexivity benefits by an eclectic and expansive toolkit. Reflexivity is not a solitary process limited to critical self-examina-

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tion but derives from a collective ethos. Reflexivity in practice is deeply intertwined with crossing into and out of contact zones of difference, power imbalances, the power of feelings, and different ways of seeing. The goal is to humanize rather than objectify the knowledge we create.

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Notes:

(1.) I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing these layers out and enriching my line of analysis.

(2.) The earlier publication, *Writing Culture* (Clifford & Marcus, 1986), had set off the debate, and the fact that no women anthropologists were invited to contribute to the volume had sent shock waves through feminist anthropology. More than a protest against the exclusion of women, *Women Writing Culture* offered a fundamental critique of the premise of *writing culture*.

(3.) Arts-based researcher Oikarinen-Jabai might refer to this playing as “performative research.” Her description evokes the ethnographic enterprise, too, as she writes, “The ‘play’ becomes interesting when we make ourselves fully present in a space that opens a path for us toward the borders, allowing us to encounter the Other and transgress our boundaries. When we step over the boundary, something is left behind, perhaps to surface again” (2003, p. 576).

(4.) This mode of listening is similar to that of a clinician who is meant to pay attention to his or her countertransference (reactions to the client and the material being discussed) so as to not confuse his or her own responses with those of the client. Without careful self-awareness, clinicians can lose touch with what the client is trying to communicate. The same is true for qualitative researchers.

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