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## A REFLEXIVE LENS: EXPLORING DILEMMAS OF QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY THROUGH THE CONCEPT OF REFLEXIVITY

**Abstract** Reflexivity has emerged as a central and critical concept in the methodology of qualitative social research. However, the concept of reflexivity is defined and taken up in a wide variety of ways, and the assumptions underlying each incarnation have particular implications for research outcomes. This paper argues that these various conceptualizations of reflexivity offer the qualitative researcher a critical lens through which to analyze key methodological dilemmas. Exploring the concept of reflexivity in its various forms provides an entry-point for understanding key dilemmas in the epistemology of qualitative methodology, qualitative research relationships, and the evaluation of qualitative research. These dilemmas present important challenges in terms of the complex issues of power, knowledge production and subjectivity. This paper thus demonstrates that a reflexive exploration of methodological dilemmas can provide a starting point for assessing the consequences and transformative potential of our qualitative research.

**Keywords** Reflexivity; Qualitative Methodology; Epistemology; Research Relationships; Power; Positionality; Quality; Research Dilemmas

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Too often in the social sciences there is a tendency to raise methodological issues and problems only when we “are talking about concrete techniques of evidence gathering” (Harding 1988:2). Working through methodological dilemmas need not be relegated to discussions of specific techniques, debating the merits or shortcomings of what are particular variations in the doing of qualitative methodology. Rather, I would

like to focus on what all these various techniques have in common: the various dilemmas of doing qualitative work, regardless of the myriad strategies for data-gathering and analysis that one may employ in doing so. This paper uses the concept of reflexivity to render these dilemmas salient to a discussion of qualitative methodology.

The doing of “reflexive research” can be found to mean many things within literature. Authors vary in terms of their descriptions of what reflexivity actually is, although numerous attempts have been made to categorize and confine its various interpretations (Wasserfall 1997; Lynch 2000; Macbeth 2001; Pillow 2003). Despite the difficulty of pinning down a single definition, it is important to consider how the various incarnations of reflexivity have been central to the project of developing qualitative methodology and its historical transformations (Smith 1992; Zavella 1996; Finlay; 2002). As Wanda Pillow (2003) notes, the ways in which the qualitative researcher claims to practice reflexivity matter for our particular research outcomes. Thus, while there is no right or wrong way to do reflexivity, how we conceptualize reflexivity and incorporate it into our research practices has implications for the qualitative research we produce. I argue that these implications, in all of their complexity, can be made clear by exploring some key interpretations of the concept of reflexivity.

As Denzin and Lincoln have observed, qualitative researchers today continue to struggle with an ongoing crisis in qualitative methodology: a “triple crisis of representation, legitimation,

and praxis” (2000:17). This paper will demonstrate that the concept of reflexivity allows us to break this crisis down into three questions that are important to explore in any qualitative inquiry. First, in our representations of the social world, what are our underlying assumptions about the production of knowledge – how do we know, and who can claim to know? What is considered legitimate knowledge, and what role does power, identity and positionality play in this process? Finally, how does one put into practice the reflexive techniques and address methodological issues in a way that results in valid, good-quality social research? These are the three main methodological dilemmas, which this paper will explore. The intention here is not to offer a resolution to any of these issues, but rather to demonstrate that it is in reflexively thinking-through these dilemmas that the researcher may benefit the most. Thus, this paper argues that the concept of reflexivity offers an important opportunity to explore crucial questions in the “thinking,” the “doing” and the “evaluation” of qualitative methodology.

Though this separation is somewhat arbitrary, these three categories of dilemmas all relate to questions about the production of knowledge in qualitative methodology. Regarding the “thinking” of qualitative methodology, Douglas Macbeth (2001) notes that one reading of reflexivity involves raising questions about the *epistemology* of qualitative methodology: what is the foundation of our knowledge in this aspect of the social sciences, and who can make claims to “know” and represent others using qualita-

tive approaches? Similarly, Frosh and Emerson (2005) interpret reflexivity as a process of testing one's interpretations, and being accountable for the means by which we arrived at a particular "reading" of the data; in other words, making explicit the process by which we came to know. These are the two approaches to reflexivity that I will be using in investigating the epistemological dilemmas of qualitative methodology.

Dilemmas within the "doing" of qualitative methodology are drawn from reflexive accounts of the research relationship. The primary themes here are the issues raised by an understanding of power in the research relationship, the role of the researcher in applying qualitative methodology, and the dual problematizing of identity and positionality. Problematizing the presence and effects of power in the research relationship has been the primary concern of feminist reflexivity (Zavella 1996), raising the question of how we as researchers are implicated and located within these power relations in making use of qualitative methodology. For Jacqueline Watts (2006), reflexivity involves asking questions about role performance in conducting qualitative research, a dilemma complicated by Amy Best's (2003) own reflexive questions about the co-construction of identity. These readings of reflexivity dovetail into Reinharz's (1997) argument that reflexivity is a process of understanding how the multiply-positioned self is meaningful (and made meaningful) within qualitative projects.

Finally, reflecting on these epistemological and relationship-related dilemmas leads us to con-

sider dilemmas inherent to the evaluation of qualitative methodology: namely, the issues of validity and quality. Howard Becker (1996) has argued that there is no concrete recipe for the production of quality qualitative work. In the absence of a check-list for evaluating research, we must reflexively consider other ways for evaluating the validity of knowledge produced through qualitative methods.

Overall, the dilemmas raised in this paper present some important challenges to qualitative researchers when analyzed through the lens of reflexivity. Methodology expresses particular forms of consciousness, a consciousness that is bound by a limited ability to conceptualize and enact social change (Sandoval 2000). Exploring methodological dilemmas through the concept of reflexivity provides an opportunity to reveal and understand these limits, which is a necessary first step to understanding the consequences and transformative potential of our research.

### THE "THINKING" OF QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY: REFLEXIVITY AND EPISTEMOLOGY

To think about methodology is to ask questions about epistemology (Hawksworth 2006), and in many ways, the project of developing a qualitative methodology has been founded upon epistemological dilemmas. In his classic study *Street Corner Society*, William Foote Whyte (1943) took the epistemological position that social researchers need to be in proximity to those they study, that we can learn about social

life by being close to those who live it. The idea that we should take the point of view of those we study is a project with the epistemological foundation that accurate knowledge about social life can be achieved by going to the source of those who actually experience it, with the belief that "the nearer we get to the conditions in which [people] actually do attribute meanings to objects and events the more accurate our descriptions of those meanings are likely to be" (Becker 1996:58). Underlying this epistemology is an assumption that there is distance to be bridged between the researcher and the researched "other:" the source of information.

Feminist epistemology was founded upon an assumption that this distance between the knower and the known could be ameliorated, while at the same time drawing attention to the ways in which hierarchical research relationships have the potential to objectify our research participants (Wolf 1996; Shope 2006). Furthermore, an epistemological reorientation was offered by feminist theorists working towards an inclusion of experiential accounts in the production of knowledge about social life. Women (and other marginalized groups) have struggled to have their experiences included in the study of social life, for "experiential accounts are too readily equated with anecdotal evidence" (Code 1995:18), and thus devalued in positivist epistemology. Experiential accounts have been an important source of knowledge for critiquing long-standing sociological "facts" and theories about social life that did not correspond to the lived realities of marginalized persons (Collins 1990). Feminist critique of

qualitative methodology also problematized the notion of value-free research, arguing that ideals of objective knowledge were not only impossible to attain, but also undesirable (Smith 1987; Harding and Norberg 2005; Hawksworth 2006). As such, reflexivity came to mean a deeper consideration of the subjectivity and role of the researcher in the process of knowledge production.

However, we should take care to understand the ways in which knowledge production that begins and ends with researcher subjectivities may reproduce epistemological problems for the project of qualitative methodology. Douglas Macbeth terms this "positional reflexivity," which involves "a disciplined view and articulation of one's analytically situated self," or how the subjectivity of the researcher enters into the process of knowledge production (2001:38). Underlying positional reflexivity is a problematic epistemological assumption that the reflexive social actor is the sole source of knowledge production. As such, positional reflexivity retains traces of enlightenment discourses of order and reason, and "organizes a professional gaze that locates the foundations for knowledge production and methodological rigor in the skeptical-analytic ego" (Macbeth 2001:41). Locating knowledge production within experience conveys the authority and ability to know as being within the reflexive researcher. Thus, in sourcing knowledge from experience, we run the risk of reproducing positivist divisions between the knowing researcher/unknowing participant; the very subject/object division that methodological

critiques had originally sought to challenge (Lal 1996).

Experience must therefore be reflexively positioned within the broader social contexts in which they occur, so as to avoid the dilemma of experiential knowledge standing in for a claim to authority. That is, we must be careful not to replace “the old tyranny of authoritarian expertise,” one that discounts people’s lived experiences, with “a new tyranny of «experientialism» that claims for first-person experiential utterances an immunity from challenge, interpretation, or debate” (Code 1995:36). Experiential accounts must be understood as particular interpretations; to accept experiential accounts as exempt from critical analysis runs the risk of romanticizing “knowledge on the margins” (Haraway 1988:584) and reproduces the dilemma of granting unquestioning authority in answering the epistemological question, “who can know?” A further epistemological dilemma arises when we consider the possibility of competing knowledge claims on the basis of experience: we have no means to decide between contradictory claims to knowledge on the basis of experience (Ramazanoglu 2002:78).

This leads us to problematize how to include the subjectivity of the researcher as an element in the process of knowledge production. Despite the above-identified problems that experiential knowledge presents for qualitative epistemology, it does raise the important reflexive question: what effect does the insertion of the self into the research process have upon the production of social knowledge (Lal 1996:200)?

Answering this question has been a central and early theme in the development of reflexive methodology. For instance, the researcher’s dedication to preconceived conceptual categories, political agendas, and an alignment with particular theoretical positions has long been identified as sources of methodological problems for sociological analysis. Glaser and Strauss (1967) argued that, at the time of their writing, the generation of new sociological explanations had stagnated due to a focus on knowledge verification between evidence and explanation, which oftentimes involved forcing a “fit” between empirical findings and pre-established grand theories of major sociological forerunners. To address this gap between empirical findings and theoretical explanation, Glaser and Strauss emphasized empirical data as the source for generating sociological knowledge – that is, our explanations for what we observe should be grounded in the empirical findings themselves. Grounded theory thus involves paying attention to, and making explicit, the process by which one generates explanations on the basis of one’s data, with conceptual categories emerging from the data itself (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

What we “see” in our qualitative investigations must thus be reflexively thought of as “what we think we see,” questioning the basis upon which we have made this interpretation. This involves understanding how one’s own conceptual categories are brought into our observations and analyses, for as Trinh T. Minh-ha has observed: “questions are always loaded with the questioner’s prejudices” (1989:69). The extent to

which a researcher’s own conceptual categories affect their production of knowledge is a particularly important question when we understand these conceptual categories as a product of our situation within a disciplinary field and academic tradition (Wacquant 1992; Bourdieu 2004). Beyond our prior commitments to theoretical perspectives and political orientations, our own culturally-contingent conceptual categories can also impact upon our understandings of what we see and hear in the research process (Becker 1998), and whether or not we will believe what our participants tell us versus what we think is “really” going on (Gordon et al. 2005; Shope 2006).

It is not an easy task to let go of one’s conceptual categories. This approach has been attempted by Mykhalovskiy and McCoy, who rejected conceptual categories from the ruling academic discourses of health care policy in favor of an “empirically empty term, one that waited to be filled as [participants] told us about their practice and their experiences” (2002:24). In spite of this intention, they found that even such an empty term as “health work” reproduced a normative standard for their participants, who read work as an assumption that one is actively doing something about one’s health in a way that would be conceptually categorized within health policy as good/acceptable (Mykhalovskiy and McCoy 2002:28). This experience demonstrates that preconceived conceptual categories will always be present within our methodology. What matters is whether and how well we acknowledge some of the ways in which these conceptual categories play a role in the process of knowledge pro-

duction, and what the potential consequences might be for our analyses. We should also take care that the interpretations we make based on what we know (as academics immersed in a field of knowledge) do not erase our participants’ knowing, and thereby their experiences (Frosh and Emerson 2005). As researchers, our dedication to particular theoretical (and methodological) approaches can hinder our interpretations by imposing conceptual categories that do not necessarily fit with people’s experiences.

If conducting reflexive qualitative research entails asking questions of knowledge production, then these questions “have to be addressed locally, in piece-by-piece analyses of specific instances of knowledge-making, in which innovative techniques are adduced and tested, and the best of older methods and assumptions are re-evaluated for their residual viability” (Code 1995:43). In this sense, we are urged to consider using a methodology based upon a reflexive epistemology – one that continually questions and problematizes the social process of knowledge production.

### THE “DOING” OF QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY: REFLEXIVITY AND THE RESEARCH RELATIONSHIP

This section may appear to take up dilemmas in qualitative methodology that primarily apply to interactive research techniques (fieldwork, interviewing, observation, etc.) rather than text-based analyses. However, certainly not all techniques under qualitative methodology involve

interviewing, observation or other first-hand means for gathering data, and the dilemmas in this section are just as applicable to text-based and secondary analyses. For instance, the issue of power cannot be avoided in text-based analyses just because the research “relationship” is between the researcher and pieces of text rather than the researcher and human participants. There remains the issue of the power and authority of the researcher in presenting a certain version of reality by authoring a particular interpretation of that text (Macbeth 2001). As such, the dilemmas of qualitative methodology transcend whatever particular techniques we may employ in doing qualitative research, particularly when it comes to the issue of power.

## REFLEXIVITY AND POWER DILEMMAS

Wanda Pillow (2003) argues that reflexivity arose as a methodological tool in the social sciences when power in the research relationship started to be discussed as a central concern, particularly in feminist research. Asking destabilizing questions about the objectivity of research led to questions about researcher/participant subjectivities, and from this, the question of power imbalances between them. However, if power is to be discussed as a dilemma in qualitative methodology, it should be noted that the ways in which we imagine power matters. Our definitions of power will impact how it is conceptualized as a problem, the kinds of issues we identify (or fail to identify) as methodological dilemmas, and potential solutions. This, in turn, influences our understandings of

social differences and subjectivities (Sandoval 2000; Gordon et al. 2005). I argue that an understanding of power that goes beyond the immediate interactions of research is most useful for understanding the implications that power differentials have for qualitative methodology. To limit ourselves to an understanding of power solely within the interactional context renders us unable to consider the full extent to which power may pose dilemmas in all relevant aspects of qualitative research.

For instance, Elizabeth Hoffman (2007) argues that further attention should be paid to emotion in the interviewing relationship, and that emotional labor in the interview should be included as important research data. She interprets emotional labor as shifts in the power relationship between interviewer and interviewee. In doing so, Hoffman characterizes power as something that shifts back and forth: at one point the interviewer has power, then the interviewee does, and so on. She also imagines power as multidimensional: while the researcher has the power to craft particular stories about the research subjects’ experiences, our participants also have the power to challenge this, by refusing to answer, redirecting questions, confronting the interviewer – as well as answering questions however they choose. Power is imagined as a possession that can be attained and used by social actors. For Hoffman (2007), these power shifts represent important data that tends to be neglected in the production of social research. The methodological challenge posed by this analysis is to examine these power shifts and the emotional labor that accompanies them as

spaces in which interviewer/interviewee relationships are contested and social knowledge is produced.

However, conceptualizing power as a possession holds particular assumptions about the research relationship: first, that power shifts between the interviewer and interviewee, like a ball being passed back and forth. This limits problematizing power differentials to the question of who holds more or less power at any given point in time through an interaction-based analysis of the research relationship. Power becomes something that can be given to or taken away from a social actor; indeed, Hoffman notes that qualitative researchers necessarily “abandon some of their power” by choosing to interview in the first place (2007:321-322). This implies that her methodology is inherently imbued with the potential to empower those we research. What is not considered in Hoffman’s account are broader power relations that exist beyond the research interaction; from this perspective, we run the risk of homogenizing entire categories of participants without considering the kinds of power differentials that exist between them. An alternative reflexive analysis of power would thus seek to contextualize power imbalances of the research relationship within broader relations of power outside of the immediate research setting.

To broaden our understanding of how power might be imagined in the research relationship, we can turn to the writings of Michel Foucault. Foucault argued that relations of power are circularity (Foucault 1977:199). For Foucault, pow-

er is not something that is intrinsically held by persons; it is the effect of discursive struggles over the realm of meaning and production of knowledge. Nor is power simply imposed from above or held by a singular source; it is distributed throughout social relationships (Foucault 1978:101). Susan Bordo clarifies this conceptualization of power, noting that, within a Foucauldian approach, “the fact that power is not held by *anyone* does not entail that it is equally held by *all*. It is «held» by no one; but people and groups *are* positioned differently within it. No one may control the rules of the game. But not all players on the field are equal” (Bordo 1993:191). This understanding of power allows us to consider the ways in which our research participants are variously located within relations of power outside of the immediate interviewing context, as well as the ways in which we as researchers are variously positioned. The utility of this relational approach to power is illustrated in the work of Shanaz Khan (2005) when she takes care to note the heterogeneity of her research participants in terms of their positions in relations of power. In studying “third world women,” Khan reflects upon the risk of constructing a unitary identity for her participants as racialized, oppressed and powerless, as this would have the effect of erasing the various positions of her interview subjects in relation to the social hierarchies that informed their everyday experiences. We might also consider the ways in which researchers themselves are variously located within relations of power, lending a multidimensional understanding to the dilemma of power in qualitative method-

ology (Hsiung 1996). A multidimensional approach to power can assist us in understanding power relations beyond the immediate research interaction as a potential dilemma, with macro-social forces impacting upon both relationships in the field and the way the research is received by international audiences (Michalowski 1997; Khan 2005).

Conceptualizing power as a possession to be passed back and forth in the research relationship may hinder our ability to understand the research relationship as a site of problematic power differences. A possessive understanding of power leads Hoffman (2007) to speculate on how power differences may be ameliorated – and yet, she is unable to articulate how sharing personal information with her informants gives them power. How can one's informants use personal information about the interviewer in a powerful way when they are so differently positioned within broader power relations outside of the interviewing context? Conversely, in sharing information with us, our interviewees take greater risks. In interviewing women engineers, Watts' (2006:387) research operated on a "model of mutuality:" disclosure was traded back and forth between the researcher and the participants, leaving Watts to wonder about the extent to which researcher's political values should be revealed when rapport may depend on this mutual sharing. One question that is *not* asked by this assumed "model of mutuality," however, is: how can we be assured that disclosure is indeed ever fully mutual? By neglecting the existence of power relationships beyond the interaction between researcher and researched,

we may be limiting our understanding of the ways in which our participants are similarly constrained in their ability to disclose.

Power is ever-present in the research relationship and trying to equalize the relationship does not erase the researcher/researched power differentials that reflexivity reveals (Wolf 1996). While we can come to understand these power differentials, there are limits to our ability to address the issue of power in qualitative research through a reflexive methodology. In examining the relationship between feminist methodology and political commitments, Wasserfall (1997) argues that care should be taken not to overextend our reading of reflexivity as a solution to the dilemma of power differences in the research relationship. While we can understand the impact of power, we deepen the dilemmas posed by it if we assume they can be erased. She analyzes this as the difference between a "weak" and "strong" reading of reflexivity. The "weak" reading characterizes reflexivity as an ongoing self-awareness project, a continual mindfulness of the social processes between the researcher and researched, including an understanding of power differentials and the ways in which we represent the subjects of our research. Yet, Wanda Pillow (2003) cautions against this form of reflexivity for its tendency to deal with power merely as a confessional tale. As Pillow notes, while transparency may enhance our understanding of power differentials, it does nothing to actually alleviate those problems. Transparency can "yield a catharsis of self-awareness for the researcher" by pointing out that the dilemma of power exists and

affected the research in some way, but cannot offer any particular solutions (Pillow 2003:181). Thus, it is important that the promises of reflexivity not be overextended, for "reflexivity is not in itself a process for overcoming distortion or exploitation" (Wasserfall 1997:152).

Conversely, a "strong" reading of reflexivity begins from the assumption that reflexive research can promote a *break-down* of power differences between the researcher and the researched. This is problematic in multiple ways (Wasserfall 1997). The pitfalls of a "strong" reading of reflexivity as a methodological tool was apparent to Wasserfall in conducting her own research: attempting to help her participants connect their immediate experiences of oppression to broader social processes and thereby empower them (i.e., equalizing the power differences between researcher/researched). A "strong" reading of reflexivity hindered her relationships in the field when her participants resisted her own interpretations of their experiences. Wasserfall's experience speaks to Lynch's (2000:36) argument that it is problematic to assume reflexivity is ever "inherently radical" or necessarily transformative. Harding and Norberg (2005) point out that taking up reflexivity as a way to break-down power imbalances might be contradictory to our research aims: on the one hand, we may be preoccupied with trying to minimize power imbalances in the research relationship, while on the other we hope to evoke powerful transformations and social change. For instance: the power of academic research is what gave rise to the political usefulness of Mykhalovskiy and colleagues' (2008) work in collaboration with

frontline health care workers. Taking up health care workers' experiences in the form of a scholarly report imbued the workers' narratives with the authority of academic work, providing them with a better means to enter into health care reform debates. Thus, the power imbalance that a "strong" reading of reflexivity assumes to break down is at times the very source of our authority by which we, as research "experts," are able to gain legitimacy and political impact.

While this tension cannot be resolved, a reflexive approach that involves making power imbalances explicit can be useful for understanding the diverse ways in which power operates. Using this approach, we can problematize the assumed binary between powerless participant and powerful researcher, and challenge the unitary identities that these positions are assumed to entail. First, reflexivity as an understanding of power differentials reveals problems with the assumption that the author is *always* in a position of power – especially when the author takes up reflexive methodology as a practice of writing the self into the text. The reflexive inclusion of the self in our authorial accounts is actually something that can work against the author's authoritative claims to knowledge. As Minh-ha (1989) has noted, good writing – that is, writing that can make an authoritative claim to knowledge, thus imbued with the power of legitimacy – has conventionally involved removal of the author from the text. In conventional writing, to write the self into the text is seen as problematic and always presents a dilemma to the author who does not fit the authoritative model of a white male self.

Minh-ha's work reminds us that not all authors are powerfully positioned, and the conventions of writing authoritative accounts are such that the heterogeneity of authors is erased.

A reflexive analysis of power thus critiques the tendency to understand our research subjects as a unitary group. Due to a tradition of "studying down," there is a tendency in qualitative methodology to erase hierarchies among those we study, which prevents us from understanding the heterogeneity of our participants and blinds us to the existence of power differentials between and among them (Khan 2005). In doing so, the qualitative researcher may miss important opportunities not only to analyze the diversity of one's participants, but also to produce research that challenges constructed homogenous identities of disadvantaged, disempowered others (such as "3<sup>rd</sup> world women"). These critiques illustrate the ways in which power differentials are a complex dilemma in qualitative methodology, for how we go about articulating power and using reflexive strategies to mediate power dilemmas will have important consequences for our research and analysis.

### REFLEXIVITY AND SUBJECTIVITY: ROLE PERFORMANCE, IDENTITY AND POSITIONALITY

If problematizing power is an important part of reflexive analysis, it follows that the subject positions within these power relationships should be similarly investigated.

Understanding the self as a research tool is an important part of the reflexive research endeavor (Watts 2006). To assure the maximum utility of the self within the field, the researcher presents the self in particular ways (Goffman 1959): for instance, as having credibility, legitimacy and authority (Watts 2006), or conversely as being inexperienced, student-like, and in need of the participants' clarification (Hoffman 2007). One also performs emotional labor, playing various and sometimes conflicting roles in managing the emotions of our participants as well as our own (Hoffman 2007; Dickson-Swift et al. 2009). A reflexive approach to role performance can extend beyond the roles played by the researcher in order to similarly consider the role performance of our research participants. They too can be analyzed as performing in particular ways to fit the script required by their own audience (i.e., us as researchers) (Murray 2003).

Furthermore, a reflexive understanding of role performance reveals that research roles are neither stable nor static. Naples (2003:63) attempted to implement the approach of "passionate detachment" in her study of a small American community, but found that this performance was difficult to maintain as her relationships with community members changed over the course of her research. She became friends with some, and was perceived as an advocate by others as the research process went on. This experience underlines how our role performances necessarily change because our research relationships themselves change: in the field, our relationships – and the

roles they entail – are as dynamic as the social processes we study.

If we can choose from and shift between multiple, dynamic roles in the field, the question remains: which role takes primacy, and when? Susan B. Murray's (2003) reflexive analysis of research roles suggest that these decisions may appear during times of crisis in the research relationship and the experience of conflict between one's multiple roles. In working at a women's crisis centre, Murray (2003) performed an official role as a representative from a feminist organization, expressing sympathy and an unwavering belief in a woman's telling of her abusive experiences. However, in a private conversation, her co-workers expressed some disbelief in the woman's story, contradicting the feminist principles of the crisis centre. This created a crisis of roles for the author, who at once experiences conflict between multiple self-presentations: the self as sociologist, as feminist, and as agency worker. Amidst this crisis, Murray takes up reflexivity as an analysis of the shifts between these roles: a means of understanding and making explicit how one's practices and decisions in both the front and back stages are informed and constrained by "the larger structural (and political) contexts that frames [one's] research" (Murray 2003:379), such as ethical codes, the need to continue with one's research, the rules of the research setting, and so on. While the qualitative researcher may experience ongoing role conflicts, we may work through the conditions under which these conflicts occur as a part of the "job" of reflexive analysis. In this way, reflexivity makes explicit

how the self is a meaningful research tool that shifts back and forth between multiple, and sometimes conflicting, role performances, and the implications of this for our research relationships and decisions.

A second way to understand the self as an important research tool has been to take up identity as a methodological dilemma. There is a tendency to focus on researcher roles at the expense of researcher selves, leaving the question of identity unexamined (Reinharz 1997). This hesitancy may be due to the concern that, in discussing identity, we run the risk of reinforcing a discourse of the authentic self. Disputes over identity often involve a tension between one's "being" (identity) and one's "doing" (role performance) – with one's being assumed to be made up of static and essential attributes (Brekhus 2008). That is, there is a tendency to create a false division between what one *is* (authentic, essential) versus what one *does* (inauthentic, performative). By distinguishing between researcher roles and researcher *selves*, there is some concern this contributes to such a division. However, a challenge to this division may lie in a reflexive problematization of identity, which involves thinking about how identity is an ongoing process, co-constructed in the research experience.

Typically when identity is discussed as a dilemma in conducting qualitative methodology, it has been restricted to the problematizing of the baggage we bring to the field, with the underlying assumption that "the researcher's biography with regard to race, class, and gender is already

formed prior to the research experience rather than being an emergent feature of the research process itself" (Best 2003:908). A reflexive understanding of identity as a dilemma differs from this approach in trying to make explicit the ways in which identity is formed through the interactions of the research relationship. This is the difference between asking "what impact did the researcher's race/gender/class have on the research relationship?" and "how are race/gender/class *made meaningful* in this relationship?" As researchers, we may bring our own baggage to the research relationship in terms of how we conceptualize what identity actually *is* (Zavella 1996). A reflexive methodology can allow the meaning of identity to emerge from the perspective of those we study, rather than importing conceptual understandings of identity from pre-established academic categories.

However, care should be taken to address this methodological dilemma in ways that destabilize, rather than solidify, identity. The inclusion of identity in the research analysis runs the risk of creating monolithic, stable stories of identity construction if one's identity is analyzed as though it were a finished product. This stabilization of identity often takes place in attempts to address power differentials, assuming that one can "deconstruct the author's authority" through the inclusion of multiple voices in the writing of the narrative account – not just the voice of the author (Pillow 2003:179). The assumption is problematic because, as Pillow (2003) notes, the inclusion of multiple voices promotes a tendency towards solidifying the identity of those voices, drawing boundaries

between each voice and reinforcing a distinction between the researcher/researched, self/other, us/them. Instead, reflexive research may be taken up as a way to destabilize identity as an ongoing process that is never finished nor fixed, as well as acknowledge the discomfort that arises from doing so. Furthermore, identity as a co-construction is not necessarily a process that runs smoothly, and identity can be misread or challenged (Best 2003). Our research participants are not passive recipients of our identity, in spite of how we may think of ourselves or how we may assume to be presenting a particular identity.

But an understanding of identity as complex and in-flux does present some anxiety for the qualitative researcher. This dilemma is similar to that presented by the multiple roles within the research relationship: Minh-ha (1989:6) struggles with the question of where to place her loyalties among her multiple and sometimes conflicting identities as a writer, a woman, and a racialized subject, and asks herself which should be prioritized in her writing. From a reflexive analysis, this dilemma is further complicated when we consider that to give priority to any one aspect of our identity runs the risk of being read as a unitary subject by the audiences of our research (Khan 2005). To combat this problem, a reflexive analysis can insist on the multidimensionality of identity. Rather than being concerned with which aspect of one's identity should take priority, reflexivity can instead aim for intersectionality, such that the relevance of any one dimension of identity is "fluid and context-dependent, with salencies

that change and shift over settings and time" (Brekhus 2008:1071). A reflexive approach that prioritizes intersectionality can be useful not only in resisting the assignment of a "master status" (Brekhus 2008), but also in thinking through how the multiple dimensions of identity may be relevant to the research relationship. While we can only understand the research if we know what our attributes mean to those we research, we cannot know in advance what aspects of our identities will be important to those we study (Reinharz 1997). Of course, this begs the question of how we can know what aspects of identity are most salient in the research process, and whether or not these match up with the conceptual categories of race, class gender, et cetera as understood by our participants, our discipline, and the wider audience of our research.

A third and final way to understand the self as a research tool is in a reflexive understanding of positionality as a methodological dilemma. As researchers we are embedded within particular theoretical traditions and perspectives as well as methodological practices (Watts 2006). In conducting our qualitative research, we may be differently positioned by research participants who tend to define and situate us in relation to the context of their social world (Best 2003). Our pre-assigned or enacted positions as researchers can affect the kinds of research relationships we experience (Acker 2000). Furthermore, in entering the spaces (or fields) in which we conduct qualitative research, there is not necessarily a ready-made position for us to fit into, requiring us to re-negotiate our positions as re-

searchers (Gordon et al. 2005). Positionality is thus as much a co-construction as is the meaning of identity in the research relationship.

Investigating positionality involves a reflection upon social location and the self as situated within broader social structures. While we occupy particular positions as researchers entering into the research relationship, there are numerous other ways in which we are positioned outside of the immediate context of the research relationship. National and international laws and social order also structure our positions, as Khan (2005) notes. By virtue of both her passport from a western nation, as well as her freedom of legal movement, Khan was "positioned differently" (2005:2025) by not sharing the risks of the imprisoned women she interviewed, and in terms of the potential consequences her project entailed. Watts (2006) further notes that positionality can refer to one's positioning within particular theory traditions and approaches, thus expanding the definition of positionality beyond social location in terms of such variables as race, class, gender, et cetera. In this sense, a reflexive understanding of positionality can involve "bringing to consciousness the social foundation of intellectual affinities" (Bourdieu 2004:113).

The value of understanding positionality has been emphasized as essential to a reflexive qualitative methodology. Harding (1988) insists that knowing the researcher's place makes the research understandable. Making one's positionality explicit is to give context to the researcher's voice, rather than reproducing the

anonymous, de-contextualized voice of authority. In other words, knowing the position from which the author speaks is crucial for our ability to understand what is being said. Furthermore, positionality can impact upon our perception of research problems (Bolak 1997:95). Depending upon one's positionality, one may have different answers to the very understanding of what counts as a research dilemma.

Perhaps the most important way of understanding positionality as a methodological dilemma arises from an analysis of insider/outsider positioning: that is, troubling the assumption of one's positioning as a researcher outside of the community/location under study, versus the insider positioning of those we study. Sandra Acker notes an interesting contradiction that arises from this binary subject position: in qualitative methodology, insider researchers are often encouraged to create distance between themselves and the social phenomena they study in order to think about what is "really" going on (2000:2). For insiders, holding the data at arm's length is characterized as being required in order to have a clearer picture of "the truth." Conversely, the outsider has been required to immerse themselves until the strange becomes familiar, for therein lies understanding: the outsider must work towards getting as close to the insider as possible, for the insider is the assumed source of knowledge (Acker 2000). This suggests that the subject positions of insider/outsider carry with them particular assumptions about the production of knowledge. In other words, the production of knowledge must be contextualized in an understanding of how it is "located

in relation to the subject positions of its producers" (Watts 2006:401).

In using a Goffmanian analysis (1959), one's positioning in terms of "insiderness/outsiderness" is not taken as an essential subject position, but rather is understood to be a strategic performance. For instance, Berik (1996) performs the role of an insider by conforming to the expected gender roles of the women she studied in rural Turkey. Being a Turkish woman herself was not enough: she had to "play the part," so to speak, in order to gain access to the women she was interested in interviewing. Similarly, outsider-ness can also be strategically performed in taking up the role of the novice seeking to learn from qualified insiders – a point noted above to be foundational to the early development of qualitative methodology (Best 2003). In analyzing insiderness/outsiderness as performative positionality is assumed to be something that we can manipulate for our own research needs.

However, the extent to which we can manipulate our positioning through performance is limited when we reflexively consider how we are positioned by others within and beyond the research relationship. In doing so, insiderness/outsiderness is not a clear positional dichotomy. Shope (2006) experiences the dilemma of insider/outsider as one of simultaneous positioning, noting that she is at once an insider in the community of women she studied by virtue of her gender, yet an outsider by virtue of her race/nationality. One can experience a simultaneous positioning as both an insider and an outsider,

occupying the subject position of the "outsider within" (Collins 1991). We might also consider insiderness/outsiderness not as fixed positions, but rather as dynamic positions within the research process: our participants may become insiders or informants to our own projects as we develop relationships with them (Murray 2003).

Troubling the positionality of insiderness/outsiderness reveals some important shortcomings that understanding these positions as a binary entail. In sharing a similar historical positioning with the Pakistani women she studies, Khan (2005) is concerned that her work will be received in western academia as being the product of a "native informer," able to convey an insider's knowledge. She notes this is problematic in two ways: first, as discussed above, the native informer is characterized as a homogenous, "unitary subject" (Khan 2005:2023) in a spokesperson position to tell things "as they really are." Herein lies the second problem in the assumption that native informing is the source of "authentic" knowledge. However, to the Pakistani women she interviewed, Khan was sometimes seen as "not authentic enough" in her position as a western-based researcher. Read as an insider by a western audience, and yet not accepted as an insider by the women she studied, Khan's experience leads us to question not only the binary positions of insider/outsider, but also our assumptions about "authentic" insider knowledge. Thus, problematizing the insider/outsider binary destabilizes the possibility for insider knowledge. Naples contributes to this destabilization in noting that, in her own work,

she "[has] yet to meet a community resident who feels completely like the mythical community insider, although several people presented themselves as more «legitimate» than others" (2003:57). If the community insider position is one that does not fit with people's experiences of community life, then the possibility for insider information about that community is called into question. Bolak (1997) further problematizes insider knowledge in the process of studying one's own. Simultaneously, as a researcher and a member of the community she studied, Bolak found herself challenged by having to rethink some of her own assumptions about what she thought she knew as an insider. Identifying with the position of insiderness does not free the researcher from the afore-noted dilemma posed by importing conceptual categories into the research relationship.

Note that this problematizing of the insider/outsider binary – and subsequently insider/outsider knowledge – is a different approach from that of Becker, who urges the researcher to be skeptical of "the instability of «native» meaning" (1996:6) in seeing the insider informant as not necessarily a reliable, consistent source of information. Rather than taking up the dichotomy between insider/outsider as a dilemma, Becker takes issue with how our informants may be indecisive about the meanings and explanations they provide us with. While this perspective allows the researcher to remain open to inconsistencies in the meanings attributed to the social phenomena under study, framing these inconsistencies as an issue of trustworthiness or reliability of our informants introduces anxiety around the

*truthfulness* of informant knowledge-claims, while leaving the division between insider/outsider positions intact. While Becker's perspective does not provide a way of breaking apart the insider/outsider dichotomy, his approach to reflexivity does lead us to problematize the issue of quality in qualitative methodology, and the role that reflexivity can play in raising such evaluation dilemmas.

### REFLEXIVE EVALUATIONS: VALIDITY AND QUALITY IN QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

The quality of qualitative research has historically been a story of pressure to appeal to scientific models of evaluation in establishing credibility (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). However, reflexivity can complicate the taken-for-granted use of such measures of quality in qualitative methodology – in particular, our ability to use validity as a research goal. Cho and Trent (2006) argue that the validity of qualitative research must be understood as contingent upon the context of our research problems and the goals we hope to achieve. As such, validity must be seen as a process that is “ever present and recursive” rather than just one step in the research process. Further, validity is contingent upon the context and goals of our research problems (Cho and Trent 2006:327). What this suggests is that procedural evaluations are problematic in qualitative methodology, and applying a set of universal evaluative criteria to all qualitative projects is not possible. When criteria check-lists are applied to evaluate qualitative research, they tend to follow a positivist model in defining quality

as to whether the researcher made the right choice of method and executed it in the right way. Thus, researchers are viewed as potential sources of error and contamination (Eakin and Mykhalovskiy 2003:190).

It is not only the activities of the subjective researcher that have been problematized as a potential source of error, but also the processes of social scientific method within which the researcher is positioned. As discussed above, Bourdieu (2004) has argued that employing the conceptual categories of a disciplinary tradition without critique or question can cause problems for our understanding and interpretation. To combat this problem, Bourdieu makes use of a “reformist” reflexivity, which he describes as “an effective means of increasing the chances of attaining the truth by increasing the cross controls and providing the principles of a technical critique” (2004:89), involving a constant reflection on the modes of thought embedded in the academic system in which we are positioned. Distinguishing this from “narcissistic” (self-centred, experience-based) reflexivity, Bourdieu insists that a reformist reflexive analysis must go beyond explicating individual experience and the steps taken in the research process in order to understand how one's position within a disciplinary field and academic universe “is liable to obstruct knowledge of the object” (2004:92). Operating on the ontological assumption that there is an objective reality to be known, reformist reflexivity is conceptualized as a way of obtaining “the truth” – of coming closer to an objective reality by eliminating errors

inherent to disciplinary modes of thought, and thus producing better quality research.

What is not clear in Bourdieu's concept of reformist reflexivity is how the researcher is able to fully step outside of the intellectual modes of thought inherent to the discipline/academy in an objectivist pursuit of “the truth” as a research goal. Furthermore, the evaluation of a research account as more or less “truthful” can be a complicated achievement in that the extent to which one has achieved accuracy is not a self-evident, objective evaluation. Judgments about the accuracy of our work and the ability to lay claim to credible knowledge are just as much a part of the social process as all other aspects of knowledge production that Bourdieu critically questions. Thus, it is not clear how one could test the extent to which such reflexive processes actually improved the quality of knowledge production, even over the long term. As noted in the earlier critique of positivist epistemology, women and other marginalized groups have struggled against positivist approaches to social science that left them with “no way of making their experiences count as informed or knowledgeable” (Code 1995:20). This has been the struggle of marginalized groups to claim a position of trustworthiness or credibility in making their experiences known. Howard Becker (1967) has also long noted the anxiety in qualitative work around establishing trustworthiness as a methodological dilemma. In the production of knowledge, there exists a “hierarchy of credibility” regarding whose knowledge is considered more trustworthy, and whose knowledge is consid-

ered suspect or biased. Becker argues that accusations of bias are typically made “when the research gives credence, in any serious way, to the perspective of some subordinate group in some hierarchical relationship” (1967:240), because we have given attention to that which is seen to be untrustworthy and not credible; the unofficial account of those who are not in positions of power. For Becker, it is the official accounts that we should be most suspect of. Official accounts are a bad source for knowledge because “things are seldom as they ought to be” (Becker 1967:242). By thinking about the ability to claim credibility as an issue of power, we introduce two important complications: first, that power is involved in claims to legitimate knowledge; and second, that marginalized populations are diverse in their ability to claim credibility, being differentiated as more or less credible on the basis of class, race, gender, ability, occupation, and so on. This is not to deny that powerful government actors are also often treated skeptically, as their claims are often interpreted as ideology or propaganda. Perhaps having too much or too little power is what signals alarm bells for potential receivers of information, since it is in these cases that the stakes and interests in the claims are highest.

The ability to claim credibility and quality further depends upon one's adherence to the norms and expectations of knowledge production. For instance, emotions are not typically included as data, since they are often seen as an element of contamination, obstructing objective knowledge. This is the case even though emo-

tions and reactions to emotional expressions play an important role in the sharing of information during interviews (Hoffman 2007). Furthermore, the reflexive method is often limited solely to an analysis of the steps taken in the research process, rather than applied to the development of theory and conceptual explanations – perhaps because it does not seem as rigorous to talk about theory development, including all the mundane interactions that led to adopting particular concepts and understandings (Puddephatt, Shaffir and Kleinknecht 2009). We may understand this oversight as symptomatic of the lingering pressures placed upon qualitative method to conform to particular accepted forms of knowledge production. The extent to which we avoid a reflexive analysis of theory development in order “to preserve, if not salvage, the scientific credibility of our work” (Puddephatt et al. 2009:12) may be a product of the norms of knowledge production embedded (and unexamined) within the discipline. Thus to use reflexivity to engage with even the most mundane aspects of research, as Wacquant (2009) argues for, is to challenge the rules of sociological (scientific) knowledge in taking up an analytic frame that does not fit with accepted modes of rigorous knowledge production.

Knowledge produced in collaboration with groups who are differently positioned in their ability to claim credibility also runs the risk of being read as biased or “contaminated” (Mykhalovskiy et al. 2008). This is complicated by the problem that marginalized groups can benefit from the advocacy of “experts” in having their experiences processed into legitimate,

credible forms of knowledge, such as academic reports (Code 1995) – but only if said academic reports and the knowledge presented therein are sanctioned as legitimate and acceptable by conforming to the expected norms of knowledge production. We may experience a knowledge clash in presenting knowledge that does not fit with accepted academic terms, concepts and politics (Zavella 1996). Thus, the researcher who seeks to disrupt inequitable claims to credibility by presenting work in the language of the marginalized is faced with the dual problem of risking misrepresentation on one hand, and limited opportunities for political critique on the other.

In problematizing the ability to make a claim for credible knowledge, it is useful to turn to an understanding of how power is implicated in the process of legitimating knowledge. Michel Foucault’s (1972) method for analyzing the relationship between knowledge and power is to focus on discourse. Discourses are the boundaries of meaning on a particular topic: what one is able to say about something. This meaning, however, does not overlie some truthful, authentic existence that can be discovered outside of discourse; in this way, discourse is not just “surface content” or “a mere intersection of things and words” (Foucault 1972:48-49), nor is it an expression of a previously established synthesis (Foucault 1972:55). That is, there is no ready-made meaning that can be “read” from the world (Foucault 1981:67). To analyze discourse is not to question “whether things exist” but rather to approach our research with questions “about where meaning comes from”

(Hall 2001:73). Foucault did not dispute that there are such things as material experiences or existence. Rather, he argues that there is no meaning to these things outside of discourse. In this sense, discourses are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault 1972:49). Foucault’s discursive method analyzes the productive process by which *we come to know*.

From a Foucauldian approach, an analysis of discourse entails a particular form of critical engagement with the statements and social practices associated with one’s topic of social inquiry. If discourse is the meaningful way by which we make sense of the world, and this meaning is the *limit* of our ability to apprehend the world, we are faced with important implications for our ability to evaluate the quality of sociological research. From a Foucauldian perspective, evaluations that critique the quality of any expression of knowledge as being inaccurate misrepresentations are problematic. Rather, by focusing on discourse, the point of critique becomes how statements *produce* a meaningful reality, and how social practices are limited to this realm of meaning. However, this is not an unproblematic process of making meaning. For Foucault, not all statements are considered simultaneously and equally within the realm of possible expression. Foucault argues that this is because *relations of power* circulate within discourse, and in this way particular knowledge and meanings come to be normalized and considered legitimate over excluded others (Foucault 1977:199).

Foucault’s methodology provides a way for reflexive analysis to move away from evaluations of quality in sociological research that rely on the re-inscription of a positivist concern with accuracy. It is easy for qualitative researchers to fall into the same patterns of reassuring accuracy while simultaneously trying to problematize the possibility for accurate representations. Shope (2006) exemplifies the lure of the accurate research evaluation in an interesting instance of contradiction. In presenting her work on interviewing women in rural South Africa, she assures the reader that she had “a South African professor of African languages” go over the transcripts of her research interviews in order “to ensure that the responses of the women were accurately transcribed into English” (2006:167); and yet, how can this accuracy be ensured while simultaneously acknowledging that “conveying rural women’s words in English mutes their voices” (Shope 2006:167)? Claiming to have produced valid knowledge (through accurate translation) while at the same time problematizing the very possibility for accurate knowledge (due to the impossibility of full translation) might be read as a contradictory position. The claim that the translator ensured a greater accuracy of conveying voice than without the translator would seem more tenable. However, perhaps Shope’s concern with accuracy can be understood as a broader methodological anxiety about *representation*. The researcher wishes to be a “worthy ally” (Shope 2006:167) in her project, and to avoid the harm of telling a problematic story that misrepresents her participants. In simplest terms: as researchers, of course we want to

“get it right” in producing our research accounts – and to convey to the reader that some steps were taken towards this purpose. Yet, in so doing, we should be aware of the ways in which we may be continuing to associate quality with the goals of perfect accuracy, absolute truth and complete knowledge, since this echoes the traces of a positivist reality (Minh-ha 1989:64).

In striving to uncover “the truth” of an account, the researcher may misidentify problems of validity. In doing so, our attempts to re-construct a story to conform to an idealized consistent, single narrative may erase important points for further reflexive analysis. Watson (2006) takes up this critique in her reflexive analysis of the meanings of lapses and inconsistencies in her analysis of interview transcripts. She concludes that “slips” in the narrative consistency should not be viewed as problems of validity in need of correction, but rather as points at which we may reflect upon the (re)negotiation of identity. Contradictions in the interview “can be interpreted as pointing to shifts in the prevailing discourse” (Watson 2006:381), rather than validity problems caused by the seemingly contradictory stories of unreliable narrators. As researchers reflecting on our interview transcripts, resisting the temptation to smooth out contradictions in our anxiety over validity can open up the possibility to see these retellings as points for reflexive analysis: in this case, a reflexive analysis that involves linking narrative reconstructions of interviewees’ lives, experiences and explanations to the broader socio-cultural context.

## CONCLUSION: LIMITS AND PROMISES OF REFLEXIVITY

While reflexivity is not a magic cure for methodological dilemmas, what matters for the consequences of our research in the end is, as Michael Lynch has observed, “who does it and how they go about doing it” (2000:36). One thing that is clear from this discussion of reflexivity is that qualitative methodology in its complex entirety, and the kinds of qualitative accounts we produce, may simultaneously benefit from and be constrained by one’s particular approach to reflexivity. Working through the various conceptualizations of reflexivity discussed above thus offers a useful analytical lens for better understanding central dilemmas in the doing, thinking and evaluation of qualitative research.

If the qualitative researcher only relegates reflexive analysis to particular points in the research process, one may miss the opportunity to challenge long-held myths about the complexity of thinking through and practicing qualitative methodology. For instance, Pamela Nilan (2002) divides the “implied subject positions” of the researcher into the binary of formal/informal positions, with the informal role sanctioned as a reflexive role in contrast with the formal objective role. However, the literature on reflexivity suggests that this division appears to be unnecessary and practically impossible to maintain in actually doing qualitative methodology. First of all, while research reports may seem to construct the division of formal and informal roles for the researcher,

such reports are themselves constructed stories that may not include all of the “messiness” of doing the actual research. The write-up is not a mirror reflection of the experience in the field. As Donna Haraway (1988:576) has cautioned, a researcher’s professed *ideology* of knowledge-production and the *practices* of actually going about obtaining information are not necessarily a match. So often in the discipline of sociology, the “messiness” that defines the conduct of the qualitative researcher is hidden from view – particularly in the teaching of methodology (Murray 2003). As such, to divide the roles of the researcher into formal/informal, objective/reflexive is to perpetuate the cordoning off of reflexive methods to particular stages of the research process. This prevents seeing the research process in its entirety as a potentially reflexive exercise – with both benefits reaped and dilemmas raised throughout.

One way to think about reflexivity as an ongoing process rather than as a single stage in the research process is to consider the ways in which reflexivity is a normal, everyday strategy for surviving everyday life (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Lynch 2000). By questioning our interpretations, we struggle along with the familiar and the unfamiliar and make choices about our actions accordingly, within the constraints of our settings. Becoming a reflexive qualitative researcher thus involves making “this *normal strategy* of reflective persons into a successful *research strategy*” (Glaser and Strauss 1967:227), with particular implications, as this paper has explored. We might also pay more attention to the reflexivity of our participants. We cannot

imbue ourselves as researchers with the special ability to be reflexive, for this reproduces the divide between knowing researcher and known participant. From this perspective, Best fails to see her interviewees’ reflexive attempts to deal with perceived race- and age-related language gaps. Rather, she interprets their techniques as “intuitively” translating (2003:907). In doing so, she misses an opportunity to understand her participants’ actions as a reflexive social strategy – and she never admits that she may indeed have heard her participants wrong had it not been for their translations.

Attending to the reflexive strategies of our research participants expands the opportunity to consider the roles of multiple social actors in shaping the research experience. This notion can be expanded further to consider the responses to our research from colleagues and the broader academic community as a part of the reflexive process as well, in providing a dialogue around our findings and an assessment of our methodological approaches. It is perhaps only within this collaborative, dialogical process that we might assess the reflexivity of our research accounts: whether an explanation of context is relevant, whether contingencies have been sufficiently explicated, and whether our form of reflexive analysis has provided an insightful and useful contribution. All of which are concerns that have been raised as critiques against reflexivity as a “potentially endless” process (Lynch 2000:45). It may be important, therefore, for future analyses to consider reflexivity not as a solitary, individualistic process (nor the sole domain of the “expert” research-

er), but rather a process that is collaborative, interactive and inherently *social*: a collective effort (Bourdieu 2004).

Why does reflexive methodology matter for qualitative research? Why take up these dilemmas, when none of them are easily solved? Despite the impossibility for reflexivity to provide a universal cure-all for the dilemmas of conducting research, the importance of discussing reflexivity lies within its ability to bring methodological dilemmas to the forefront in the first place. The internal practices of qualitative methodology shape the subsequent political effects of the qualitative research we produce

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(Mykhalovskiy et al. 2008). A reflexive analysis, however it is that we may approach it in our methodology, can provide a starting point for thinking about the social process and consequences of our research practices.

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