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Contours in Reflexivity: Commitment, Criteria and Change

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Abstract

This article examines the intellectual contours in calls to reflexivity in social research. In charting changes in these calls and their ideas on the role of social research in society, the article draws out lessons for future orientation. Whilst highlighting that the contribution of social research to our common understanding is part of its vitality, different authors have sought to see it in terms of how social actions are produced in research texts, via the role of experience as a starting point for reflexivity, to deploying exclusion of the researcher from dominant forces in order to produce more accurate explanations of social relations. Overall, we can be left bewildered in the face of these differences. Yet the article concludes by arguing that each has its place for clarifying the role and place of social research in society, but that they should not be over-extended as that produces an inward-looking perspective and leads to a paralysis in practice.

Key words: Reflexivity, assumptions, exclusion, commitment, criteria and change.

Introduction

Calls to reflexivity in social research are variable. For some they are unduly philosophical and of marginal significance to practice and at their worst, destructive. For others, these critiques become the legislative forums in which what counts as 'truth' is subject to continued deconstruction in order to expose the myth of a modernist dream.

Whilst aspects of these perspectives do assist in generating a greater sensitivity to the issues that inform practice, the result can be so unhelpful that it tends to polarise debates and achieves little for advancing our understandings of the limits, strengths and role of social research in the constitution and understanding of social relations.

The production of reflexive thoughts on social scientific activity takes place against a background of pre-reflexive assumptions. This may seem a paradox, but it prevents paralysis in action. Some set of assumptions is necessary in order to practice in the first instance. They are open to revision in order to learn from the ebbs and flows of history and accompanying changes in contextual knowledge. Reflexivity guards against the assumption that there is an unproblematic relationship between the social scientific text and its representation

of the world. It also guards against the assumption that textual openness reflects a fluid world in which choice is equally distributed within and between different populations.

Overall this process can set up a continual scrutiny in order to develop ideas and practices for knowing the social world. Degrees of 'fixity' of assumptions are required on the part of the social scientist, without which one would collapse into infinite regress, in order to examine the social world in the first instance. The question is not whether this occurs, but how and with what implications for our understandings? It is a willingness to consider the content and context of social scientific practices and how that relates to its process and product and then refine its insights as a result, that separates lay from social scientific reflexivity.

In this article I chart a history that enables us to situate the reasons that drove writers to clarify their relationship to a range of ideas. By moving beyond a relativism that threatens to collapse into solipsism and the sort of ad hominem denunciations that relieves hearers and readers of the need for systematic, relational thought, we can open up a productive dimension and see what those ideas can still offer us in seeking to understand current practices.

Commitment

In celebration of rationality we find arguments that reflection enables stability in order to cast an objective gaze upon social reality. A neo-Kantian view holds that conceptualisations order what would otherwise be chaotic through the capacity of transcendental reason present within the minds of individual investigators. Because we cannot know the reality that we inhabit through cognition, we are led to examine the forms through which reality is represented to us.

For Max Weber (1949), the practices of social research should replicate the same qualities that Kant found within the human mind. They cannot simply be about the collection of social facts, but reflexive practices in terms of being 'idea of ideas' (Albrow 1990: 149). His 'ideal type' thereby serves as an analytic instrument for the ordering of empirical reality. It was not possible for reflection to turn unproblematically into a social scientific methodology that ruled out reflexivity as an unnecessary pre-occupation. He shared with the Austrian economists a concern with the idea of choice driven by ultimate values, but without allusion to an abstract model of a rational person that persists in so much social science (Colman 1990).

We see in Weber's work a mixture of ethical pluralism and reference to the nation as an ultimate value. These were informed, in various ways, by his political predispositions, philosophical influences, inter-disciplinary engagement (at one time he referred to himself as a 'social economist' {Holton and Turner 1990}) and a refusal to read off human actions according to the dictates of universal explanations (whether based on individual rational calculation or read off from some concept of social totality).

These influences constitute a powerful set of ideas that still resonate with contemporary issues manifest in, for example, the McDonaldization thesis (Ritzer 2008) and distinctions between the factual and normative roles of social researchers (Hammersley 2009). His recognition of the practices of social research in terms of the changing conditions in which it finds itself provides a core dynamic for the philosophy of social research as it seeks to understand the grounds for the status of disciplines (Williams and May 1996). Its relevance lies in refracting the social landscapes it studies because it is a fundamental part of what it seeks to understand. It does not reflect as such, but mediates through the deployment of particular tools of inquiry. Weber was, therefore, only too aware that disciplines are bound to evolve through a need to reflect changes in their environments (Weber 1949).

In subscribing to an ethic of ultimate ends and it being no business of the social researcher to enter into political judgements, a search for their own meanings must lie outside of the practice of their discipline. In Weber's work this ends up as an individual matter in the face of the forces of detraditionalization and scientific progress, both of which lead the human race into further disenchantment. It is the persona of the exceptional scientist, rather than a scholar whose meanings and products should be related to a culture and context, that gained a hold in his work.

We can see this tendency in 'Politics as a Vocation' and 'Science as a Vocation'. In these essays Weber alludes to the facts of environments in order that his audiences may see the choices that face them. Here we find nothing beyond facing a personal responsibility for choices faced with the facts of existence: 'Scientific pleading is meaningless in principle because the various value spheres of the world stand in irreconcilable conflict with each other' (Weber 1970:147). Then, in discussing differences in the age of social scientists, he writes: 'Age is not decisive; what is decisive is the trained relentlessness in viewing the realities of life, and the ability to face such realities and measure up to them inwardly' (Weber 1970: 126-127).

We terminate with an ethic of responsibility that derives from the inevitability of choice in the face of overwhelming forces. Behind and moving through these forces stand politics and the threat of violence with an accompanying demand that social scientists make a clear differentiation between facts and values in their work.

In 'Science as a Vocation' Weber wrote of the value of commitment, as well as the need for intellectual integrity: over eighty years before the philosopher Bernard Williams (2002) was to extol such virtues as a source of hope for the future and a means of counter-attack against those who preferred irony to the demands of the production of truth. Yet if we end up with these matters becoming the sole province of the individual, what does this say about the cultures of production that we inhabit and how they either enable or constrain our practices? Character, culture and context become severed, leaving the burden of responsibility to be faced in isolation.

We face a situation of inevitable ambivalence that no amount of textual justification can resolve: between an ethic of responsibility for the production of accurate accounts and an ethic of conviction that motivates us to do so in the first place, whilst placing our own substantive values to one side. How are we to reconcile this with a continual need to seek new ways of understanding social life within the unfolding of history? The dialectic of individual transcendence, alongside an empathic understanding to engage in research, is too great a burden to place upon our individual shoulders. It may not be too great, however, within well developed, supportive, cultures of inquiry that provide spaces for reflection in the face of competing expectations.

If Weber did not provide sufficient attention to the sites from which social research is produced, we can take from him matters of continued importance. First, there is the issue of there being no universalistic standpoint upon which to base the foundations of a social scientific methodology. Instead, there are perspectives that do not side-step the inevitable making of problematic choices. A Kantian separation of art, morality and science was placed in question by Weber and his studies on rationality. Subsequent postmodernist writings have sought to de-differentiate these spheres or to blur their boundaries, as can be seen in debates between Jean-François Lyotard and Jürgen Habermas (see Holub 1991) and the accompanying interventions of Richard Rorty (1992). The methodological outcome of which is to place representations of reality in total suspension and instead focus upon the texts themselves. The best one can hope for is a 'corroborative objectivity' that is rooted within the subjective experiences of the particularity of life worlds (von Glasersfeld 1991).

It is at this point that the tragedy in Weber's writings is so apparent: between that of needing to hold onto one's convictions in order to maintain dignity, whilst also recognising the existence of so many others such

that their realization is far removed from any likely reality. Yet this ‘Weberian move away from an (ironic) ‘totalising perspective’ refuses to substitute for an ethical ‘totality’ a series of postmodern partial standpoints. For a standpoint worth adopting is one which...never abandons its secret desire to be the only one worth adopting’ (Turner 1990: 115).

What Weber exposes is the illusion that a general standpoint can act as final arbitrator in disputes concerning the possible consequences, rather than the content, of research findings. It is not necessary to cease our investigations at the partiality of different viewpoints. Whilst research can contribute to unhelpful characterizations that do little more than reflect dominant stereotypes that work to relieve others of understanding (Ratcliffe 2004), we can learn from mediating between different cultures of inquiry (Hall 1999) as a contribution towards recognition not only of difference, but also tolerance through understanding, of others.

There is also the importance of the context of knowledge production, as well as its reception. In writings on reflexivity, this is a neglected topic. It is clear that Weber was sophisticated in his understanding of, for example, the consequences of the material relations between commerce and the university (Tribe 1994), but there is a need to go further if we are to productively deploy his legacy for contemporary understandings.

We can do this by taking a strategic, rather than strictly methodological position, on Weber’s writings on value freedom (Scott 1995). By taking the latter we end up in a situation in which the fact-value dichotomy becomes so entrenched it does not take us forward in terms of understanding, whilst also being indefensible at the level of practice. Simply asserting that one sphere of activity is value laden whilst the other is not, undermines the productive potential of social research where its findings are contestable in the public domain.

Findings are contestable because they are invested with meaning and its product often assumes that there is a separation to be made between knowledge and action. Introducing history into this relationship allows us to move from the idea of an ontological or logical separation between facts and values, to one of ‘natural proximity’ (Pels 2003). What is allowed for is a greater reflexive vigilance in understanding their relationship in practice that allows us to see the value of respective knowledges in social life. This is evident, for example, in situations where ‘trust’ in expert systems needs to be replaced by a more complex understanding of the relations between the social scientific and lifeworld communities if we are to better understand the mediated nature of social science in respect to social life (Wynne 1996).

Criteria for Doing

We might accommodate this separation in a different way altogether by saying that lay knowledge is reflected in social scientific discourse. For Alfred Schutz, Weber failed to recognise the episodic nature of human conduct and hence that causal adequacy was bound by sociological and historical understanding (Schutz 1973). For him the meaning is the event, or an act is the meaningful process. From this point of view, *verstehen* is not a method for doing social research, but what researchers should study, for it represents the: ‘experiential form in which common sense thinking takes cognisance of the social cultural world’ (Schutz 1979: 29).

The mediation of first and second order constructs should now be a topic of reflexive concern. A commonsense stock of knowledge orientates people to apply meaning to their own actions, those of others and the events that they encounter. The lifeworld exhibits the basis for a primary experience that enables people to orientate their actions through taking its self-evidence, or pre-reflexive constitution, for granted: ‘I find myself

always within an historically given world which, as a world of nature as well as a sociocultural world, had existed before my birth and which will continue to exist after my death' (Schutz 1970: 163-4).

The generation of social scientific knowledge (second order) should concern itself with the explication of Husserl's 'natural attitude' by rendering apparent the 'taken-for granted' in everyday life. It follows that social phenomena are constituted as meaningful before the researcher appears on the scene. These basic 'meaning structures' are then analytically re-arranged by social research with the consequence that it does not accurately reflect social relations. To guard against this, social scientific constructs must satisfy the 'postulate of adequacy' by being compatible 'with the constructs of everyday life' (Schutz 1979: 35).

Schutz presents a clear argument for the study of 'lay' reflexivity. It is not a subjective state of affairs, but an inter-subjective one that represents a process of acculturation as manifested through publicly available forms of communication, including language. In order to adequately grasp the meanings used in everyday life the 'postulate of adequacy' should be followed: 'Compliance with this postulate warrants the consistency of the constructs of the social scientist with the constructs of common-sense experience of the social reality' (Schutz 1970: 279). Does this suggest that interpretative procedures produce meanings that are oriented only to the context in which they are produced? If so, this may be interpreted as suggesting that the 'truth' of these procedures cannot be established outside of these contexts, leaving social research as a relative and descriptive endeavour.

At this point we find a Kantian element to Schutz's work. Social research appears as a quest for the organising principles of our 'being-in-the world'. His critique of social scientific procedures thus: 'consists in spelling out the transcendental conditions of the meaningful world as we know it' (Bauman 1978: 183). Therefore, social research retains its role in thinking through 'ideas about ideas'. We can see this in the criteria for the 'postulate of logical consistency' such that: 'the objective validity of thought objects constructed by the social scientist and their strictly logical character is one of the most important features by which scientific thought objects are distinguished from the thought objects constructed by common-sense thinking in daily life which they have to supersede' (Schutz 1970: 278).

We are still left with a tension: that between the form of justification within the research community and its intelligibility to common-sense reasoning. An action-oriented social theory with an emphasis upon common sense reasoning appears as a solution to this issue. In the unfolding of social thought Alan Dawe (1970) originally held this to be part of the social action, rather than social system end of social theory. He was to correct this dichotomy with a more productive understanding of the relations between social scientific production and reception when he noted that both perspectives begin with human action (see Dawe 1979). Instead of a separation between the two, they capture an ambivalence that represents an existential feature of social life as expressed between impersonality and freedom of choice: 'Thus dualism of social experience is central to our very existence in modern society. It is, therefore, central to all the forms of thought and work which articulate our experience of that society' (Dawe 1979: 365).

We saw that this ambivalence tended to become an individual matter in Weber's formulations. What now emerges is not a construct of the social sciences, but a relationship that is inherent within social life that varies according to circumstances. In being reflected back into the domain of social research and then mediated from there via reasons and consequences into the public domain, it may be seen to constitute a vibrancy and relevance, if not a clear acceptability. If we take this view we are left with a productive legacy when the strictly methodological interpretation of Schutz's work moves aside for a more nuanced view enabling reflexivity to take on board an 'intellectualist bias' in knowledge construction (O'Neill 1972).

Ambivalence within everyday life is catered for through many techniques in social research that enable sufficient consistency to allow for a degree of predictability. Yet the articulation in social scientific work of experiences of seeking to regain such control in daily life are often mediated through the lenses of work that claim to be reflexive, but are nothing more than the disguised regurgitation of positivism. Thus we see a celebration of fluidity through social studies, but upon examination of the justifications for the process through which the work was conducted, a falling back upon established and detached ways of seeing and constituting social reality more reminiscent of classical rationality than postmodern irony. Such a route is also achieved via empiricist leanings in quantitative measures of human behaviour whereby the facts are said to speak for themselves and have no need of interpretation.

Schutz had a much more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between common-sense and social scientific understandings than subsequent interpretations have allowed (O'Neill 1995). Stepping outside of the strictly methodological, but rooted within the socio-theoretical, we find a number of productive elements in Schutz's work for the purposes of this article.

Moving away from narrow interpretations of the postulate of adequacy, we can take from his work an emphasis upon how scientific reasoning is also dependent upon the 'common-sense communicative competence of the community of scientists in general and the larger lay society in which they live and work' (O'Neill 1995: 152). A normative orientation towards the search for the truth informs a community of scientific inquiries that draws from a wider view of value orientations. In terms of theory, for example: 'coherence, simplicity, and elegance determine theory selection as much as the preservation of otherwise well-confirmed theories of predictive power and instrumental potential' (Habermas 2003: 223).

To examine these relations requires an understanding of changes over time, but also the creation of 'mediating institutions' between social scientific and lay understandings of knowledge and its implications for action. In their absence, researchers are left to fall back upon institutional positions and justifications separate from any discussion of mediation. Between institutional position and disposition, we find varying degrees of reflexive concern. How the domains of science and common sense interact and inform each other is thus of primary consideration, not the assumption that each is unproblematically separate.

I started this section with the differences between Schutz and Weber. Nevertheless, if we take the latter's idea of authority in terms of the position of the social scientist and the ethic of conviction and place that alongside how expertise is increasingly placed in question in contemporary times, raising the need for mediating institutions and discourses, it allows us to examine the contemporary importance of the relationship between knowledge, expertise and democracy (Turner 2003). Once again, neither allusion to simple dichotomies or separations between social thinkers will get us far in understanding this in terms of the practice of research.

How the Doing is Done

Schutz's emphasis upon common sense took social research in new directions with an emphasis upon 'science' without positivism. The tools of inquiry for this purpose were noted by Harold Garfinkel. He then wrote of a development 'not yet adequately exploited' that sought 'a generalized social system built solely from the analysis of experience structures' (quoted in Heritage 1984: 9).

Seeking the means to analyse these 'experience structures' led Garfinkel (1967) to refuse to differentiate between everyday theorising in social life and social science. Drawing upon indexicality, taken from Charles Peirce's semiology, enabled the idea that everyday language and actions should not be understood without

being situated within the social milieu in which they are uttered and produced, because meanings will vary from context to context.

The Kantian influence is eradicated. To address this social scientists produce metaphors in order to theorise as to how objects are constructed in the social world. Nevertheless, these do not reflect the situated and practical manner in which the process of recognition and production takes place in everyday life. Researchers are thus called upon to build analytic apparatuses that: 'will provide for how it is that any activities, which members do in such a way as to be recognizable as such to members, are done, and done recognizably' (Sacks 1974: 218).

A researchers use of abstract theoretical 'categories' results in a disjuncture between the 'concreteness' of everyday activities and their social scientific representation. The overall result is that 'real society' only comes into being: 'as the achieved results of administering the policies and methods of formal, constructive analysis' (Garfinkel 1991: 13). To accurately represent meaning-production within the lifeworld, its context-dependence must be recognised not as an analytic impediment, but as the starting and finishing point of social analysis.

The idea of reflexivity, as the basis of order within the lifeworld, is given through accurate descriptions of accounting procedures used by 'members' within social settings: 'The central recommendation is that the activities whereby members produce and manage settings of organized everyday affairs are identical with members' procedures for making those settings 'account-able'. The 'reflexive' or 'incarnate' character of accounting practices and accounts makes up the crux of that recommendation' (Garfinkel 1967: 1). Reflexivity then contributes to the production of social order and is displayed through situated and public activities that are open to analysis.

A number of consequences for the study of social life follow. First, all that is accountable by lay actors becomes regarded as rational. Second, an analytic indifference in the process of studying formal structures is maintained by abstaining from all judgements of their 'adequacy, value, importance, necessity, practicality, success, or consequentiality' (Garfinkel and Sacks 1986: 166). Third, any hermeneutic implications of a meeting between the language games of researchers and those of lay actors are sidelined in favour of meticulous descriptions. Fourth, language as a medium for the expression of interests and motives by people who are differentially positioned in social life is rejected in favour of language as a topic for uncovering the methods through which ordered activity is generated. Finally, practices and ideas of knowing and being in the social world are taken up through the study of language use.

In terms of the relations between social scientific and lay discourse, we are left with an issue. Does the above lead to a collapse between an understanding of reflexivity in actions and the ability of actors to reflect upon those actions? If so, a key question arises: 'if, and in what way, the 'reflexivity' of actions implies the 'reflexivity' of actors, or what kind of 'reflective capabilities' are implied in the ethnomethodological perspective?' (Czyzewski 1994: 166).

Actors within the lifeworld appear to be denied the potential to not only reflect upon their actions, but also to change the conditions under and through which their actions takes place. What of a consideration of the relations between production and reception of social scientific knowledge? This is side-stepped in favour of a collapse: 'If it is possible to lay bare the constitutive ordering of the world that experimental subjects owe to their own interpretive rules, then the process of translation between them and the observer can be done away with' (Habermas 1990: 110).

Objectivist accounts are set up as the protagonist to the reflexive but what guarantees, the ethnomethodologist would ask, are given by being generally reflexive? To regard reflexivity as being the property of particular positions, texts or social researchers allows it to operate on the basis of being exclusive.

Ethnomethodologically speaking, reflexivity is mundane and uninteresting and so it questions the 'epistemological hubris that seems to accompany self-consciously reflexive claims'. Its study of 'constitutive reflexivity proposes no unreflexive counterpart' and instead is part of the 'infrastructure of objective accounting' (Lynch 2000: 47).

Processes of methodological purification and the institutionalisation of practices within social scientific communities, now leads to a terminal point: the expunging of all residues that once provided for radical insights. In a consideration of the ethnomethodological legacy, Mervin Pollner refers to endogenous and radical reflexivity. The former refers to the constituting of social reality in terms of: 'how what members do in, to, and about social reality' (1991: 372). The latter, on the other hand, refers to how social reality, in general, is constituted. The object of its practices thus includes the presuppositions that are employed by social inquirers in their constructions of social reality. For him, the central legacy of ethnomethodology lies in its emphasis upon radical reflexivity.

A greater emphasis upon endogenous reflexivity in the unfolding of this research tradition has led to radical reflexivity being downplayed. Relations between the general and particular are not considered. Above all, it is about 'unsettling' and not simply the generation of meticulous descriptions via methodological prescriptions. It generates: 'an insecurity regarding basic assumptions, discourse and practices used in describing reality'. Further: 'Because it is the antithesis of 'settling down' it is not surprising that radical reflexivity is abandoned' (Pollner 1991: 370) as a community of inquiry is constituted that seeks a scientism, albeit in a different form, for its legitimacy. We should note, however, that this may also be the consequence of a blurring of boundaries between conversation analysis (CA) and ethnomethodology, with the former emphasising an: 'increasingly detailed explication of endogenous processes' (Pollner 1991: 373). It is for this reason perhaps that, over time, we have seen the establishment of an ethnomethodological out-group for whom method is not seen as a panacea for the avoidance of fundamental issues concerning the study of social life (see May and Powell 2008: chp 4).

Ethnomethodology sought to overcome the scholastic point of view in the study of social life (Garfinkel 1991). It aimed to guard against writings on reflexivity becoming a means of privileging particular positions by reminding us about the mundanity of reflexivity within everyday life (Lynch 2000). By attending to the ways in which everyday life is produced through the work of interpretation by lay actors, there is a key challenge to the idea that the social world remains unintelligible until the work of the social scientist is completed. As a study in the legacy of Winch for social science concludes: 'Everyday understanding might not be the last word, but it certainly ought to be the first' (Hutchinson, Read and Sharrock 2008: 138).

Commitment and Change

Alvin Gouldner took aim at ethnomethodology as a form of 'micro-anarchism' that delighted in exposing the fragility of the social order. It appeals to those who wished to engage in a 'non-violent revolt' against the status quo because they could not, or would not, challenge dominant social structures (Gouldner 1971: 394-395). He was more concerned with social change and the inevitable, pre-reflexive assumptions made by social scientists.

Social scientists normalise 'unpermitted worlds' that threaten stability and order. Accommodation to this state of affairs is enacted in several ways. First, by adhering to idea of value neutrality this enables an existential distance to be maintained from the consequences of research work and the subjects of investigation. Second, it is ignored via technicist allusions that deny its significance through sole attention to the rigour of method, or

rules it out via the adoption of particular methodologies (Gouldner 1971: 484-488). Both of these moves remain symptomatic of an empiricist legacy in our apparent post-empiricist age.

In his writings we find a caution about the possibilities for how his call to reflexivity might be translated into practice. He did not want it to become: 'just another topic for panel meetings at professional conventions' or 'another burbling little stream of technical reports' that focus upon the 'profession's origins, educational characteristics, patterns of productivity, political preferences, communication networks, nor even about its fads, foibles, and phonies' (Gouldner 1971: 489).

To guard against this predisposition towards methodological de-politicisation that is so characteristic of associations that seek to represent particular academic specialisms via their allusions to detached professionalism, a 'radical' project was required.

The term 'radical' is deployed in his writings because knowledge production should be linked to the investigator's position within the world. Further, the knowledge produced should seek to transform, as well as know the world, whilst the body of knowledge should pass through the researcher as a total person. These translate into issues that concern not 'how to work but how to live' (Gouldner 1971: 489. Original Italics). Attention to the conduct of social researchers, therefore, is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for maturation: 'What is needed is a new praxis that transforms the person' (1971: 494. Original Italics).

We are left with the following implications for a reflexive research practice. Understanding is to be directed toward how the researcher's praxis and their role and social position relate to the product and process of their work. It seeks to deepen self-awareness of the production of valid and reliable 'bits of information', strengthen a commitment to the value of this awareness and generate a willingness to be open to 'hostile information'. It is not about the object of study, as such, but the mode of study in terms of the relationship that is established between being a social scientist and a person in the world (Gouldner 1971: 494).

We now enter the realm of character and its relationship to the process and product of social research. Taking formal logic, along with the evidential basis for the adoption of a theory, or its openness and resistance to falsification as sufficient reason, brackets an understanding of the experiential basis of theoretical adherence. It is not suggested, in any way, that we replace evidence with the particularity of experience, but it is to accept that the behaviour of the social scientist is not: 'shaped solely by a willing conformity to the morality of scientific method' (Gouldner 1971: 30). What, then, are the factors shaping such behaviour?

What is not open to scrutiny is the relation between a social scientist and a theory as being 'intuitively convincing'. An alignment between the background assumptions of the social scientist and those of the theory occurs such that 'psychic closure' or 'consensual validation' is achieved (Gouldner 1971: 30). Here Gouldner is drawing upon the work of Michael Polanyi. He is getting at articulation, never being able to reach finitude, expressing the 'ineffable': 'something that I know and can describe even less precisely than usual, or even only vaguely' (Polanyi 1962: 88). The 'internal', as represented by the biography of the researcher and the 'external', represented by the work of theory, become aligned through elements that are obscured in each.

These background assumptions range from those that are general and orientate in such a way that the unfamiliar becomes meaningful, through to assumptions as applied to those within a single domain: 'they are, in effect, the metaphysics of a domain' (Gouldner 1971: 31). As to whether theories must rest upon such assumptions, or if researchers should or should not be influenced by them, these matters are held to be for philosophers of science and 'methodological moralists', respectively. That they influence practice is an empirical matter (Gouldner 1971: 32).

Background assumptions are characterized by the absence of explicit criteria to assess their utility and when it comes to domain assumptions, they rest upon sentiments. It is not to say that they are directly related, for when sentiments are at variance with those things taught within the culture we may find open rebellion and 'adopting or seeking new domain assumptions more consonant with the feelings they actually have' (1971: 39). They may not be commonplace because it may be easier to live with older assumptions; feelings of inadequacy may result from such disjuncture such that it is individualised and turned into an expression of personal pathology, or it may be articulated among trusted others where it finds support and confirmation.

Whatever the outcome, such tensions may be expressed in terms of the relations between what is called 'role reality' and 'personal reality'. Role reality is what is expected to be learnt and known by a competent practitioner, whilst personal reality relates to the imputations made about the social world separate from the obligations attendant upon systematic thought and evaluation.

What can result from this tension is a subjecting of the latter to 'systematic doubt' such that they sink into 'subsidiary awareness', but nevertheless remain of consequence for practice (1971: 41-45). A resultant conflation of personal and role reality enables the particular to be read as the general; the point being that cultures generate different personal realities and so exhibits differences in the process and product of theory construction (Gouldner 1975: 309).

Whilst the history of social science has been written as a difference in view between Weber and Gouldner, the latter still speaks of a tragedy in the practice of social research totally reminiscent of the former. Whilst both emphasise that disciplinary preoccupations can become a form of escape, rather than engagement with the issues of the time, their solutions are not the same. The struggle between scientific demands and personal impulses is overcome for one by a refusal to be assimilated to something that is ultimately unbearable and illegitimate. There is an escape from tragedy when it is recognised that the practitioner: 'need not allow themselves to be assimilated to their cultural masks...when they insist that it is they who are the measure, and they who do the measuring...in confining work to the requirements of a demanding and unfulfillable paradigm (they are) sacrificing unexpressed parts of themselves...in a wager that this sacrifice is best for science'' (Gouldner 1975: 320-321).

There are a limited number of solutions for how to link a person with the expectations surrounding their role. Whilst Gouldner outlines some of these and makes no assumption regarding a final resting place, he is clear that those who jump the gap without knowing where they will end up are to be applauded for providing models for those who are left just 'dawdling at the edge' (1975: 322).

Reflexivity is now taken into new terrains by linking the personal and cultural with the particular and general. For the purposes of this discussion, despite a call for blending the inculcated gaze of the social scientist that allows for the constitution of the social world as an object of investigation with subjective experiences, we end up in the realm of authenticity at the individual level. Although Gouldner and Weber were to converge and diverge on issues, we can end up in the same place. Whilst attention to the conduct of researchers is necessary in order to understand the differences between better and worse practice, it is not a sufficient condition for maturation. Gouldner's call thus displays a disjuncture between professional rhetoric, practice transformation and conditions of production. As a result it has been characterised as an act of celebration or impeachment: 'Hooray for myself. Down with the others!' (Pels 2003: 167).

Change, Exclusion and Commitment

Taking this legacy forward into our unfolding history allows us to examine other traditions that have sought to take up the issues of how the relations between positioning and belonging relate to knowledge production (May 2000). To this extent feminisms are central to the investigation of reflexivity. They examine the separation between subject and object (another way of expressing Gouldner's personal and role reality within a community of researchers) not from a position of disinterest from which the researcher works, but that interest itself comes from 'being engaged' (Hartsock 1987).

What is immediately placed in question are simple and unsustainable ideas of bias being constituted in terms of possessing 'interests'. In part this is undertaken through a general comparison of the differences between men and women: an 'abstract masculinity' compared to the 'connectedness and continuities' between women living in everyday life as exemplified through the exercise of empathy and an 'ethic of care' (see Larrabee 1993).

As I mentioned earlier, despite methodologically and theoretically sophisticated arguments to the contrary, so many researchers are still caught in a simple separation between facts and values. Even though these remain disguised behind the dances of textual sophistication and theoretical exegesis, its persistence is evident in the justifications used about practice and the forms of expertise constituted to pronounce upon various phenomena.

The dominance and persistence of these ways of thinking leads to an absence of understanding of how people are embedded within the social milieus that they routinely inhabit and which orientate, but not simply determine, their actions. Scientific abstraction glosses over experience in everyday life, the result of which is the production of a version of events that is explicable neither in terms of the subjectivity of the analyst, nor that of the subject herself.

Borrowing from the theoretical and empirical labours of non-feminists exacerbated this problem and was to demonstrate the limits of conventional approaches that glossed over important elements in social life: for example, the unseen and yet fundamental efforts involved in emotional labour; relational work with significant and generalized others; the politics of reproduction without which production would be impossible and the whole relationship between gender, time and work (Odih 2007). These are the invisible workings of societies and an absence of their understanding leads to questions about how partial understandings are passed off as universal truths.

Dorothy Smith (1988; 1993; 1999), drawing upon Schutz, Garfinkel and Marx, takes the absence of women's experiences in social scientific accounts as symptomatic of 'relations of ruling' that occur through processes of social construction: 'They are relations that coordinate people's activities across and beyond local sites of everyday experience' (Smith 2002: 45). The creation of a sphere in which women can make links between experiences and the images and ideas through which they can make sense of them – the dimension between knowledge production and reception - is thereby limited.

The point is to create a sphere of reflection by employing the exclusion of women in the service of improvements in scientific insights. It is deployed productively because an analytic focus upon the differences in men's and women's situations gives: 'a scientific advantage to those who can make use of the differences' (Harding 1991:120). What emerges is a 'strong objectivity' in which thinking from women's lives uncovers those processes and structures which, from a male point of view, appear natural but from a feminist standpoint position require explanation. A resultant focus upon macro tendencies: 'permits a more robust notion of

reflexivity than is currently available in the sociology of knowledge or the philosophy of science' (Harding 1991:149).

Whereas conventional epistemology speaks of knowledge as if it were a free-floating voice, this approach takes the underlying social epistemology that is implied in any theory of knowledge. It examines the significance of the gap that lies between understanding from the point of view of oppressed and dominated groups and the dominant conceptual schemes that ride over such experiences in the name of a 'weak' social science. The result is a 'standpoint' which, unlike a perspective, is socially mediated and requires both science and politics to achieve (Harding 1991: footnote, p. 276).

Where Alvin Gouldner emphasised criteria and sentiment in terms of background assumptions, a distinction can be made between constitutive and contextual values. The former refer to those values that inform the 'rules determining what constitutes acceptable scientific practice or scientific method'. Contextual values, on the other hand: 'belong to the social and cultural environment in which science is done' (Longino 1990: 4). Instead of assuming a simple distinction between these two, they exist in a dynamic interaction that is actually required by the process and practice of scientific inquiry. The dynamic works to both protect and challenge scientific claims exhibiting the same ambivalence that is characteristic of the world that is studied. Yet to admit of a social dimension to knowledge is often seen to rule out certainty and permanence. Is this a great loss? Given that 'no epistemological theory has been able to guarantee the attainment of those ideals, this seems a minor loss' (Longino 1990: 232).

There is no need to be content with a 'weak' reflexivity that creates an artificial isolation of research communities from larger social forces. They become 'disabled by their lack of any mechanism for identifying the cultural values and interests of the researchers, which form part of the evidence for the results of research in both the natural and social sciences' (Harding 1991:162). The result is a tendency towards judgemental relativism and weak objectivity and whilst there are allusions to not wishing to harm subjects and note cultural biases, these concerns still 'remain at the level of desire rather than competent enactment' (Harding 1991:163). By taking account of social situations and cultural particularities in terms of relations between other work that is of importance, an 'oppositional theory' may be developed that takes on board experiences and examines the causal tendencies that are part of natural and social life.

A process of 'explication' arises in practice in which relevance derives from the subject's 'lived actualities' and not from 'an abstract space with relevances determined by notions such as the cumulation of a body of scientific knowledge...The discovery of an objectively existing social process is thus, through its capacity to generate bases of experience, seen from such bases of experience. The aim is to disclose the social process from within as it is lived' (Smith 1988: 176-7).

The feminist social researcher takes the ambivalence that arises from seeking to answer the questions 'who am I?' and 'how do others see me?' An absence of connectivity due to occupying contradictory social locations (inside and outside) is turned into analytic advantage. What is retained is a scientific viewpoint for women without collapsing into the issues associated with identity politics in which knowledge is only accessible to particular groups which acts as a reason for celebration, but also functions to exclude.

An issue still remains. Such an approach may privilege a 'view from nowhere' that is characteristic of weak objectivism. Wealth and power divide women as much as men, so does this evade, as oppose to seek to resolve, issues associated with the relations between research and everyday life? In addressing this issue it is an examination of the causes of differences that is the unifying principle between different women. In the pursuit of this aim a common factor emerges: 'it is the same group of white, European, bourgeois men who

have legitimated and brought into being for the rest of us life worlds different from theirs' (Harding 1986: 175).

In addition to this focus, an 'intellectual participatory democracy' is required into which the results of feminist research are fed and discussed: 'To enact or operationalize the directive of strong objectivity is to value the Other's perspective and to pass over in thought into the social condition that creates it - not in order to stay there, to 'go native' or merge the self with the Other, but in order to look back at the self in all its cultural particularity from a more distant, critical, objectifying location' (Harding 1991: 151).

What is recognised is the need to investigate, rather than deny, the relations between subject and object. Contained within this call is an avoidance of adherence to a 'truth ideal' that is nothing more than attempts by powerful groups to legitimize how social relations are to be organized, as well as determine their form of interaction with nature (Harding 2006). Overall, it is held to be a common project that involves a critical reflexivity through attention to history in the collective constitution of women as 'other'. A dialogic approach to scientific activity then acts as a check upon the privileging of research accounts according to one standpoint as an assumed 'universal'. The aim is to create a forum through which the lost voices of women may be recovered in terms of making links between women's experiences in a more public, rather than private, forum. The activity of empowerment overcomes the tendency to see women as not possessing: 'an autonomous source of knowledge, experience, relevance and imagination' (Smith, 1988: 51). In the process, women's reflexivity within everyday experiences is revealed, rather than concealed in the partial perspectives of male 'scientific' findings.

To speak in the name 'of' requires some unifying factors among women. A unifying principle may be a common group of men as rulers, but critiques of this emerged from within feminisms themselves. They rested upon the idea of 'woman' as somehow universal and thus questioned the ontological basis upon which these perspectives were constructed.

Judith Butler writes of performativity in relation to both gender and sex as being different from performance because it does not presuppose a subject or a standpoint rooted in ontology. Taking performative speech acts, as those things that bring something into being as a result of being named, it follows that discourse brings into being the subject, not the subject who produces discourse. Performativity then becomes: 'that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names' (Butler 1994: 33. Original Italics). The opportunities for women to access understandings that bring together their experiences with explanations for those in relation to positions in a social field beyond discourses, thereby evaporates.

Associating ontology with a necessary commitment to essentialism provides for celebrations of indeterminacy, fragmentation and relativism. A degree of stability or even a common 'foe' from which to base an engaged research practice aimed at change by recognising the social nature of scientific knowledge production, now moves aside for an emphasis upon difference: 'if we...say no to modernity and its regulatory shackles in an effort to rehabilitate a utopia of the past, then I think we miss the chance to understand how the analysis of sexuality is pervasively structured by sexual difference' (Butler 1999: 20).

Disrupting what is taken to be the exclusionary effects of performativity in order to produce a more inclusionary society is a clear aim of Judith Butler's work. The implicit normative judgements for this purpose, however, are not apparent and we are left with a position that it not so much for consensus, but against non-consensus. The implications for research see a clear tendency towards privileging the local, specific and discrete, over matters concerned with articulation and contextualization (Fraser in Benhabib et al 1995). The overall effect is to theorize a social openness but the implications for social research practice are far less clear.

The issue of agency and the ability to exercise reflexivity in an approach that sees identity as bound up within a relational approach to language was raised in respect to ethnomethodology. We have reflexivity in action, but what about reflexivity upon actions? If we take identity as an effect of language, then what happens about the relationship between social scientific findings and lay knowledge in terms of any transformative potential for improving women's lives that results from such interactions? The overall effect may easily slip into a detachment between analysis and social location (McNay 2008).

A concern with the relationship between openness and engagement can be seen in an interview in which Judith Butler speaks of the need to produce feminist alternatives to those such as Catharine MacKinnon in the public sphere, but without undermining or demonising existing work (Butler 1994). Such a move requires that the focus upon how subjects are constituted becomes one goal among others within a normative framework: 'there are questions of social and economic justice which are not primarily concerned with questions of subject-formation. To this end it is crucial to re-think the domain of power-relations, and to develop a way of adjudicating political norms without forgetting that such an adjudication will also always be a struggle for power' (Butler in Benhabib et al 1995: 141). How do you undertake such work without displacing the very terms of reference that have constituted the uniqueness and power of feminist approaches to knowing the social world?

What we see here is how a productive ambivalence to inform intellectual practice may lapse into increasing retreats towards theoretical neatness. The institutionalization of such activities is a social process, but a perspective that focuses upon discourse deconstruction to the exclusion of a focus on the institutional arrangements under which knowledge production, dissemination and reception takes place is not politically well-equipped to defend itself except in the most reified places far removed from the lives of those whom it is intended to assist. It is then vulnerable to becoming not the discipline of feminism as conducted in the name of women, but the disciplining of feminism itself (Messer-Davidow 2002).

The social character of knowledge and the efforts involved in mediating between constitutive and contextual values can easily be lost, leaving not the work of understanding, but instead those who shout across chasms informed by a positioning and process that has long since ceased to be an object of investigation taken forward into practice. Taking this route enables research to build upon findings concerning women's positions and experiences within the social world (Maynard 1998; Walby 1997). It is not achieved by 'flattening out' an understanding of conflict and diversity between and within women's experiences (Segal 1999), nor is it achieved from regarding agency as arising from the indeterminacy of symbolic structures, rather than social practice (McNay 2000; 2008).

Summary

Opening up the practice of social research to reflexive scrutiny has consequences. At the experiential level of the researcher, a tension can be felt between the centrality of their experiences, measured against the aggregate of social values and practices they seek to understand. Feelings of inconsequentiality may result as individuality is absorbed within totality.

We found in the work of Max Weber that this existed as a tension between an ethic of commitment and an ethic of responsibility: that is, a belief in the value of science and a commitment to represent that which is discovered. Although his work has been interpreted as erecting walls between the integrity of science and arbitrary values, it is equally plausible to suggest that it resulted from the effort to construct a sphere in which: 'affirmation was possible and, most important, where bureaucratic and scientific rationality were impossible' (Wolin 2004: 380).

The search for the place of passion from which is derived the affirmation 'here I stand' sits in an uneasy relationship to research practice. Its professionalism accompanies uncertainties about emotional commitment, leaving no place for caring and passion to be part of its practice in the wake of arrogant assertions of narrowly constituted specialisms.

Here is where the expressive and strategic provide for a rich mix in practice, which if not part of a culture that recognises its place, strengths and limitations in the world of which it is a part, leads to individual frustration and even resentment towards the unfulfilled promises of a practice that can never live up to such expectations in the first place. Without supportive cultures of inquiry, it easily becomes unproductive, as opposed to a productive tension taken forward in practice.

Whilst arrogance is not uncommon, neither are expressions of individualism in an age in which social problems are increasingly individualised. Pushing too far in this direction sees individuals or groups of individuals opting for particular schools of thought, thinkers or methods because such allegiances provide a relief from this basic tension and critiques may be launched from privileged vantage points. We may also see a reflexive turn inwards that does little to help in understanding the relations between social research and social life, whilst writings on reflexivity are expected to be manuals about how to be reflexive, rather than investigating the varying degrees of reflexivity that inhere between context, character and culture (May with Perry forthcoming).

Each of the insights covered in this article has contributed to greater sensitivity in relation to these issues. Each also, in their different ways, seeks a closure of a more general consideration of the role and future of social research in social life. Max Weber and Alfred Schutz are both thinkers whose works have passed through so many hands. A return to their insights shows both strengths and limitations. Similarly, with Harold Garfinkel we find an emphasis upon reflexivity that should alert us to unrealistic claims for the benefits of its various practices, along with a caution against collapsing spheres of activity whose differences constitute their vibrancy and insight.

We have much to thank these writers for in showing us the social nature of knowledge production. We have also found limits to this reflexive endeavour. It is plausible to suggest that precisely because the physical sciences are not so consciously reflexive, they are 'normal' sciences in the Kuhnian sense of the word. How often can people explicate the reasons for their actions when they may be intuitive? Whilst context can help us with understanding knowledge production, content is also a key component of explanatory adequacy and the efforts aimed at achieving practical understandings in everyday life in terms of knowledge reception. An understanding of both production and reception enables us to examine the natural proximity of social research and social life and the interactions between constitutive and contextual values.

Reflexivity requires us to examine what social research practice sees and the manner in which it is constructed, as well as its wider place within social relations. Accompanying this is recognition that practical interventions in the organisation of social life are central to its endeavours and vital to its future. Whilst Alvin Gouldner introduced the topic of feeling in practice, this can hover on the edges of an individualist and idealist conception 'straight out of nineteenth century Romanticism' (Dawe 1973: 51). The point of taking on board the role of experience in practice is also to hold a place for a practice whose value lies in its ability to provide insights that inform and also question our common understandings. The feelings and experiences of the researcher are the starting point to this process, but not the finishing point.

Similarly, to allude, albeit in a disguised fashion, to a sense of belonging between the researcher and researched that is unproblematically regurgitated as a condition of interpretative adequacy and thus the authenticity of findings, elides an understanding of the different ways of understanding that come with any

attempt aimed at explanation. This is the point that Dorothy Smith makes about feminist-inspired social research, but also concerns the translation and contestation of ideas between contexts. Here we find several impulses characterising the poles of reflexivity. First, the continual process of deconstruction in order to remain sensitive to working assumptions and their effects on research practice. Second, there is a process of reconstruction that informs engagement via an improved practice and third, a concern with the dissemination and interpretation of such knowledge and its implications for actions. Overall, deconstruction is performed in the name of reconstruction (Harding and Hintikka 1983).

We can also observe that an absence of reflexivity in research practice can be symptomatic of a politics that takes organic belonging as unproblematic and any questioning of those relations as an act that automatically debunks supposedly self-evident truths. Institutions are said to bear the problems of reflexivity, not people. Reflexivity de-bunks as the critique of the self-evident. For some, knowing one's place according to a strong tradition is what constitutes a viable society and is the political and social solution to the 'problem' of reflexivity. When dealing with issues in this manner, however, the termination point lies in some 'sinister solutions' (Dahl 1999).

Reflexivity works as a sensitising device that brings into view those elements of research that remain hidden by limitations beyond normal consideration. However, when it works to produce yet another hierarchy through which to judge the adequacy of research results about the social world, it easily slips into undermining, as opposed to positively contributing to, dialogue and representation.

Such an outcome can easily occur within environments where there is no shortage of those willing to occupy this space and who are far less reserved in their pronouncements of how the world should be. Both a narrow technicism and the repeated inventions of reflexive adequacy can work to produce an image of good and bad social research, leaving those less reserved about such matters to participate in the public realm in which judgements, formulations and policies are routinely made.

Here I am reminded of a colleague and friend, well known in social research circles, who once rang me up to ask what an editorial board was asking about when they requested him to be 'more reflexive' in his article. I read the article. He wanted to talk about the world, not the word. They wanted to reverse this relation. The core question then becomes: how far do you go? David Silverman recounts a story to illustrate what it means to take this too far: "Many years ago, I remember a research student who used to make visiting speakers flounder by asking them: 'how would you apply your own analysis to the text you have just presented? As they wriggled, I wriggled too - not from intellectual difficulty but rather from distaste for this sort of wordplay which appeared to make a not very articulate student into a profound thinker" (1997: 240).

Reflexive questioning should involve not just an examination of the grounds upon we may claim to know the social world, but also point to the limitations of our knowledge. In this sense it acts as a corrective to the instrumentalism informed by the desire to control, rather than understand, the social world. Academic commentators do not enjoy a monopoly on reflexive questioning and also find themselves increasingly subject to the very forces which may act to counter reflexivity. We should always be aware that in our apparent methodologically post positivist/empiricist/modernist age, the quiet revenge of instrumentality marches onwards.

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Biography

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