

Welcome to this podcast about designing rigorous and reflexive of research. We'll start by discussing the key learning points from a workshop at the University of Strathclyde, which took place in September, 2019. And this will be followed by a reflexive commentary from a couple of the students who participated in this event. My name's Barbara Simpson. I'm a professor of leadership and organisational dynamics at the University of Strathclyde. Our guest speaker for this workshop is Professor Ann Cunliffe, who is professor of organisation studies at FGV in Sao Paulo in Brazil. So welcome, Ann. I'd like to start by asking you, why is reflexivity so useful in research?

Well, that's a good question, because not everybody would agree that it is useful. But I believe it is. It's, perhaps, important just to start off with a definition of reflexivity, because I find that people often use the terms "reflection" and "reflexivity" interchangeably, and to me, they're very different. And I think it's important to understand what the difference is. So one of the things that we talked about in the workshop was that, actually, the difference is an ontological one. So very quickly, when we talk about reflexivity--

and a lot of what we do in business schools is teaching our students to become more reflective about their practice--

then we're working from an objectivist ontology, because reflection is all about this ability to stand back from a situation, to distance ourselves, to try to get the facts about the situation, understand what's going on, and to make some logical sense of that in order to solve a problem or achieve a goal. Reflexivity, I think, goes much deeper than that.

So it's not about standing back. So for me, reflexivity is based on the idea that we actively and ongoingly constitute our social and organisational worlds and our understanding or our knowledge of those worlds in our interactions and in our conversations. So in other words, we can't stand back in the same way that we can from that objectivist perspective. So reflexivity is about questioning the relationship between ourselves, other participants in our research, the nature of our theories, our research accounts, and so on.

So from an academic perspective, reflexivity is very much concerned with how we construct and use knowledge. And so reflexivity really is about questioning what we might be taking for granted in that relationship between ourselves and our world, so how do our beliefs and actions influence and shape and are influenced by what's going on around us. So in other words, we're sort of socially situated, and we can't take ourselves out of that. So it's recognising that. So just going back, then, to your question, Barbara, about why is reflexivity useful, I think, first of all, it's useful, because it recognises the complexity of life, that whether we're researching life or

whether we're looking at our practice in life--

managerial practice, for example--

that it's complicated and that it is messy and that we need to recognise that in some way, because that will then help us not only understand more effectively what life is about, but also, I think, enrich knowledge. You know, I often wonder, you read sort of mainstream studies or unreflexive studies that are nice and neat, so everything fits together. The data proves the hypotheses. Somebody's done a questionnaire or a survey of 209 people, and I always feel a bit uncomfortable about that, because reflexivity would lead us to question, what are the suppositions behind the questions on the survey or in the questionnaire? How did those questions frame the responses?

You know, were there other aspects of whatever the topic was that the interviewees or respondents wanted to talk about but didn't, because they didn't have the opportunity? So it's adjusting those kinds of questions. Right. I can understand your discomfort around that, but surely it's also very uncomfortable for us, as researchers, to step away from the objective--

the idea that we are objective and separate and our job, as researchers, is to gather factual, truthful knowledge when we're in the field. Yeah. Yeah, and I think that's one of the challenges of doing--

of being reflexive in our research.

But we impose those restrictions on ourselves, because one of the challenges of doing reflexive research is, obviously, it being accepted and being able to get it published, because you are not being objective. You're not being neutral. You're not distancing yourself from the field.

But that's--

that's a restriction or an expectation or a requirement that we impose on ourselves, because the implication is that's the best way of doing research. But it misses so much of the richness of our experience.

I don't know if that makes sense. Yeah. I mean you're alluding really to methodological issues here and also epistemological issues. What is knowledge, and what's the relationship between what you're talking about in terms of reflexivity and our understanding of knowledge? Yeah, yeah. And you know, when we did the workshop, we had quite a bit of discussion around the different forms of knowledge and the need, really, to evaluate those forms of knowledge from within that particular ontology and epistemology.

So I'm not saying that we shouldn't engage in objectivist research, that we shouldn't use our realist epistemology, where we quantify data. There is a role for that. But what I am saying is that we need more pluralistic forms of research, where we can engage in more subjectivist or intersubjective forms of research, which offer another way of seeing and experiencing the world, another way of understanding what might be going on in the world. So I think reflexivity is about plurality of epistemologies, but also evaluating or judging those epistemologies from within their own logic, if you like.

Can you give me some examples of how to do that?

Yeah, so let me--

well, let me sort of take, for example, action research. So I work with colleagues who--

all they do is action research. So in other words, they go out into organisations. They help organisations, organisational members solve problems. And action research is a particular epistemology and a particular methodology.

But the way that we do action research can vary depending on our ontology.

So from an objectivist ontology, when we're doing action research, then we go out into the field. We gather facts about a problem. We identify what the problem might be. And--

with organisation members, and then we offer solutions as a researcher. But we can equally do action research for more participatory subjectivist or intersubjectivist perspectives, where when we're not distancing ourselves as an action researcher from what's going on, but we are working with organisation participants to identify maybe multiple interpretations of the problem, and then work together to address how we might deal with that. So we can use action research from that reflexive perspective, where as a researcher, you're actually not an objective observer, action researcher, but you are a participant with all the other organisational participants in sharing knowledge and constructing knowledge and figuring out what the problem is. So when we're looking at those two approaches, then we're not looking at, OK, so what is--

for example, from the objectivist perspective, what was the answer--

what model did we develop that helped organisational members deal with that problem? When we're working from that more subjectivist or intersubjectivist perspective, then we're focusing on the process of how we went around constructing what the problem might be, what was the dialogical process, how did we explore the different interpretations, and so on.

So you're focusing on different issues, for a start, and then how we might write up our research, then, may differ. So instead of presenting a model as we might do with the objectivist process and say, OK, this--

we followed these stages. This was the problem that was identified. This was the solution to the problem. If you're working from that more subjectivist, intersubjective participatory approach, then you're looking at, what knowledge did we share? What was the understanding that we constructed between us of what the issues were? And so when you start to sort of write that up, what you've got is not models. You've got the dialogue between participants that shows how understanding was constructed.

That's a really useful example. Thank you very much. It strikes me listening to what you're saying, though, that a contribution--

the contribution that a subjectivist or intersubjectivist researcher is going to make will look quite different from the contribution that an objectivist researcher will make. Can you comment on that? Yeah, because from an objectivist perspective, the contribution is often the outcome or the product. And while that's important, if we're looking at intersubjective or subjectivist research, then what we might focus on is, how is knowledge or knowing or understanding or the solution or solutions--

how are they constructed?

And we sort of talked about, for example, how do you theorise, then, from a more reflexive perspective? Because theory is going to look different than the more objectivist ways of theorising. And this is something that I think often people working with reflexivity struggle with. So we sort of--

I said that one of the things that I talked about is instead of using theory, use the term "interpretive insights," because what comes from that process of discussion and collaboration and participation is an insight or insights around, what are the issues here, and what are the options or the possibilities in terms of how we deal with this? You might have interpretive insights around, well, then how might we work together as members of an organisation or researchers working with members of an organisation to create

this shared understanding? So we might get insights around, if you like, the process of doing that. OK, I really like this idea of interpretive insights, but surely these are very local, local to the actual research situation. How can these interpretive insights be useful to somebody else in a different situation? Yeah, and that's another good question, because I often find that in my papers, I get asked, OK, so how is this generalizable, which, obviously, is that more objectivist, unreflexive approach. And I say, well, they're not generalizable in the way that we talk about generalizable from that objectivist ontology and epistemology. Instead, I use the term "resonance." So those insights might resonate with people in different contexts, and they might resonate in ways that are unexpected. But nevertheless, somebody might say--

somebody might read our research and go, wow, that's a really interesting idea.

You know, let me think about, how can I use that in my situation?

So to me, that's far more powerful than generalisation, because it impacts us in some way, and we explore what it might do for us, how we might use it. So I think from a reflexive perspective, it's sort of saying, well, I have no control over the meanings that people take away from my research, because we're all going to understand, make sense of that in different ways, but different ways which might be powerful, because we can take them and do something with them. And we sort of interpret that resonance, if you like, that wow, that's interesting. We sort of interpret that in our own way within our own context, which I think, actually, is if we look at it from a purely instrumental perspective, is far more useful than a generalisation, which you are claiming works across all contexts.

Yes. Because it is--

I'm a knowledgeable person, who can interpret and act in my own circumstances. So our time is ticking by, but I do want to ask you one more question, I think, unless you have other questions that you want me to address. But my final question is, all of this has huge implications for the way we write and for the language we use. You had mentioned writing a little bit earlier in our conversation, but I wonder if you could just talk a little bit more about the challenges in writing and the way we use language for a reflexive researcher.

Yeah, let me take language first, because, to me, language is really important. And sometimes it takes me a long time to write, because I'm thinking about what language is appropriate in relation to reflexivity, writing in reflexive ways. So for example, not talking about the organisation as though it exists, because I'm working from the perspective that we're shaping the organisation in our everyday interactions and conversations. So then what language do we use? So I think it's being more reflexive about how the language that we use might impact the way that people might understand what we're talking about. Am I using language in a way that's consistent with my ontological positioning?

And that takes time. And writing is an issue, so how do I write from a reflexive perspective? Because I'm trying to write in a way where I'm saying that I'm not theorising. I'm trying to be reflexive about, how do my assumptions impact the way that I did the research and how I interpreted my research? And sometimes it's--

you know, you can write those reflexive questions into the papers that you're writing or into your thesis. So maintaining that sort of questioning stance--

what was, for example, my role as a researcher? What were my assumptions? How did they impact what I did in my research? So I often advise my PhD students, OK, when you being reflexive, one of the ways in which you can do that is you can put in your methodology chapter a sort of reflexive section where you're

questioning this.

Or you can write in a reflexive way throughout the whole thesis. So where you're, for example, describing or discussing the findings, what are some of your assumptions that influence the way that you're interpreting those findings? So I think there are different ways that you can write reflexively, and it's sort of finding what makes sense to you. I mean one of the things that I did when I was doing my PhD was I kept to reflect, well, what started as a reflective journal and turned into a reflexive journal. And I actually bound and submitted that with my thesis.

And interestingly, the first question I was asked by my external examiner was about the journal.

So you know, because--

that's another benefit of reflexivity, because going back over that, I think we learned more about ourselves as researchers and academics. So it accepts that the process of doing research is a learning experience. It's also just a, sort of final point, writing in a tentative way. And this comes back to language. So you often see in objectivist studies, phrases like, "it is clear that."

I never use that language, so one way of interpreting this would be more tentative, reflexive language. So I think if you're writing from a reflexive perspective, because of the assumptions underpinning reflexivity, it's more about what are the possibilities, not what are the facts. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. So it's finding a way of writing that embodies that. OK, so it's very experimental. There is no recipe. Right. Yeah. I'm not following the protocol. Yes. Yes, indeed. So that's great. Just in closing, I wonder if you've got any final words of advice for a researcher who wants to develop more reflexive practice.

Just very quickly, my advice would be to stay with it, because we often feel pressured not to be reflexive. But I think it's so rewarding, if you can stick with it. And it's about finding your own reflexive voice in the process of doing the research that's important. So be persistent. Hang in there. That's a great piece of advice. Thank you very much. So thank you, Ann, for your wonderful workshop.

And thanks for your good time today. You're welcome. A few weeks after the workshop a couple of the participants got together to chat about what they've learned. The participants are Anne Augustine, who's just entering the second year of her PhD study into the intersubjective dynamics of collaborative leadership in a public sector organisation. She's chatting with James Bonner, who's in his third year of study, looking at the interaction of financial, social, and natural factors in the context of the water supply in rural communities in Malawi. So you've listened to Ann and Barbara talk in the podcast.

You obviously had the two days to think about reflexivity and rigour with others. So where are you now in terms of what you're thinking that reflexivity means to you? I think that probably one of the biggest things really to come out of the research and also the discussion that happened afterwards was that distinction between being reflective and reflexive. And I think that I always thought of water as symbolically and literally this reflective object, you know, the original mirror, the original reflecting of light and looking at lots of symbolism that links to that moon; being this object, which reflects light and then this interlinking between the moon and water.

So I've looked at reflection in many ways, and I was like, reflection's great. But that reflexivity thing, I think, was really useful, because that idea that I think we often can do a writing, and then do a piece of reflection, and then full stop sort of thing, and then add on at the end. And this reflexivity is

like, oh. This is something that must come back, and I'm really returning to sort of thing with the reflexive, a much more dynamic thing.

It can be quite hard, because then it's like right I now need to rewrite what I wrote before. And I think that's really--

it was a real useful insight, but also helps me, because it makes me realise that this process, this is a process of constant reflection and acting on the reflection and being, it's something about being rather than doing. And if you know--

I mean and I think that was a really useful thing. To have someone say that to me felt good, to say this is something. So don't feel that that kind of thinking is being lost or wasted. So I think that's something that is really useful.

And I know seeing these terms in writing, like that's come up. So I think that's why I've taken How about you? of view. I would say very similar, not necessarily thinking about the distinction between reflection and reflexivity, although you're right. But I think the thing for me was just realising reflexivity is never done. You know, it's a mindset. It's a way of thinking. It's a way of approaching not just research, but, presumably, life, and, therefore, there are many layers to reflexivity.

And what I aspire to is a reflexive practice, which is an ontological way of seeing the world that things should be open to question. Things should be open to challenge and, therefore, change. And that includes me as well--

not just as a researcher, but as a person in the world. And I'm being able to think of it as an ongoing project. And as you say, the difficulty with that is that you write something, and you think--

you go back to it, and you think, actually, I don't mean that. You know, those are the wrong words, or that's the wrong sentiment I'm trying to convey.

And even with something that I wrote two months ago, I'm looking back at it now and thinking, god, I don't even think that way anymore. So there's a frustration. The frustration is, how do you come to a point where you feel comfortable for long enough to write something, like a doctoral thesis, and want to stand by that without your thinking having moved on again? And I don't know. I mean I don't know how that will resolve. Because I suppose it's the idea that there will be a final full stop on your thesis.

Yeah, absolutely. And I suppose I think this has been a dilemma of this reflexivity and thinking around water. This very cyclical process is that a PhD is a linear one, and the structure we constantly get reminded is you have this very set out structure, which you do follow through. And that feels difficult. You know, it's putting a circular, flowing, changing object into this square hole type thing. And that feels hard, so I guess to lead on from that is, how do you feel you will put reflexivity into your writing, recognising that challenge? Yeah. That is the question, I suppose.

And in the workshop, Ann talked about three ways that reflexivity can be introduced. And they're very practical, and actually, I know I'm going to use those. You know, one of those is how we look at our specific topic. And I know that when I research leadership, even the position of leadership that I'm coming from, collaborative leadership, is very countercultural in terms of how the leadership is theorised within the academy. So I knew that already. The second side of it was how to use reflexivity as a method.

And part of my goal, as a researcher, is to leave something behind, not in an arrogant, narcissistic way, but that my being a researcher in an organisational context has a benefit. And part of that benefit, I would hope, is that the people I'm researching with are able to develop their capacity to

lead in complexity without me telling them, but actually by virtue of asking them questions, asking them to probe their own assumptions about how they work together that they will change, and they will learn to ask themselves those questions when I've gone.

But the third thing, which is the hard thing that we just talked about, is how you actually practice that.

And how do I reconcile my conflicting worldviews? How do I reconcile the fact that I'm changing? How do I reconcile the fact that ontologically, I feel like I'm kind of wobbling or vacillating between two ways of seeing the world and the extent to which I allow myself to be defined by one or the other? And as I said, there was a time when I felt I had to present a very clean thesis that kind of had written out all of those wranglings, but actually, I now realise that part of my job as a reflexive researcher is to narrate that and to own it and for it to become part of the journey of, well, I did think this. And now I think that. And actually, I think both of these things.

And there's a paradox and a tension, which is not just a research tension, but it's a tension of life, of organising and leading and so on. I'm not coming to a position that is out of sync with my research and the people I'm researching with. It's actually more reflective. It's more human, and it's more real, because it's not pristine and sort of complexity-free or mess-free. So that, for me, is the challenge--

how I can sustain a way of thinking and a way of writing and a way of researching that actually honours the mess.

Honours the mess. That's a good way of putting it. Yeah. And what about you? I think, yeah, for me, I may be being a little further on in my writing. It's helped me confirm two things, I think. Maybe the first point is to use the first person in my writing. Yeah. And I have changed all of my writing to write from the first person, and that has come out of thinking around these terms and the kind of validation to use that term from speaking to people like Ann and Barbara and others. Speak from a personal experience, and then engaging with some methods like phenomenology, which are a personal perspective.

And that has been, I think, a fundamental shift for me, because I also shared some writing with colleagues and friends, who you trust. And again, maybe this is the thing to do, because they've said, you're writing in this third person, quite objective language. But when you talk about water, and you talk about your experience with water and how you're passionate about this project and environmental issues, you always talk from you. You always use words like emotion, and your body language conveys that.

Just do that in your writing. See what happens, and it was a change for me--

not necessarily for everyone. And like to reflect on some or to reflect and then think about it. That would not necessarily be appropriate language for an object of this piece of research, which is something Ann brought up, use the language appropriate for the ontology, the epistemology. But I'm using "I," which is showing that it's something inter, interobjective or intersubjective, so that's been something really powerful for me. And I really want to think--

to continue with. But I think this other thing--

and I'm really glad that Ann talked about this--

is these reflective, reflexive strands or pieces or journals. And I've kept a journal since the start of the PhD of various things and feelings and what I'm doing.

Just as a side piece of writing, and that that can be part of your writing.

And I get to a point in the writing now, and I just stop. And I make a box, and I put it in right into the PhD and say, I'm not sure where I'm at just now but I've got all of these things happening. And I'm a bit unsure which ontology I'm dealing with here. I'm a bit unsure if my methods fit But it's just been quite--

it's quite cathartic just to put that over there and say, I'm wondering about this. I'm then sorting that, almost, a little bit in my brain.

And I really ought to put that into my PhD somehow. And I definitely feel rather than a separate chapter or a separate piece, this is going to be an ongoing thing. Yeah. Yeah, I'm the same. You know, I don't want--

I might write a section in the methodology about how I'm proposing to use reflexivity. But even now, I'm thinking that, actually, it's woven through the whole thesis. And to use that term, like "woven," or this--

I'm finding terms I really like and particularly theorists or academics using. "Entanglement" is this term that tim Ingold or Latour uses or certainly the people I'm working with, or "intertwined," these concepts. So it feels natural to intertwine it with the reflections. And those moments of doubt and unsureness or confidence that something go, wow, wherever, like a revelation here.

This is something, and give it that more free language, I think, is really, really useful. Yeah, which, again, reflects something that Ann and Barbara said, which is how important language is and actually having the courage to use different language, language that we don't think is particularly academic but actually conveys much more and is much more powerful, because it is emotive, and it is human. And I think this is important in a bigger sense that we talk of a contribution of research and who we work with, and this academic language.

We do use this all dressed in objectivity in an accounting or leadership or these social sciences that have a defense almost of quite objective language. But behind it is humans, emotion, and a kind of transient world. And our contribution has--

people don't talk like this to another, do they in these terms? That should--

that maybe, I think, is a contribution is to try and disarm our writing a little bit. I think that's important, and it helps me, then, to speak to a friend or your mom or your sister about your research in a much more open way is useful.

Yeah.

The place of useful learning

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