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## Positioning the Self

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### Role Considerations and the Practices of Reflexivity

*The personality of the artist passes into the narration itself, flowing round and round the persons and the action like a vital sea. . . . The dramatic form is reached when the vitality which has flowed and eddied round each person fills every person with such vital force that he or she assumes a proper and intangible esthetic life. The personality of the artist, at first a cry or a cadence or a mood and then a fluid and lambent narrative, finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalises itself, so to speak. The esthetic image in the dramatic form is life purified in and reprojected from the human imagination. The mystery of esthetic like that of material creation is accomplished. The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.*

(James Joyce, 1964, p. 219)

Joyce provides a provocative portrait of the place of the artist in the production of imaginative work. At the center of this description is a paradox between the artist's being present in every character and at the same time lurking beyond the narrative as a distant observer. This paradox, which

is central to the process of creating a story from imagination, is also central to the process of creating qualitative accounts of observed realities. When we do qualitative research, we begin with intangible ideas and imaginations, we engage with participants and we bring to them our “reprojected” ideas in the process of understanding their lives, and we creatively produce accounts of those experiences in a way that often leaves us somewhat invisible—“beyond or above” our own “handiwork.”

In qualitative research, when we invoke an awareness of the ways our own personalities and experience pass into the constructed products of our research, we are engaged in a process of reflexivity. A simple definition of *reflexivity* is: the ways in which a researcher critically monitors and understands the role of the self in the research endeavor. Reflexivity serves a heuristic function for the research for it is through an internal search that the researcher discovers the nature and meaning of experience and develops methods and procedures for carrying the investigation and analysis to a deeper level (Moustakas, 1990).

Although reflexivity has come to hold a central position in all forms of qualitative methods, it is still often invisible in the final reports of research. Faced with the challenge of publishing a journal article in a 25-page format within a set of vague postpositivist expectations, researchers often strip away the reflexive commentary in order to present a research article that will appear convincing and robust when reviewed. As a result, there is an underlying tension in qualitative research: be reflexive throughout the process but hold this tightly when it comes time to publish. Although there are a number of publishing fora that allow for the inclusion of reflexive insights, this remains a tension in the construction of qualitative reports.

As qualitative research has become more accepted and methodologies more clearly articulated, it is important that we move toward a greater alignment of principles and practice. The principles and merits of reflexivity within interpretive, critical, and postmodern paradigms are well established; the practices, from the start of the project to the final write-up, may be less apparent. As Mauthner and Doucet (2003) have clearly articulated, there is widespread acknowledgment that being reflexive is important in the process of creating meanings in qualitative research; nevertheless, there is little emphasis on the difficulties, practicalities, and methods of doing it.

## Dimensions of Reflexive Practice

At the broadest level, reflexive practice is concerned with examining and monitoring the role that we play in shaping the research outcome. There are a number of dimensions to reflexive practice that can help us to think about this role.

## Research Results Are Mediated

There is no such thing as innocent research (Järviluoma, Moisala, & Vilkkö, 2003). In this regard, all outcomes of the research endeavor are mediated in some way. In the tradition of qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument through which research results are produced (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reflexivity, therefore, becomes the means by which we scrutinize the mediating role of the self in the production of research results.

## Focus on Experience

Feminist critiques of traditional science (e.g., Allen, 2000; Harding, 1991; Oakley, 1981; Reinharz, 1992) highlighted the fallacy of separating the researcher and researched in social science research activity. In an effort to bring women's experience to the foreground in a patriarchal landscape, they argued that women must start their inquiry by attending to their own experience. Rather than rendering the researcher invisible or upholding the pretence that their own views and experience didn't matter, feminist scholars argued for the importance of including personal experience as a way of legitimating what were often women's private, unnoticed, or invisible subjective experiences as a woman. In order to understand how subjective experience was shaping the research process, women were encouraged to reflect on feelings as well as thoughts (Kleinman & Copp, 1993) and to consider the ways personal knowledge and experience affected their understanding of other women's experience. These feminist understandings served as a basis for including subjective experience in all forms of qualitative research.

More generally, reflexivity begins with the principle of including personal and professional experience in the research endeavor. It recognizes that the self cannot be excluded from the research process and that accumulated life experiences color all aspects of the research process from the selection of focus, to the shaping of questions, to the interpretation of data.

When we study human development and family relationships, we are always, at some level, insiders in relation to the topic under study. Our own experiences of growth, transition, and family relationships shape the way our attention is drawn to particular topics, the way we puzzle about them, and ultimately the way we make sense of what is going on. In all of the qualitative projects I have been involved in, my own personal experiences of family and development have served as the beginning point for my reflexive practice. Experiences of involuntary childlessness, adoption, father involvement, work and family tensions, being a man in a family, and negotiating time schedules in a dual-earner family have all served as a primary resource in my thinking about these experiences as research foci.

## Identity Issues

Whenever we are carrying out interviews or are involved in observations, we are socially situated. In keeping with the principles of symbolic interactionist identity theory, who we are and how we are seen in the situation is a product of the interplay between our own motives and the attributions that are made about us under the changing conditions of the situation. Therefore, in any research situation, we present ourselves in a way we wish to be seen, and at the same time are attentive to the way others are seeing us in that situation. Reflexivity is concerned with the ways we manage our identities in research settings. Although there is a tradition that emphasizes the importance of presenting and managing the professional researcher role in these settings, many other identities are either presented by us or attributed to us in research settings. We may present or be seen to be presenting ourselves in a variety of ways: in family roles and identities; as the passionate listener; as friend; or as an advocate for a shared cause. To be reflexive is to monitor how we are presenting ourselves and how we are perceived in these social research settings.

Hence, when we conduct research, our research identity is not fixed in terms of a preconceived idea about what it means to be a researcher; rather it is in flux and emerges as the conditions of the research situation unfold. In this regard, who we are as a researcher is something that is interactively created in the research setting. Through reflexive practice, we record and monitor this changing identity.

## Reflexivity and Physical Presence in the Field

Research and analysis are often thought of as activities that take place in people's heads without the benefit of an attached body. When we enter into field sites to observe activity or engage with a participant in an interview, we bring along our bodies, appearance, and a variety of behavioral cues. How we physically position ourselves in relation to participants can also be an indication of the ways that we produce and perform power relationships in the field (Järviluoma et al., 2003). How we dress, where we sit or stand, and how we posture ourselves (e.g., arms crossed, looking inquisitive, being stiff or nervous, etc.) can make a difference in how relationships with participants are established. Often these physical moves are not conscious or rational but rather reflect our tendency to "act with our bodies before we think or speak" (Järviluoma et al., 2003, p. 31). Being reflexive means realizing the importance of our full body presence as a way of understanding our roles and relationships.

## Relationship Between the Researcher and the Researched

In a traditional positivistic orientation to research practice, the link between the researcher and the researched was most likely to be construed as a formal, rule-bound, unidirectional, and professional association. There is a clear differentiation of roles between the researcher and “subjects,” with the process involving a one-way flow of information that is manifested as “gathering data” and “extracting data.” Social constructionist, critical, and postmodern approaches have reframed this association and have placed a greater emphasis on the relationship between researchers and participants in the research. Instead of an emphasis on separate, neatly defined roles, there is an awareness of the ways in which researchers and participants may have shared, intersubjective experiences; participate in a common cultural environment; and, through their interaction, act as coparticipants in the production of situated knowledge.

When we are reflexive about these relationships, we can be attentive to how our research ideas are socially produced through interviews or observations. Interviews, like any form of social interaction, are likely to bring forward certain kinds of information or experiences while at the same time repressing others. Through the process of reflexivity, we can scrutinize how the research situation is conducive to the production and communication of certain kinds of knowledge and experience. In the words of Ellis and Berger (2003), the interview process becomes

less a conduit of information from informants to researchers that represents how things are, and more a sea swell of meaning-making in which researchers connect their own experiences to those of others and provide stories that open up the conversations about how we live and cope. (p. 161)

There are times, too, when the research conversation can have a transforming effect on both the researched and the researcher. It can have the effect of a social “awakening” that can be experienced as disturbing and even traumatic (Mitchell & Radford, 1996).

Reflexive practice provides the means for understanding how our own experiences and stories interact with those of our participants. Although the sharing of personal information by an interviewer can be construed as a “tactic” to encourage the respondent to “open up,” it is also the case that the researcher is motivated by the desire to reciprocate with the participants and share personal details, feelings, and “private” experiences (Ellis & Berger, 2003).

Clinicians who conduct qualitative research are also in a position of having to monitor carefully the way relationships are managed. Research and

therapy interviews call for different positioning of the researcher, and they follow different paths of inquiry. As Burck (2005) indicates, “doing curiosity” without having to carry the therapeutic responsibility for change gives rise to “conversations of a different order” that can open up new areas of understanding while at the same time still allowing participants to discover significant connections for themselves.

## Epistemological Positioning

The way we position the self in any research project is contingent on our epistemological beliefs. In Chapter 2, we conceptualized epistemology as a continuum between an objectivist and subjectivist stance. In the practice of science, objectivity has always been a matter to contend with. The credibility of research products is still often tied to questions of objectivity. Whereas positivist oriented research upholds this as an ideal, constructionist or critical research has problematized this practice.

In traditional, positivist research, the methodological directive was to position the researcher’s self outside of the participant’s experiential domain. Researcher bias was seen as the primary problem and as a result, there was an emphasis on finding ways to create distance between the researcher and participants. Classic double blind experiments serve as one means of separating the researcher from participants and maintaining a sense of blindness about the subjects and the conditions under which the data were collected. The effort to minimize “experimenter effects” and to address the “problem of bias” can result in a number of practical challenges. As Parker (1994) has argued, these efforts often end up as “unworkable correctives” that are undermined by “seepage” of information in patterns of relationships among researchers and subjects, heightened controls and therefore artificiality of the research situation, and the inevitable use of deception with subjects in order to ensure researcher and participant “blindness.”

In the qualitative research tradition, objectivity and the problem of bias have been approached from a number of perspectives. In positivist oriented research, a number of strategies have been used to try to minimize the damaging effects of bias. For example, covert ethnographic research that has tried to get at naturalistically occurring behavior and activities insists on keeping the researcher’s self at a distance from the naturally occurring activities of the field. The practice of reflexivity has also been used as a way to identify researcher biases on the assumption that identification and awareness of bias is a means by which to put that bias on the shelf so it does not interfere with or encumber the process of observing what is “really” happening with participants.

For qualitative researchers who uphold an objectivist epistemology, there is some consensus that the integrity of the research is enhanced not by creating distance from participants, but by the degree to which they are able to get closer to phenomena under study. Wolff (1964), for example, suggests that the best method for achieving “objectivity” is not for researchers to distance themselves, but to “surrender” to phenomena they wish to understand. This involves “total involvement, suspension of received notions, pertinence of everything, identification and the risk of being hurt” (p. 236). Only when researchers are close enough can phenomena reveal themselves. Then researchers are “being adequate to the object” (p. 236). Likewise, Blumer (1969) emphasizes the importance of the researcher “taking the role of the acting unit whose behavior he is studying” in order to get accurate data. To try to collect data from a distance is to risk “the worst kind of subjectivism” (p. 86) or the “fallacy of objectivism” (Denzin, 1978, p. 10). From this perspective, the assessment of validity is contingent on how closely the researcher can understand the account and its context in terms of who produced it, for whom, and why (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). Although the researcher is now accounted for in the relationship, the emphasis here is still on representing the participants’ reality. As a result, this form of positioning is consistent with a postpositivist approach to research.

In the middle of the continuum between subjectivism and objectivism are strategies that seek to keep in play the principle of objectivity while placing the self more evidently in the research procedures. Keller (1985) makes a distinction between “static objectivity” and “dynamic objectivity.” Whereas static objectivity is concerned with a search for knowledge that radically severs subject from object, “dynamic objectivity aims at a form of knowledge that grants to the world around us its independent integrity but does so in a way that remains cognizant of, indeed, relies on, our connectivity with that world” (p. 117). Dynamic objectivity is reflexive and keeps the researcher’s self squarely inside the research process. This idea is consistent with what it means to be both subjective and objective in qualitative research. It does not mean removing the self, but on the contrary, immersing the self.

A subjectivist epistemology places a strong emphasis on making the researcher’s voice fully apparent in research accounts. One of the most obvious examples of this is the use of autoethnography as a way of foregrounding the researchers’ own experience as they seek to make sense of the culture of which they are a part (see Chapter 5). More broadly in ethnography, there has been increasing emphasis placed on the field researcher as author who produces texts that are laden with the author’s meanings. As Atkinson (1992, p. 17) has argued, in spite of the traditional direction given to fieldworkers to “remember” and to record things as “accurately” as possible, they should be aware that there is no “complete” record to be made and “no

neutral medium” for its production. Rather, field notes are already encoded with interpretive qualities that reconstruct versions of the social world (Atkinson, 1992). Reflexivity serves as the means by which researchers make sense of and construe their own experiential account of culture.

In participatory action research, subjectivity also comes to the foreground as researchers must be vigilant about the ways their own values, interests, and stakes shape the process of social transformation in the research. Reflexivity in participatory action research, or for that matter any other form of critical research, is a matter of reflecting self-consciously on the ways we contribute to the process of change by studying and influencing social practices. Researchers not only monitor and make apparent their subjective experience, but their political and ideological beliefs as well. In this approach, the distinction between “researcher” and “practitioner” is blurred:

Practitioners regard themselves explicitly as engaged in action that makes history, and they are likely to regard research as a process of learning from action and history—a process conducted within action and history, not standing outside it in the role of recorder or commentator, or above it in the role of conductor or controller. (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003, pp. 354–355)

## Issues of Voice

Postmodernism places an emphasis on the diversity of experience and highlights the way dominant representations of reality have tended to blur the full spectrum of people’s experiences. In postmodern approaches, multivocality is a principle that serves as a means to bring forward multiple perspectives and divergent experience. There is no interest in highlighting the authoritative voice or the correct version of reality. Rather, there is an interest in keeping all voices in play, regardless of the possibility that these may be in tension or contradictory. To be reflexive in postmodern qualitative research is to be keenly attentive to matters of voice. For researchers, this is a matter of weighing their own voice in the cacophony of opinions, ideas, and perceptions expressed by other participating voices in the research.

As Hertz (1997) outlined, there are a number of challenges that researchers face when they set out to present multiple voices. First, there are questions about how to present one’s own voice as the author of the text; second, there are decisions about how to present the voices of participants in the text being written; and third, there are additional challenges when the researcher’s self is also the subject of inquiry. Researchers still primarily use written texts as the medium for presenting these multiple voices. Although there is no simple formula for how to meet these challenges, the guiding principle is to present

these voices (including one's own) with a concern for preserving the integrity, intent, and diversity of the messages, without overworking the participants' stories into a sanitized or "right" version of reality. We seek to maintain the distinctiveness of different voices and to keep in play some of the inevitable tensions and contradictions that arise in the understanding of complex social reality. As part of this, it is important to get beyond what Richardson (2003) has referred to as "acute and chronic passivity" in the way that voice is presented—either through the passive-voiced author or the passive "subjects" (p. 501).

Richardson (2003) has outlined a number of ways in which postmodern researchers can effectively bring forward voices through alternative means. These include use of dramatic textual performances, poetry, layered accounts, or readers' theater. Even writing in the usual form is not about "getting the story right," but rather about "getting it" with all its different contours and nuances (p. 511). Whatever the form of presentation, the researcher's self is always present and as a result, qualitative researchers are always learning about their topics and about themselves. In this regard, reflexivity not only fosters a deeper understanding of the voices of others, but a deeper understanding of one's own voice.

At a very practical level, each of us is faced with the decision of how to present our understanding of self and others in relation to the topic at hand. Although our goal may be to present in a fair and reasonable way the many voices that are part of our research, we may not always be successful in "giving all sides their due." For Gergen and Gergen (2003), one of the pitfalls of writing up qualitative results is that the voices of respondents may be overrun by the researcher's narration: "Typically the investigator functions as the ultimate author of the work (or the coordinator of the voices) and thus serves as the ultimate arbiter of inclusion, emphasis and integration" (p. 581). At the other extreme, researchers can adopt the position that they are presenting the respondents' voice and they have successfully and accurately captured and presented their stories. This is rooted in an assumption that "subjects' utterances are seen as transparent passageways into their experiences and selves" (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003, p. 423). Using critical reflexive practice, Mauthner and Doucet came to an awareness that people's accounts of their lives are not completely transparent, do involve ambiguous and selective representations, and are always incomplete. As a result, the authors suggest two strategies that arise from these reflexive insights. First, they are careful to explain how their own theories are developed out of the interaction between respondents' accounts and their interpretations of those accounts. Second, they pay more attention to the conditions and constraints under which the jointly constructed accounts are produced.

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Issues of voice are even more complex in qualitative research that is conducted by a team. Using a postmodern standpoint, Bryan, Negretti, Christensen, and Stokes (2002) carried out a collaborative research project as part of a university course and, in the process, engaged in a form of team reflexivity. In other words, through focus groups and interviews that involved themselves as team members, they explored the collaborative experience of working through some of the team challenges, including hierarchies, authorship, and conflict. This served as a mechanism to make each of their voices—including perspectives, preferences, and concerns—transparent in the research process. Hence, while we tend to think of reflexivity as an individual endeavor in qualitative research, this project brings to the foreground some of the unique challenges associated with collaborative work.

### Reflexivity Is Interpretive Practice

Reflexivity is at the heart of qualitative inquiry. Researchers are engaged, at all stages of inquiry, in a process of interpretation and meaning making that necessarily includes their own biography and social position. As a result, research questions are products of an interpretive process. Qualitative researchers enter into relationships with participants, engage in complex social settings, and seek to understand the meanings of their responses. Understanding participants' responses and realities necessarily includes our own realities and interpretive understandings of their experiences.

#### **Reflexivity: Practices and Pitfalls**

- Research involves a process of systematic inquiry; it is the means by which we document the assumptions, decisions, and interpretations that constitute the process of inquiry.
- Reflexivity involves the cultivation of good recording habits; designate a notebook, a handheld recorder, or open a file that will serve as a destination to store your unfolding ideas.
- Writing is a form of thinking; therefore the process of writing down reflexive ideas is a way of deepening the inner dialogue and engaging in the process of thinking and discovery.
- Random thoughts need not be fit into the overall picture at the time; you can fit them in later or ignore them if no longer relevant.
- Many insights only come along once; try to capture these when they do appear.
- Don't edit reflexive insights; follow intuitions and outrageous possibilities.
- Being fully reflexive means paying attention to thoughts, ideas, possible interpretations, emotions, and values.
- Reflexivity is a way of capturing how we arrived at our understandings and explanations; it is a means of documenting the logic behind the interpretive process.

## Why Do We “Do” Reflexivity?

At the root of reflexive practice is an inherent assumption that this is virtuous activity. As Lynch (2000) has argued, there is now an established tradition within qualitative methods texts that not only advocates for the importance of reflexivity, but in fact extols it as an epistemological, moral, and political virtue. This is manifested in a variety of ways:

- By examining our own experiences and prejudices, we can be in a better position to address and control our personal bias.
- By scrutinizing our political standpoint, we can lay our values and interests on the table in order to prepare readers for what is to come.
- Through a process of self-critical examination, we can reduce the distortions of our own thinking and interpretations.

In all of these approaches, there is an underlying concern with getting at the truth and using reflexivity as a way of minimizing distortion and bias. Ontologically, this approach to reflexivity upholds a form of objectivism—we scrutinize the researcher’s self as a way to keep it separate from the reality “out there” (i.e., objective reality) that we are trying to understand. Using reflexivity in this way is concerned with enhancing objectivity and is therefore consistent with positivist or postpositivist principles. In some of my own writings about reflexivity (Daly, 1997), I came to the awareness that I was using reflexivity in this way: I talked about personal experiences and perspectives and presented the awareness as a kind of guarantee to the reader that I would not let these get in the way of representing participants’ stories.

Consistent with objectivist principles, Maxwell (2005) talks about the importance of scrutinizing researcher subjectivity as a means to understand bias. The emphasis here is on researchers’ examining the ways their own values and expectations influence both the conduct and conclusions of the study in order to avoid any unwelcome consequences. These biases, unless scrutinized and managed, are viewed as a threat to the validity of the study. Although it is acknowledged that removing the influence of the researcher is impossible, there is a focus on limiting the negative effects of such bias and using an understanding of it to determine how the bias might affect the validity of the inferences that are drawn from the interview. The emphasis here is on scrutinizing bias in order to bring forward participants’ accounts as accurately as possible.

In contrast to the idea of reflexivity as virtue is the idea that reflexivity is an unavoidable feature of the way all research actions are performed, made sense of, and produced as reports. This is rooted in a belief that it is impossible not to be reflexive in all aspects of research activity. As Stanley and Wise

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(1983) argued some time ago, “One’s self can’t be left behind, it can only be omitted from discussion and written accounts of the research process. But it is an omission, a failure to discuss something which has been present in the research itself” (p. 262). The self is embedded in all forms of interpretation and meaning construction and is part of the embodied practices through which persons singly and together, prospectively and retrospectively, produce accounts of experience (Lynch, 2000). From this assumption, reflexivity works in different ways:

- It demonstrates the situated nature of knowledge construction.
- It exposes uncertainties and “messy contingencies.”
- It is attentive to the conditions under which accounts are produced.

At a very practical level, reflexivity also serves as a means by which we can monitor how we are managing our relationships with participants. Specifically, by reflecting on what we do and say, we can assess and make adjustments about the following:

- The level of reciprocity in the research relationship: Is there a give and take? Am I sharing experiences and giving back while at the same time really listening to what is being said?
- A better understanding of our own interviewing style and the implications for how this shapes the outcome of the interview (e.g., do I minimize my own involvement or am I imposing my values or sharing excessively what I have learned or experienced?).
- By monitoring our personal involvement we can see how our empathy and sharing of experience can encourage talk but also see how our own emotions and experiences shape and/or limit how participants respond. Am I inappropriately leading the participant to specific answers (Rubin & Rubin, 2005)?
- Judgment is a normal part of any relationship. We continuously make judgments about what people do and what they say. The judgments we make in an interview can create discomfort, anger, or embarrassment—or empathy, compassion, or support. It is important to interpret what these emerging feelings might say about our understanding of the topic.
- Reflexive practice is also a way to be mindful of blind spots that may be limiting our ability to see (or hear) experiences that are beyond our familiar repertoire.

### **Reflexivity in Narrative Analysis**

Mary Gergen (2004) was interested in the relative flexibility and fluidity of narratives. In other words, she was interested in the ways and conditions under which people chose to

change the narrated accounts of their lives in the interview setting. The underlying assumption of this view is that narratives are coconstructions in the research setting that are shaped by the identity of the inquirer, the questions asked, the temporal-spatial characteristics of the interview, and the relationships among these various elements. The same story told at a cocktail party, a therapy session, or a funeral would have a different shape and story line. In narrative analysis, therefore, reflexivity is concerned with an examination of how we as researchers coconstruct the narrative through our own participation. To this end, we can be reflexive about the following:

- How do our silences, smiles, and frowns shape the way the story is told?
- How do our age, race/ethnicity, and/or gender lead to embellishments of some themes and suppression of others?
- How do our own experiences lead us to contribute to the story?

Gergen acknowledges that being reflective about our own role in the production of narrative accounts leads to some troubling questions about how we write up our narrative analyses. Specifically, she asks, "If we do acknowledge that narratives are not simply about others, can we still value them? Should we still do narrative analysis?" The answer is yes, but it means writing up our work in different ways:

- We acknowledge that we "collaborate" with participants in the collection of narratives
- We don't extricate ourselves from the jointly produced materials
- We are inspired to write reports in ways that demonstrate our "multiplicities, as speakers, writers, and analysts" (p. 281).

## Reflexivity in Family Research

When qualitative researchers enter into the family domain, they temporarily become part of the family system. They are typically welcomed into the home, and although they may be treated with caution, they nevertheless become part of the network of interacting personalities. Lareau (2002), in her intensive observation studies of families in their homes (approximately 20 visits per family), reports that family dynamics do change when the researcher arrives—especially at the beginning. Specifically, while they were likely to be on their good behavior for the first couple of visits, yelling and cursing often resumed by the third visit.

One of the ways we can be reflexive in family situations is to consider how we shape our roles according to varying circumstances. There are many possibilities here, including passive observer, interactive inquirer, friend, detached inquirer, or participant in the sharing of family stories and experiences. The stance we adopt is a function of both our research interest and

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personal abilities that shape the course of our position as it changes and evolves in the research context. Being attentive to stance means being reflexive about our role as we attempt to manage our own place in the family dynamics.

When doing qualitative research with couples and families, there is always the potential for power alliances or being triangulated into relationships. When we interview people about personal aspects of their lives, it is not uncommon for them to invite some subtle acknowledgment and/or affirmation of their experiences, life-meaning, and/or feelings. Through our reactions of agreement, support, and interest on the one hand, or indifference or disapproval on the other hand, we give our participants relationship cues that communicate acceptance or rejection or withdrawal or support. In my interviews with infertile couples, I occasionally found myself in the midst of a potentially dangerous alliance that was difficult to avoid. In the following example, a husband and wife were having widely different experiences in the way they were coping with infertility and were having difficulty understanding each other's experience. As a result the wife turned to me to try to understand:

*Wife:* He doesn't know exactly how I feel and I find that hard to understand, because he is my husband and this is his problem too. He wants a child too. He just seems to be able to accept it so much easier without asking questions.

*Husband:* Well you just have to accept it, no?

*Wife:* Well I agree with him, you have to accept it because I have no choice. Like what am I going to do? I can't go on crying all my life. But what I can't understand is, "How can it be so much easier for him to accept than me?" How? (turning to me inquisitively)

For me to provide an answer to this question would be to form an alliance with the wife. By providing advice or an explanation, I would be working with her to explain him. After some initial squirming, I avoided being placed in the role of being both the expert and her ally by simply reflecting the same question back to her. In other words, I asked her why she thought it was easier for him to accept it, to which she responded with a long explanation about his family background. This technique was effective insofar as it served the respondent's need to understand her husband's behavior. More importantly, from my standpoint, it allowed me to manage the intimate space in a way that kept me in a more neutral role and the husband engaged in the interview.

This example highlights some of the complexities of gender mixed with the intricacies of participating in the dynamics of the family system. Reflecting on these positions provides an opportunity to monitor the ways we are both co-opted into the family and the ways we navigate our own role as researcher. Warren (2002) offers a similar experience while conducting research with female mental patients and their husbands. In this case, each wife and husband knew that the other was being interviewed, putting the interviewer in the middle of some awkward triadic relationships as each spouse sought to gather information about the other from the interviewer. On the surface, these raised questions about secrecy and loyalty; at a deeper level, they raised fundamental questions about ethics and confidentiality. Reflexivity about your role becomes critical to having clear guidelines for how to manage these kinds of difficult requests.

## Reflexivity and Social Positioning

To be reflexive about social position is to be attentive to our own status characteristics such as race/ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation, disability, and gender. Reflexivity about our social position is ongoing as we encounter different people throughout a project who have varying characteristics and backgrounds. Reflexivity about our own social positioning is necessary as a means to invoke a critical reflection on the ways we bring to the research our own position of privilege, our vulnerabilities, and ideological commitments (Allen, 2000). It is a means to raise our consciousness of the ways privilege and oppression operate in family life (in our own and in the lives of those we study) in order to be sensitive about how we generate knowledge that will be a catalyst for social change (Allen, 2000).

As part of this, it is important to recognize that all categories are internally diverse and do not come with easy formulas for how to conduct our role as researcher. For example, Kong, Mahoney, and Plummer (2002) have outlined the importance of moving from thinking of "homosexuality" as an objective, essentialist category to thinking about a de-essentialized experience that involves many different kinds of sensibilities and subjectively constructed names for that experience (e.g., queer, gay, lesbian, transsexual). Participants routinely have affiliations with many categories and as a result it is best to avoid making presumptions about participants based on membership in any one category (Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2002). Furthermore, there is an "intersectionality" among categories such as gender, race, class, and sexual orientation that requires an attentiveness to their overlapping effects (Allen & Piercy, 2005). Reflexivity calls for us to

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consider how we might rigidly place ourselves in certain kinds of categories and to consider the ways our own sense of self changes within the research experience.

Although there has been an increasing emphasis placed on the importance of entering into nonhierarchical relationships with participants, there are always elements of power that are part of research relationships. These may be subtle or obvious—but there are always dynamics of status, control, and power that operate in these relationships. This has been referred to as the “baseline threat” that is built into any intensive interview situation insofar as agreement to participate in an interview, regardless of how friendly or conversational, involves giving up some personal control and risks having one’s public persona altered in some way (Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2002). Moreover, the dynamics are changeable and subject to situational fluctuations that require an ongoing vigilance about who we are in the situation and the power we hold.

### Gender and Sexual Orientation

In research on families, gender plays a key role in how we shape our inquiry and interpret what participants tell us. As Järviluoma et al. (2003) have argued, research is not solely an activity of the brain, but is conducted by a person who has his or her own experience in the gendered world, operates within a gendered environment, has a sexual orientation, and ongoingly participates in the construction of gender in everyday life as well as in research. As a result of the pervasive role that gender plays in the research process, it is difficult to generalize about the ways the researcher’s gender can influence the research interview (Johnson, 2002). Critical in this regard is to examine the nature of the research question. In my own research on the gendered nature of scheduling in families, I interviewed both women and men as part of the study. As it became increasingly evident in the interviews that women continued to play a dominant managerial role in the orchestration of family schedules, I, as a male, had to contend with some of my own struggles, questions, and—yes—defensiveness about not being in control of various decisions and dynamics. As a participant in these same kinds of family experiences, I needed to consider how my roles first as a son, then as a husband and father, shaped how I understood and responded to the experiences that were being conveyed to me. There were of course a range of responses, and I found myself aligning my own experience with some men’s more than others’. At other times I was appreciative of the detailed descriptions wives were able to bring to their everyday routines. There were times when I was somewhat aghast at how pronounced the power differences were

in these relationships; at other times I admired the fair and creative balance they seemed to have achieved. This was an area of family experience where women have traditionally exerted a great deal of power, and as a result, it was important for me to reflect on my experience as I conducted the interviews and puzzled through my interpretations of what I was hearing.

When we conduct interviews of members of the opposite sex, different challenges emerge as a result of social position. In an overview of research on men interviewing women, Reinharz and Chase (2002) point to examples where women were less likely to volunteer information about personal experiences when interviewed by a man; male interviewers had to be more mindful of where interviews were conducted in order to ensure women's safety; and men had to be deliberate about downplaying gender, desexualizing the interview in order to put women at ease. When conducting an in-home study of female seniors, Wenger (2002) reports that male interviewers were perceived as threatening and could not be trusted, resulting in higher refusal rates. Somewhat different challenges are reported by women interviewing men. As a female interviewer of divorced fathers, Arendell (1997) described how men were not only skeptical about her ability to understand and represent their experience as men, but they were often aggressively resistant in the interview, with dominance displays and assertions of superiority. Similarly, Wolkomir (see Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2002) described the challenge of being a heterosexual woman interviewing gay men about their religious beliefs. In these kinds of situations, reflexivity serves as a means to strategize ways to manage the dynamics of control in the situation (Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2002).

Oswald (2002) examined the way urban gay, lesbian, and queer adults who were raised in rural areas returned to their families and communities of origin to attend heterosexual family weddings. Writing from an insider perspective, Oswald traces what it means to negotiate their sense of self when returning to rural settings in relation to visibility/invisibility, closeness/distance, and comfort/discomfort during these weddings.

## Class

In terms of class, a number of qualitative researchers have provided accounts of the importance of monitoring the effects of class differences on the research process. Sword (1999), for example, in her interviews with pregnant women on social assistance, talked about how conspicuous she felt in the way that she initially dressed as a white, middle-aged professional woman with economic and social resources. After some initial awkwardness, she was deliberate about dressing down as a way of reducing the class differences.

In contrast with Sword's experience of having to be mindful of the social class difference, Edwards (2004) writes from the perspective of one who had a class experience similar to participant's. In an analysis of working-class women living in two rural trailer park communities, she provides insight into the meanings women assign to the invisible labor of family identity management. She writes from the perspective of a white woman from a working-class family who lived in trailer park housing as a child and reports on the way her own experience influenced her analysis of the ways families monitor boundaries and manage impressions within the community and beyond.

## Age

When researchers interview children, it is important they be reflexive when considering the dynamics of power that exist between an adult interviewer and a younger child. This imbalance is rooted in a number of structured conditions that make it difficult to reduce the status differential. According to Eder and Fingerson (2002), for example, researchers can never have equal status with children because of differences in cognitive, physical, and social development; the fact that children are always the "researched" and never the "researchers"; and children's lower social status resulting from a tradition of expecting children to respect and obey adults. Furthermore, as Nesor (1998) has argued, our understanding of children's perception of the research experience is quite limited. One way of understanding our own role in research with children is to ask children to be researchers themselves—asking questions of each other and taking the lead in the exploration of their own experience. This kind of practice, while at times disconcerting for the researcher, who must relinquish control, provides the opportunity to abandon adult-oriented perspectives that may be quite outside the everyday experience of kids (Nesor, 1998). Reflexive practice serves as a means for heightening awareness of adult assumptions and power imbalances. This awareness can serve as a basis for addressing these in the interview and finding ways to reciprocate and provide support to children and youth in the interview context.

Conducting studies with older people also introduces some unique challenges. Being reflexive about this means paying attention to our own age and the age differential in relation to those we are engaging in the research process. Although there may be a number of special challenges associated with interviewing seniors who might have cognitive or sensory impairments, it is also likely that they are "just like us but they've been alive longer" Wenger (2002). Nevertheless, reflexivity about age provides an opportunity to reflect on your own potentially ageist assumptions about the group you

are researching. In a description of her research with older adults with Alzheimer's disease, Dupuis (1999) talks about the importance of "controlling in" rather than "controlling out" her emotions when trying to understand what were often difficult stories coming from her participants living in a long-term care facility. She describes her experience:

At times I felt enraged and frustrated at the injustices being done to the residents and their family members. I felt terrified, helpless and the need to escape when one of my participants swung at me several times when I would not let him out the door he so desperately wanted to go through in his search for home. I frequently felt deep sadness and was often discouraged. (p. 50)

## Race/Ethnicity

Through interviews, oral histories, and thick description, qualitative research has provided a means to understand experiences of personal and institutional racism. In the tradition of ethnography, qualitative research has also served as a means for seeing the experience of race, ethnicity, and culture more clearly. Being reflexive about our own subjectivity in relation to ethnic and racial representation becomes critical. In North America and Western Europe, however, being "white" is still often the unreflected-upon standard from which all other racial identities vary (Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Parker, 2002). Accordingly, researcher reflexivity must take into account these hegemonic forces. For example, Grahame (2003) examines how Asian immigrant women manage the demands of family, job training, and paid work in their new society where many work practices and family policies are built on the experiences of primarily middle-class white women. This research invokes a critical, reflexive awareness at several levels, including individual experience, institutional organization, and social policy.

Reflexivity on social positioning in all of these areas ultimately begs the question of the degree to which it is necessary for the researcher to share the same background characteristics of the participants. In other words, to what degree should men interview men, Latinos interview Latinos, or black women interview other black women? The answer is not straightforward. Morse (2002) tackles the question in relation to interviewing people who are ill, and her response is instructive. She argues that researchers who have training in the health care professions and those who have general social science backgrounds can each bring different agendas, theories, and perspectives to the research endeavor. Being open to different researcher backgrounds and perspectives provides a means for capturing the complex character of what it means to be ill (Morse, 2002).

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On the other hand, there are many examples where the gap in social positioning is so great, or the power dynamics so unbalanced, that it is necessary to find a means to align the researcher's background more closely with the participants' experience. For example, in studies where there are extremely sensitive gendered experiences that include issues of misused power or abuse, it may be essential to have same-sex interviewers (Reinharz & Chase, 2002). In studies of racial or ethnic experience, researchers who do not share the same background need to be attentive to the ways their own worldview may lead to unsuccessful research interviews. Rossman and Rallis (2003) provide the example of an Anglophone student conducting research in a Hispanic community. The researcher asked narrative questions using a linear assumption about time, but the participants understood their own lives according to an assumption of important affective episodes that didn't necessarily follow an orderly sequence. Reflexivity serves as a means for scrutinizing these underlying assumptions and making any necessary modifications in the data collection effort.

**Self-Positioning: How Do I Do This?**

Sometimes our own social position characteristics (gender, race/ethnicity, class) are so deeply embedded and taken for granted that it is difficult to "see" how they are shaping our research roles and activity. Through a process of reflexivity, we invoke a deliberate awareness of these experiences. One way to start this process is to reflect on "epiphany" moments in our own experience where we are acutely aware of our social positioning. Open a file on this and begin by describing those experiences that come to mind. These might include occasions when you felt vulnerability, power, awkwardness, affirmation, conflict, or an experience of clear self-awareness. Think and write about what these imply for an understanding of your standpoint and perspective.

**Balancing Vulnerability and Researcher Presence**

Reflexivity serves as a means for monitoring our own subjectivity throughout the research process. When we write up the results of our qualitative research, there is always the question about the degree to which we include aspects of our reflexive accounts in these final products. Finding the right balance means attending to your epistemological beliefs and, at a more practical level, navigating your way through a number of potential criticisms. For example, given our rootedness in objectivist scientific practices, there is the potential that including too much of your own story can be criticized as a form of "emotional exhibitionism" (Kleinman, 1991). This may be accompanied by

a feeling of vulnerability that comes with having your own experiences placed into the public forum. In some of my own research, I have provided disclosures about aspects of my own life, including involuntary childlessness and adoptive parenting. While I was never criticized for including this information, I was aware that I was sharing personal information in a very public way. By contrast, for researchers who do autoethnography, this is an intentional way of communicating the nuance of subjective experience. At the other end of the spectrum is the practice of not including any of our reflexive thoughts in the final written account of our research. Yet when we silence our own voice and strip out all reflexive thoughts and experiences, we risk presenting a one-sided form of objectivism where we render ourselves invisible. Friedrichs (1981) has referred to this practice in the write-up of research results as involving the “disembodied intellect” whose only role is to present analytic products that are devoid of any researcher subjectivity.

Conscious inclusion of our own biographical experiences and values can also play an important role in getting beyond the “universalizing impulse” in research in order to generate more inclusive studies of families and their complex diversities (Allen, 2000). When we reflect critically on the ambiguities and complexities of our own family experience, we can become vulnerable participants in the telling of the research story. At the same time, however, the interlacing of our own story with those of participants can become more credible and powerful in the telling (see, e.g., Allen, 2000; Miller, 1993).

