

# The Component of 'Self' in Research: A Self-Reflexive Approach

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## Abstract

The feminist voice (Reinharz, 1992) invites the researcher's personal experiential data in the material as embodied knowing, and self-reflexivity uses "feedback" from the materials or writing to admit new possibilities (Schon, 1983; Steier, 1995). Through a combined feminist and self-reflexive framework, a chronological account of the development of my epistemological awareness is explored. This paper demonstrates the self-reflexively functioning researcher through the illustration of a self-reflexive ethnographic approach (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) to the relationship between epistemology and (my) self.

## Introduction

Autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) incorporates the researcher's lived experience in the data collection. Following new developments in social science methodology, the incorporation of subjectivity into research provides a fuller understanding of the human condition by describing how people react to life events. This is an important counterpoint to realist ethnography that posits a split between the "researcher role" and other aspects of self. Reflexivity is the key for the autoethnographic researcher to avoid a narcissistic demonstration of navel gazing by reflecting on her experiences from various perspectives as a researcher, subject, individual, agent of society, etc. Support for the inclusion of the researcher as subject, and the individual as part of the social structure can be found in new developments in quantum physics.

*"Quantum theory has demolished the classical concepts of solid objects and of strictly deterministic laws of nature. At the subatomic level the solid, material objects of classical physics dissolve into wavelike patterns of probabilities. Ultimately these patterns do not represent probabilities of things but rather probabilities of interconnections. A careful analysis of the process of observation in atomic physics has shown that the subatomic particles have no meaning as isolated entities but can only be understood as interconnections between the preparations of an experiment and the subsequent measurement. Quantum theory thus reveals a basic oneness of the universe. It shows that we cannot decompose the world into independently existing, smallest units. As we penetrate into matter, nature does not show us any isolated basic building blocks but rather appears as a complicated web of relations between the various parts of the whole. These relations always include the observer in an essential way. The human observer constitutes the final link in the chain of observational processes and the properties of any atomic object can only be understood in terms of the objects interaction with the observer. This means that the classical ideal of an objective description of nature is no longer valid. The Cartesian partition between the "I" and the world, between the observer and the observed cannot be made when dealing with atomic matter. In atomic physics we can never speak about nature without, at the same time, speaking about ourselves." Fritjof Capra, The Tao of Physics*

Capra's quote illustrates that science itself has proven that the world does not exist in reductionist dichotomies. Therefore, the long-reigning rationalist epistemology is being challenged by knowledge creation validation from philosophical approaches such as gnoseology (mindful inquiry) and ontology (experiential knowing in feminist inquiry) which allows the researcher to connect to her embodied feelings and to, participatorily, be a part of the research process. Epistemology, the search for the workings of the mind which recognize and confirm knowledge as valid and real (Bentz and Shapiro, 1998) is in a renaissance.

### **Reflection on Research Experiences**

My "dream wall" is covered with clippings of dancers, poems, nature scenes, cards from friends and students. Among them is a card which depicts a barefoot woman in stringy-haired dishevelment wearing a tattered, shapeless smock. Grasping a shovel in both hands she is putting dirt into a hole in the ground. Her eyes are huge and wild-looking. My eyes fall to the caption at the bottom, "Mad Woman Desperately Trying to Bury Delicate Feelings".

Such behavior is the result of mainstream attitudes to marginalized behavior. Inner experiences shock the mainstream because of the transformative power which might rock the status quo. The psychological has taken precedence over social change for hundreds of years in western philosophy and psychology (Mindell, 1995). However, the traditional rationalist approach is no longer adequate as it leaves the world emotionally hollow, aesthetically meaningless, and spiritually empty (Pirsig, 1974).

I bought the "mad woman" card for myself in a bookstore several years ago. It speaks to my feelings about my past study experience which I now recognize as a state of marginalization and oppression. In reflection on my past study, I have had very little to do with what I considered to be "research". Math and physics were highly recommended for the college bound students in high school with the boys excelling. The one girl who had great aptitude became a nurse. I sneaked into a liberal arts state college with high verbal scores perked by my love of literature, avoiding the physics and math classes entirely. Interpreting stories and poems was a joy in my high school English classes. However, economics forced me to be practical and I studied to become a teacher in secondary English education in undergraduate school. The study was theory-oriented educational psychology and methodology with practical application limited to one lesson plan taught to peers in class. In 1973, I opted to do my 6 months of student teaching in what was called an "inner city" school in Warren, Ohio, indicating my as yet unexplored value needs of engaging in practical social action. "Inner city" referred to the section of a city which was racially diverse.

During the intervening seventeen years after undergraduate school of living and teaching in Korea, Japan, and Singapore, I came to honor the value I place in practical application and interactive and collaborative learning with the people bringing in their own perspectives. My master's program at Temple University Japan (TUJ), Tokyo proved to be practically-oriented and humanistic. Therefore I excelled in connecting my seventeen years of language teaching and life experience with theories of second language education. As the time period was 1985-1987, I now reflectively realize that the credit I gave to TUJ for providing a program which allowed me to use my teaching context and personal experiences as an educator through such concepts as humanistic, student-generated methods through Gertrude Moskowitz's Caring and Sharing in the Language Classroom suggests more that influence from the post-modern research concepts was filtering into English as a Second Language Education (ESL). Analysis of practical application to specific contexts in terms of theoretical frameworks was the pattern of study at TUJ. This approach suggests a deconstruction of narratives seeking a "truth" relative to the researcher/educator and her students in a local, cultural context, there-

fore not universal truths. My undergraduate educational experiences, on the other hand, were attempted socialization in the positivist tradition that the laboratory (peer teaching class) was a controlled setting where a prescribed set of tools could predict results. Therefore the method is at the center of research implemented by a non-interactive, objective researcher to produce concrete, certain results. TUJ's graduation requirement was a 5-hour comprehensive exam with no graduation thesis so I again avoided "research". Most doctoral study concerning ESL focused on applied linguistics. Longitudinal studies of analyzing discrete point discourse of second language speakers without consideration of the impact of the researcher on the subjects' language acquisition were the norm. A further thirteen years passed before I started a doctoral program.

### **Toward Inclusive Perspectives**

Long commutes of 3 hours round-trip for my new job in the province of Kyushu after graduation from TUJ, Tokyo provided ample reading time. A vivid picture of a certain day, now almost twenty years ago, remains in my heart. What is it about the writer's concepts, I thought, as I finished the first page of a second language acquisition article, that grasp my interest and speak to me? I had read his books and articles before but something was different this time. Going back to the top of the page I read down through it again sensitized to all the words, phrases, ideas. I wondered what he said that resonated so strongly with me on the first page. Realization washed over me in tingling waves as I recognized my presence on the page in the use of "she" as the generic pronoun. The writer was speaking not only directly to me but also about me as a participant in the scholarly community. I do not have words to describe the bodily, feeling reaction I had to this realization. Shortly afterward, I pulled *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, 1986) from my bookshelf and read it. Two of my early experiences in Kyushu had been less than supportive when two white American men told me that I would never find a full time job because I was a woman in the less-than-progressive thinking of Kyushu, or that I could not be considered for a position because it was too long of a commute for a woman. That job, in fact, turned out to be the one I accepted, through an alternative route introduction. I know very few non-Japanese women working at university in Kyushu, so *Women's Ways of Knowing* explicated and validated other than only received ways of knowing which I recognized that I used: constructed knowing consisting of truths from subjective (intuitive), separate (critical/doubting), and connected (empathetic) ways of knowing as well as from received (recipient of) knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986). I gained confidence that I was not alone in my approach to the world and could move forward to engage in the cross-cultural adjustments I wanted to make in this new setting.

As I adapted to my work-life in Kyushu, I also became active in the community as a facilitator of a gender issues discussion class for women organized by the women's center in 1994 in preparation for the 1995 Beijing Women's Conference. My learning to "flow" in and out of situations, when to act out or not, when to speak or not, depending on the situation and not on realizing my inner wish is brought to this group (and others I facilitate such as the Older Adult Women's Movement Class, and the Cross-Cultural Discussion Class) through my role of participant-facilitator. The non-expert, listening position creates a safe container for the women's own narratives to become the content (Nakamura, Taniyama, Otsu, Drake, 2001). Therefore, the group has developed into a consciousness-raising, social-action oriented community of which I am a member, although this was not my original intention. Through my embodiment of adapting to varying communication patterns, I have empowered our participants to carry on the work of the UN through ongoing activities they have identified.

Six years later, a collaborative research project including me as facilitator, one other facilitator and two participants has resulted in two publications in 2001 about the group's study and work. None of

us knew how to do research, but the relational and reflective connection (Park, 1999, 2000) was rich with collaborative learning and sustained our project, from data collection to writing up the results over a period of two years. Our articles were published because of the participatory community research context we had explored, and in spite of a poorly executed survey questionnaire. The physical move to Kyushu and a full time job in the Japanese context seems to have propelled a search for expression of my voice through collaboratively seeking for voice with other women. Reading about goals of feminist research for this paper has developed my awareness that I similarly value a contribution to the welfare of women and marginalized groups through social change (Reinharz, 1992) as evidenced in my experiences both as a woman and as a facilitator of women's issues discussion. Further, a committed goal to encourage the women to become connected in their community resulted in my becoming a participant in the process and changing my own consciousness. The goal of contribution to knowledge creation I am now exploring in my Fielding work.

### **Epistemological Perspectives**

In spite of the many intercultural experiences through which I have learned to co-construct meaning with people who hold different perspectives, in the written study plan for the Research and Inquiry Course for Fielding Graduate Institute, I identified the psychological aspect of "self" as the component of research by proposing to determine my personality through instruments such as the Myers-Briggs Temperament Indicator (MBTI), Kolb's Learning Style Chart, the Enneagram. In this way, I speculated, I could determine my biases and what kind of research would suit me best. On reflection, all the instruments are quantitatively constructed. In addition, I now perceive my interest in the psychological angle of the researcher arising from the idea of the individual as a separate element of society in western philosophy. My thinking has been socially constructed (Gergen, 1999; Pearce, 1995) through the education system in the USA. There are two major scientific ideologies: logical positivists and post-positivists. The positivists believe that true facts (knowledge) come from direct observation of the patterns of phenomena from their discrete parts measured by the tools of mathematics. The researcher is in a detached relationship to the subjects to avoid bias. An advantage to the positivist position is that processes of cause and effect of organization structure may be identified, while the disadvantage in this is that individual differences or social issues are not considered.

Post-positivists are more subjective and relative valuing the emerging reality of shared, co-constructed knowledge. Therefore in research with a mindful researcher (Bentz and Shapiro, 1998) and the research question (Polkinghorne, 1983) at the center of the context in interaction with the participants a dynamic, systemic process is created in order to best construct methodology to produce knowledge to empower the participants. The advantage of post-positivism is in the agency given to humans in their shared constructions of their reality, while disadvantages are that in the establishment of rapport between researcher and participants, the researcher may end up working toward defending the interests of the group, and the group's critical dialogue may be silenced in their wish to please the researcher. In reflection I now realize that it is the shifting epistemological perceptions on how knowledge is created that has opened a door for the marginalized, oppressed voices such as my own to bring fresh energy to scholarly work. My research interest of movement as an expression of relationship building from an aesthetic perspective for humans to effect their worlds now informs scholarly research.

I would like to note here my recognition that because positivism used quantitative research methods, and positivism is now out of vogue that quantitative methods are not to also be scorned. In mapping myself as a researcher in this paper I have used quantitatively constructed personality preference results to support and inform experiential vignettes. The extended MBTI results placed me on a continuum of ENFP personality preferences which is an extroverted intuitive, introverted analyzer with

a less developed preference for capturing details (Keirse, 1998; Briggs, 1980). Kolb's Learning Cycle puts me extremely high on the experiential, experimental and reflective, but almost flat against the axis on abstract conceptualization. A number 7 on the enneagram, this type of personality likes to engage in new pursuits. Such a research personality seeks the intimate connection with participants and prefers interaction. However, additionally using a quantitative research method to note quality of movement such as Rudolf Laban's Movement Analysis (Laban, 1980) with the Butoh participants, for example, would give me emotional distance from the participants bringing a different definition to the movement research into my perspective, as well as encouraging development of my lesser preferences of detail orientation and abstraction. Using quantitative methods in combination with qualitative increases the opportunity for self-reflexivity.

### **Feminist Values and Participatory, Collaborative, Cooperative Perspectives**

I resonate strongly with the idea of personal experiences as a valuable asset for feminist research. Starting from one's own experience "defines our research question, leads us to resources of useful data, gains the trust of others in doing research, and enables us to partially test our findings" (Reinharz, 1992). A feminist researcher then honors personal experiences of the participants and her own research process as lived experience with reflection on what she learned in the process in a product that is partly informal, engagingly personal, and even confessional. The following excerpt from my Butoh notes indicates strongly that I am a participatory/collaborative researcher valuing a feminist approach.

*Harada-sensei of Seiryukai Butoh with whom I practice came to see my ballet performance and later told me it was more like Butoh than ballet. He loved it and had predicted that I would get a special award, which I did. He and the group sent me flowers. I now know I am accepted as a member of Seiryukai Butoh. The other night after one of our meetings we rode home on the train together as he lives further down the line from where I get off. I was amazed to find out that he thinks in reflexive social theory terms. We did not speak in those technical terms (this is all in Japanese remember), but the meaning was the same. I asked him how he figured out that our internal images are those imposed by the society. He said because of all of his 'kendo' and martial arts training in "the proper way" to do things. I asked him why he did the performance with the audience as participants. He said because the responses go out into the community in waves. Then when I told him how amazed I was that he and I think the same he simply said, "That is why we have met." It is a kind of karma. This is an excellent context to work participatorily. He is translating some of his video titles to put in the Lincoln Center library. When I found that out, I offered to help him do it and then take them directly to Lincoln Center this summer. Another of his goals is to have Seiryukai perform in New York City, and then in Paris. In addition, I like the way he is guiding the young people in the group, some of whom are youth at 'near' risk. They really like him, respect him, and he "teaches" them, for example, how to do things in society which they seem to have missed out on learning. As I stood up to get off the train, he reached out and shook my hand.*

The type of interactive, rapport-development illustrated in this vignette illustrates the MBTI results of an extraverted intuitor who trusts interrelationships and creates harmony by applying person-centered values (MBTI, July 2000). Participatory action research is especially appealing to this personality preference as she can develop caring intimate friendships with the participants. In this manner she is privy to information and data beyond that of the detached objective observer. She and her participants, through interaction and sharing of new perspectives, can experience changed awareness and consciousness raising about their context. One concern in my case is that I may become too close to the participants and must keep reflexivity in the foreground in order to see the data from the participants' view. Therefore, I should maintain a role of facilitator-researcher to a degree to help the

participants maintain distance so that they will not be inclined to withhold information that they perceive might not please me. Reinharz (1992) points out the dilemmas of subjectivity and rapport. The inclusion of the personal experience of the researcher may be seen as a "confession of bias" in objectivist terms; the development of rapport may have structural barriers, and some researchers say that the expectation that feminist researchers must establish rapport is in itself oppressive as it casts the researcher in a role of traditional expectations of caregiver. Problematizing her biases through dialectic, self-reflection will help a rapport-oriented researcher hold the necessary tension to carry through participatory research.

## Conclusion

I now see "research" as an ongoing process of forming a rational "argument" in creative ways so that the definition of rationalism is expanded. The argument may be produced from data from multi-disciplinary methods in quantitative and qualitative research. "The process of validation is not empirical verification but a qualitative probability presented through the process of argumentation by which open-ended agreement is reached about proposed interpretation of the meaning of the action" (Polkinghorne, 1983). Park (2000) suggests that an epistemological framework with a combination of both classical and other forms of knowledge is methodologically rigorous and therefore can be considered scientific.

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