



Human Relations
[0018-7267(200308)56:8]
Volume 56(8): 983–1003: 036988
Copyright © 2003
The Tavistock Institute ®
SAGE Publications
London, Thousand Oaks CA,
New Delhi
www.sagepublications.com

Reflexive inquiry in organizational research: Questions and possibilities

Ann L. Cunliffe

ABSTRACT

Over the last 20 years, social science scholars have challenged conventional conceptions of social reality, knowledge, and the validity of our methods of inquiry. Many have criticized the aim of mainstream social science to provide an absolute, objective view of the world and have called for a reflexive stance in which we recognize all social activity, including research itself, as an ongoing endogenous accomplishment. Three main themes have emerged: a crisis of representation, an emphasis on the constitutive nature of language, and a call for reflexive approaches to research. Contemporary organizational theorists have found themselves drawn into the debate and struggling with a number of questions around how to carry out reflexive research. I examine those questions and explore the implications for organizational research. In doing so, I attempt to enact reflexivity through one layer of narrative circularity.

KEYWORDS

radical reflexivity ■ reflexive research practice ■ representation ■ social constructionism

The notion of reflexivity, or a crisis of truth, has emerged within many disciplines: philosophy (Derrida, 1976; Heidegger, 1966), linguistics (de Saussure, 1959; Wittgenstein, 1953), the natural sciences (Ashmore, 1989; Latour, 1988), anthropology (Clifford & Marcus, 1986), sociology (Bodily, 1994; Garfinkel, 1967; Gouldner, 1970; Pollner, 1991), psychology (Gergen & Gergen, 1991; Shotter, 1992), and comparatively recently in organization

and management studies (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000; Calás & Smircich, 1999; Cooper, 1990; Watson, 1995). Essentially, reflexive scholars question the threads of philosophical and methodological certainty implicit in the goal of mainstream social science to provide an absolute view of the world. They suggest that all forms of inquiry are paradigmatically circumscribed (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Chia, 1996b), and therefore truth claims, assumptions about reality and the ways in which we generate accurate theories should be challenged to reveal the inherent instability of knowledge. Much of the debate surrounding reflexivity focuses on philosophical issues about the nature of reality and knowledge, but reflexivity also raises fundamental questions about our ability as researchers to capture the complex, interactional and emergent nature of our social experience. There are comparatively few discussions about the issues involved in reflexive research practice. Given the concerns reflexivity raises, can it offer anything to organizational researchers or does it so problemize the research process that it paralyzes the researcher? I suggest that by confronting these concerns, we can carry out 'reflexive' research that offers insights for academics and practitioners into how we constitute knowledge and realities.

The first part of this article explores briefly the contours of the debate by offering a definition (itself a problematic endeavor) and situating conceptualizations of reflexivity within two metaphors, each rooted in different philosophical assumptions. These metaphors provide a basis for differentiating various approaches to reflexivity and can lead to a deeper understanding of reflexive research practice. Indeed, as Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000) emphasize, one of the principal tasks of reflexive social science is to become aware of the interplay between philosophical positions and research practice.¹ In an attempt to surface the ambiguities embedded within reflexive researching and theorizing, I examine a number of reflexive questions and their implications for organizational research. In doing so, I suggest a need for *radically reflexive research* that embraces both root metaphors.

Reflexivity: Definitions and approaches

With a history rooted in such divergent fields, it is difficult to capture a single definition or focus of reflexivity. Questions arise over whether it is a philosophy, a research method or a technique, and numerous types of reflexivities have been identified (e.g. Holland, 1999; Latour, 1988; Lynch, 2000). Pollner's definition of radical reflexivity offers a starting point:

an 'unsettling,' i.e., an insecurity regarding the basic assumptions, discourse and practices used in describing reality.

(1991: 370)

That is, questioning the distinctions we make between what is fact or fiction, the nature of knowledge, and ultimately our purpose and practice as researchers.

Reflexivity is entwined with a crisis of representation (Clifford, 1986) that questions our relationship with our social world and the ways in which we account for our experience. This questioning takes the form of a 'turning back' on knowledge, truth claims, language, and texts to make them more transparent and less believable (Lawson, 1985). Within mainstream social science, ontology and epistemology are separated because social reality consists of phenomena external to participants and therefore how we come to know and theorize our world is separate from our experience of it. Representation is unproblematic because researchers can observe reality, identify causality, develop truthful, objective, and empirically testable theories and explanatory models which then form a basis for action. By following this method, we can develop confident knowledge (Samuels, 1991) and experience a sense of ontological and epistemological security because *we know what we know and who we are*. Reflexivity 'unsettles' representation by suggesting that we are constantly constructing meaning and social realities as we interact with others and talk about our experience. We therefore cannot separate ontology and epistemology, nor can we ignore the situated nature of that experience and the cultural, historical, and linguistic traditions that permeate our work (Jun, 1994).

The form of reflexivity I expound in this article, radical-reflexivity, builds on ethnographic and phenomenological work to suggest that we need to go further than questioning the truth claims of others, to question how we as researchers (and practitioners) also make truth claims and construct meaning. This assumes that all research, positivist and anti-positivist, is constructed between research participants (researcher, 'subjects', colleagues, texts) and that we need to take responsibility 'for [our] own theorizing, as well as whatever it is [we] theorize about' (Hardy & Clegg, 1997: S13). In other words, we need to recognize our philosophical commitments and enact their internal logic, while opening them to critical questioning so that we expose their situated nature. In the remainder of the text, I examine a number of reflexive questions and possibilities, and surface my own fallibility by exposing the circularity of my account (*in the form of an italicized narrative*) to make it one of many narratives (Ashmore, 1989). The questions themselves re-present one layer of narrative circularity, and are important because

by not recognizing my own situatedness and fallibility, I fall prey to the very issues that reflexivity eschews – the objectivity of reality and privileging of particular forms of knowledge.

One of the difficulties of reflexive work is that it is always open to criticism – I'm undermining my own position by privileging a particular (reflexive) ontology and epistemology – I'm privileging myself if I expose my own biases – I can deconstruct a text from a meta-reflexive stance which privileges both an epistemology and myself as I step back from the process of construction . . . so how reflexive can that be? Perhaps the danger (i.e. talking about reflexivity while being unreflexive) lies in NOT recognizing the situatedness of our position and that it is just one amongst many?

Radical-reflexivity reveals these irreconcilable issues, highlights the tentativeness of our theories and explanations, and surfaces our fallibility as researchers. In doing so, we can reveal any 'forgotten choices, expose hidden alternatives, lay bare epistemological limits and empower voices which have been subjugated by objective discourse' (Lynch, 2000: 36).

Approaches: Constructionist and deconstructionist

Reflexive approaches to organization theory have been influenced by work in two broad fields: cultural anthropology and sociology, and more recently, postmodernism and poststructuralism. Scholars within these disciplines argue that we should not accept our accounts of the world at face value, because social activity is not pre-structured or rule-driven but constituted in interaction and/or language and therefore difficult to capture and categorize. I suggest that these two fields of influence have led to reflexive organizational texts being explicitly or implicitly grounded in one of two root metaphors: otherness or betweenness. Texts grounded in otherness build on postmodern and poststructuralist commitments by incorporating deconstructionist or contradiction-centered approaches (Hatch, 1997; Steier, 1991). This meta-reflexive approach addresses the representational crisis head on, by using the oppositional logic of otherness to overturn any notions of our ability to produce truthful, authoritative accounts. Texts grounded in betweenness draw on ethnographic work, specifically constructionist approaches, proposing that social realities are constructed between us in our conversations (Shotter, 1993; Watson, 1994). Each metaphor has very different implications for researching organizational life. *I offer the metaphors as my own ways of ordering that are themselves open to reflexive interrogation by readers.*

Otherness draws on postmodern and poststructuralist ideas that language speaks through subjects to create a fictive, relative reality in which meaning both:

- Defers** Texts have no original meaning, meaning is created in a subjectal space involving the consciousness and non-consciousness of the writer/reader and linguistic systems (Kristeva, 1984).
- Differs** This deferral process also occurs through oppositional logic. Words (the present term) implicitly derive meaning from their opposite while repressing and negating that absent term (Cooper, 1987, 1989; Derrida, 1973).

Therefore, meaning is created through a constant interplay of presence/absence and what *is not said* is as important as what *is said* because each supplements the other. Reflexive researchers recognize oppositional logic as implicit, and actively explore the paradoxical relationship between presence and absence. For example, in one of my research conversations, a project manager showed me a complex computer-generated critical path analysis (CPA) designed to simplify and help her manage complexity in a company-wide project. She talked about emerging problems: managers rigidly adhering to the CPA when realities demanded change, power struggles about who should be on *the* critical path, the underlying and sometimes naive assumptions about who is in control of what, whether the initial analysis was based on 'real' facts . . . disorganization was embedded within this organizing tool. Organizing (ordering) aims to subdue disorganizing (dis-ordering), but although we may think we have eliminated disorganization, it will always be present. Thus, organizing is a process of otherness, of dealing with a fundamental tension between organization (presence) and disorganization (absence) (Cooper, 1990). Oppositional logic is a constitutive feature of any reflexive analysis because it reveals the contradictions inherent in truth claims and the instability of language by turning meaning back on itself. *A tu quoque argument because it is inherently self-contradictory – the truth is we cannot be truthful.*

Otherness has significant implications for organization studies. Mainstream organizational research gives priority to the present term by talking about such 'things' as the organization, managerial roles, power bases, and organizational systems as though they exist as entities separate from those who study or live them. Chia (1996b) argues that this stance embraces *being-realism*, a preoccupation with a world of discrete, static entities. He suggests that reflexive researchers should recognize otherness, the ongoing, heterogeneous and often contested nature of lived experience, by exploring the tensions and interrelationships of meaning, realities, and theorizing – a 'weak theory of organizational *becoming*' (p. 50). He later (Chia & King, 1998) contrasts these two approaches by using Bergson's notion of the logic of the Gaze, which extracts, fixes, objectifies and disembodies some thing from a

process (mainstream research), and the logic of the Glance, which is concerned with motion, peripheral vision, an unfocused field of experience we attempt to construct continually (reflexive research).

Deconstruction (Derrida, 1976) is an example of this form of reflexive analysis. Reflexive *deconstructive* ethnography sees organizations as texts (an interplay of discourses in experiences, events, writings etc.) in which dominant and straightforward understandings and practices are questioned and contradictions exposed. Self is an effect of discourse, or speech acts, or caught in a chain of significations: a site constituted by symbolic, discursive, socio-historical, often contradictory and uncontrollable forces (Linstead, 1993a, 1993b). Research is an intertextual space where texts, participants, and linguistic conventions interweave (Kristeva, 1984; Tyler, 1986), and where meaning and the relationship between author, text, subjects and reader are open to reflexive scrutiny. Within the field of organization studies, writers have responded to this challenge by deconstructing management ideologies, power relations, management theory, organizational practices, and how narratives may regulate social experience. Clair (1997), for example, studies the discursive enactment of oppression and resistance, illustrating the complexities of discursive relations by using oppositional logic to suggest that acts of oppression are also acts of resistance, and vice versa.

The second approach to reflexivity *betweenness*, is rooted in the disciplines of cultural anthropology, sociology and social constructionism and draws attention to the constitutive nature of language (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Garfinkel, 1967; Shotter, 1993). Social constructionists argue that we construct and make sense of social realities in various forms of discourse; conversation, writing, and reading. Radically reflexive researchers recognize their own place in this process, suggesting we *construct intersubjectively* the very *objective realities* we think we are studying: we are inventors not representers of realities (Clifford, 1986). Constructionist research explores how meaning is created between research participants. For example, Boje et al. (1999) examine how three storytelling organizations (a choral company, a group of researchers, the journal editor and reviewers) construct a research story. Katz and Shotter (1996) focus on arresting moments in conversations between residents, medical patients, and a collaborative consultant (Katz) to explore how meanings and new understandings are created between participants.

As can be seen from the examples given above, whether one takes a deconstructionist or constructionist approach has a major impact on how one studies organizational life. A further distinction influences our mode of inquiry, whether as a reflexive organizational researcher we take an endogenous or radical approach (Pollner, 1991). Deconstructionist and many

constructionist approaches to reflexivity take an endogenous or first-order approach to reflexivity (Steier, 1991) – *applying* reflexivity as a method to see how realities are constituted by other people in local contexts. Researchers examine how taken-for-granted features, actions, language, and shared knowledge of actors help organize and reinforce action within a social setting. For example, I might study how the actions, language, and conversations of organizational members help constitute organizational discourse, power relations, and oppression, or how modes of discipline are embedded in participants' ways of talking. From this perspective, a subject–object distinction still exists because the researcher is an outside expert looking in, deconstructing the work of others or studying how *other* people socially construct *their* realities. In a study of how managers dealt with uncertainty, I began what I thought were nondirected discussions, asking managers to tell me about uncertainty. Happily, their days were filled with uncertainty, until I began to wonder . . . if I had asked them to tell me about certainties, would they have described the opposite? I had not recognized my own role in discursively constructing the very features of 'reality' I was studying. *A 'double objectification' in which I detached myself from the process of studying the 'objectifications' of practice.*

From a radically reflexive, second-order perspective, reflexivity becomes an ontological issue because it unsettles any notions of the objectification of reality and knowledge and embraces a process of becoming (Chia, 1996b). Radical-reflexivity turns the reflexive act upon ourselves to deconstruct our own constructions of realities, identities, and knowledge, and highlight the intersubjective and indexical nature of meaning (i.e. accounts are ongoing discursive social accomplishments taking place in shared, taken-for-granted interactions between people). Radically reflexive researchers explore how we as researchers and practitioners constitute meaning through our own taken-for-granted suppositions, actions, and linguistic practices – our own reflexive accomplishment from the perspective of becoming-realism. This means recognizing that we are working within a number of linguistic communities (e.g. academic, business) and need to unsettle our forms of reasoning and any claims of objectivity or truth. No one account or theory is privileged over another (Latour, 1988). There are few examples of radically reflexive organizational research.

In summary, both deconstructionist and constructionist perspectives define reflexivity as a turning back, but differ in terms of their focus. Whereas deconstructionist approaches carry an epistemological stance concerned with problemizing explanations and revealing philosophical, ideological, linguistic and textual uncertainties, constructionist approaches focus on our ways of being and acting in the world, how we make sense of our experience, and

therefore call for narrative circularity – tracing the situated and partial nature of our accounts. The former throws open debate on issues such as the philosophical suppositions underlying texts; the latter on ontological issues of who we are and how we interact and create our realities with others.

Reflexive organizational research: Reflexive questions and possibilities

Critics of reflexivity argue it has little to offer. Questioning what is real, what is knowledge, and who (or what) is self, leads only to intellectual chaos, self-indulgent navel-gazing, *aporia*² (Latour, 1988), and politically motivated subjectivism (Searle, 1993) – all of which supposedly undermine serious research and make it impossible to say anything meaningful about theory or practice. By engaging in narrative circularity, I can undermine my own argument, but then why make it in the first place? Does reflexivity paralyze any attempt at social action or can it be useful? *The question of 'usefulness' itself is open to scrutiny because it smacks of unreflexive functionalism.* Gabriel (2002) suggests that knowledge is actionable (useful) based on its use value not its claims to truth, and that users (practitioners and academics) are bricoleurs employing whatever is available. If this is so, radical-reflexivity is important to the bricoleur because it offers a more critical and ethical basis for constructing meaning, identities, and the taken-for-granted workings of our institutions and language communities. Both deconstructionist and constructionist approaches unsettle any claims to moral neutrality (MacIntyre, 1981) and the privileging of theory and 'expert researcher/manager', by highlighting the need to explore the absent other. Radical-reflexivity can be a socio-ontological resource, a basis for inventing richer, reflexive explanations of how we make sense and construct experience (F.C. Richardson & Fowers, 1998). By exploring the 'other' we become 'apparently emptier, but richer in contingencies' as we open ourselves to new possibilities (Heidegger, 1966: 82).

These new possibilities incorporate *radical-reflexivity* which draws on the root metaphors of both otherness and betweenness to allow a critical examination of the way we constitute knowledge, meaning, and our lives as social actors (organizational members, managers or researchers). Radical-reflexivity also incorporates the logic of the Glance, the complex, living, bodily relation with others and the otherness around us: tensions inherent to the process of constituting meaning. In other words, it allows a critical stance, but also offers possibilities of making connections – essential if we want to construct 'useful' organizational knowledge.

I offer the following construction of radical-reflexivity as:

- questioning our intellectual suppositions;
- recognizing research is a symmetrical and reflexive narrative, a number of 'Participant' stories which interconnect in some way;
- examining and exploring researcher/participant relationships and their impact on knowledge;
- acknowledging the constitutive nature of our research conversations;
- constructing 'emerging practical theories' rather than objective truths;
- exposing the situated nature of accounts through narrative circularity;
- focusing on life and research as a process of becoming rather than already established truth.

Lynch (2000: 47) implies that there is a fine line between reflexive studies that are 'interesting, insightful and cleverly written' and 'tedious, pretentious and unrevealing'. I will explore these issues below, situating them in the context of trying to 'do' radically reflexive research, especially ethnography. I frame the issues in terms of questions, which not only highlight the paradoxes (and narrative circularity) of reflexivity, but also some of the criticisms and the difficulties in balancing reflexivity with a research agenda.

1. Ontological oscillation: Can we carry out reflexive research that is internally consistent?

How can I construct reflexive research that helps us (researchers, organizational members. . .) make sense of our experience while questioning the foundations of knowledge and my own suppositions . . . without undermining my own argument and plausibility or privileging my own account?

What approach should I take: a 'God's eye' approach (make statements from an outsider stance, a meta-logic, privileged position), a face value approach (my statements are not self-referring just to be taken at face value), say my claims are context-dependent and provisional . . . ?³

An inherent paradox of reflexivity is the issue of self-referentiality, which takes two forms: the internal consistency of our assumptions and research design, and the need to avoid 'tedious' and 'unrevealing' self-circularity. Inconsistency can result when I talk about reflexivity without being reflexive myself, or take an endogenous approach to research (see earlier). In doing so, I put myself outside the reflexive frame as a meta-theorist to

deconstruct other texts or study how others construct reality, while ignoring my own place in the constructing process. Researchers engage in a number of strategies to avoid ontological oscillation, including: banning it (Steier, 1991), writing from a meta-level in which the author's view is taken at face value (Hassard, 1994; Woolgar & Ashmore, 1988), or 'just writing' (Latour, 1988). Each of these approaches is in danger of falling back into an unreflexive 'flat naturalism' (Pels, 2000) in which an account is taken as representative or believable. Weick (1995) suggests we should just accept ontological oscillation as a necessary part of sense-making because in acting within multiple realities, no one can be an ontological purist. This form of ontological oscillation or gerrymandering is problematic to some reflexive scholars because it privileges being-realism and the author (Chia, 1996b): a case of 'do as I say, not as I do'. Alternatively, if we challenge our own intellectual production and draw attention to the otherness of our own texts, we can end up with debilitating self-reference as we go round in ever decreasing circles trying to explain why something is unexplainable or has no objective meaning. As Samuels (1991: 512) iterates:

To question the foundations of confident knowledge is to question the foundation of the knowledge taken confidently that enables us to question the foundations of confident knowledge!

How do we address this issue? For those who want to research the lived world and make a meaningful contribution, how can we do so in a self-exemplifying way without falling prey to infinite regress or ontological oscillation? What are the possibilities for reflexive organizational research?

At the risk of being criticized as unreflexively privileging a theoretical standpoint, I suggest that radically reflexive researchers engage in at least one self-referential loop by acknowledging and interrogating the impact of their own ontological and epistemological assumptions on their research strategy. They do not do so to privilege their position, but to ensure that their research has an internal logic and to emphasize its situated nature. This means revealing how our research is a narrative construction with its own discursive rules and conventions, and is open to scrutiny and different interpretations by readers. Researchers favoring deconstructionist approaches may adopt a 'suspicious' stance, unsettling the underlying assumptions and conventions of their research paradigm and practice, and articulating the inherent tensions and opportunities of these assumptions. From a constructionist perspective, researchers recognize the intersubjective nature of their research and explore how meaning – both organizational and the research account itself – are constructed between research participants. Some organizational

researchers may use both approaches in a radically reflexive exploration of how meaning is constructed, and also unsettle conventional ideas about meaning, identity construction (of researcher and 'subject'), and power relations in the research process, to explore other ways of researching management and organizational practice.

2. Is there a 'reality' to study?

What 'reality' can I study when I'm claiming an independent, external reality doesn't exist?

Reflexive ethnographers suggest that the social world is not an object to be discovered and represented by dispassionate objective researchers, rather researchers actively constitute reality as they study it – we are constructing what we think an organization is. If we accept this idea that reality and knowledge are always emerging social constructions grounded in our discursive practices, then everything is relative to the moment of speaking/writing/reading – the moment of the Glance. The subject matter of organizational research disappears if there is no fixed organization structure or set of managerial roles. How can we study ever-emerging discursive realities, which we as researchers have a part in creating?⁴ At the extremes, reflexive scholars criticize conventional research strategies for their mindless objective empiricism, and positivists criticize reflexive strategies for their groundless solipsist relativism. How may we avoid both while remaining sensitive to reflexive paradoxes (Chia, 1996b)?

Pels (2000) states that reflexive research claims no privileged, dominant or persuasive status, but offers a weaker criterion of truth by displaying the relationship between the 'spokesperson and that which is spoken for' (p. 17). From a constructionist perspective, this means designing research to be sensitive to humanly generated and multiply layered understandings (Chia, 1996a), to the social, historical and linguistic processes in which we are embedded. In the search to design reflexive, grounded, rich, interesting research, some authors suggest that we view our work as storytelling (fictional or metaphorical) rather than truth-telling (Boje, 1995; Clifford, 1986; Gabriel, 1995). However, there are many different approaches to storytelling. Questions emerge as to who is/should be telling the story, about what or whom, and how?⁵ Some authors see *storytelling* from an endogenous perspective⁶ where research is written in story form or where stories are collected from subjects and analyzed from a metaphor of storytelling or narrative by identifying plots, episodes and dialogue (e.g. Boje, 1991; Czarniawska, 1997; Gubrium & Holstein, 1998). Other authors take an ontological perspective using *story making* as metaphor for constructing our

understanding of social realities, suggesting that social life and research itself are multiple stories, interwoven narratives of meaning-making constructed and enacted within various discourses. L. Richardson's autobiographical *Paradigms lost* (1999) emphasizes the radically reflexive process of meaning-making using dialogue, excerpts from *Paradise lost*, flashbacks, etc. to construct a socio-narrative – connecting self, language and others.

One approach to radically reflexive research is to build on Kristeva's (1984) notion of intertextuality. She suggests that texts, in this context research accounts, are written and rewritten in both synchronic (situated in the context and point of listening/writing/reading) and diachronic (through time) ways. Meaning, experience and identities are not fixed but in-process, and research an intertextual space where a plurality of characters, words, voices, and fragments of ideologies or representations connect. A radically reflexive researcher explores what these fragments are and how they come together at particular points in time and subjectal space to shape meaning. This involves both constructionist and deconstructionist metaphors if researchers unsettle some conventional ideas about meaning, experience and identities.

3. Just who is author/researcher/subject?

Who is 'author'?

Whose reflexive voice – the researcher's and/or 'subject's', and how can we recognize the interplay of voices without privileging ourselves and excluding the voices of others?

Reflexivity questions the dialectics of the researcher/participant relationship in a number of ways. At a fundamental level, reflexivity questions agency, whether there is a conscious, self-directing, self-aware individual. There is a crucial difference between constructionist and deconstructionist approaches to agency. Deconstructionist approaches decenter self⁷ and the subject, and focus on text, discourse, and ideologies.⁸ This can result in ontological oscillation because the deconstructor is (presumably) centered enough to impose his/her voice on the text from a God's eye position. Also, if knowledge is actively constituted, then the notion of the researcher as an objective observer becomes problematic because all perspectives become partial. Thus, issues of privilege, power and voice emerge: who constructs the research, who interprets, who writes, whose voice is heard/not heard?

Radically reflexive researchers accept that research is as much about the world of the researcher (our experience, culture, language, and writing

conventions) as it is about the world we are studying. S/he is active, along with other participants, in constructing and making sense of social and organizational realities – indeed, researcher, research participants and readers are constructed through the very act of researching/writing/reading. If we as reflexive researchers are not objective experts studying the behavior of subjects – then who are we? Turner's (2000) examination of the role of the social anthropologist suggests that research involves socially constituting configurations in which all involved negotiate cultural practices and their meanings. This elevates the active intersubjectivity of participants and consequently ethnographic work may be seen as 'a cultural poetics that is an interplay of voices, of positioned utterances' (Clifford, 1986: 12) in which 'every version of an "other," . . . is also the construction of a "self" ' (p. 23). In other words, our discursive practices, our conversations, our writing, the fundamental tension between what is/is not, are all entwined in a process of fashioning self/others, social realities and sense. It therefore becomes important for a researcher to reflexively interrogate how s/he constructs representations; to work with others towards more linguistically expressible accounts. How might we do so? In Figure 1, I explore this issue and outline possible reflexive researcher/participant relationships.

The researcher may focus on self-reflexivity, the 'subject's' reflexivity, or intersubjective radical-reflexivity.

Self reflexivity: The researcher's voice

With its roots in Gouldner's reflexive sociology (1970), self-reflexivity recognizes the influence of the researcher's values and assumptions on the process of inquiry. Researchers need to confront themselves and make their assumptions explicit so that the reader is aware of their impact. This may take the form of researcher confessions about personal biases, textual strategies such as writing from the first person singular, or writing a story about the researcher's fieldwork experience. Care needs to be taken over how this is done because such explanations may not necessarily take a reflexive stance. For example, post hoc researcher confessions about how her/his values, beliefs, perceptions, etc. may have influenced the research can be misleading because they may be reflective rather than reflexive and can deceive us into assuming that complete self-knowledge is both possible and authentic (Linstead, 1994). This raises a reflexive paradox: in unmasking the subjectivity of our accounts, we forget we are turning ourselves into objects to be studied and in doing so lose sight of our active subjectivity (Cooper, 1987). Self-reflexivity can be disembodiment – the thinker separating self from the moment of existence. In the process of reflecting on ourselves we take an

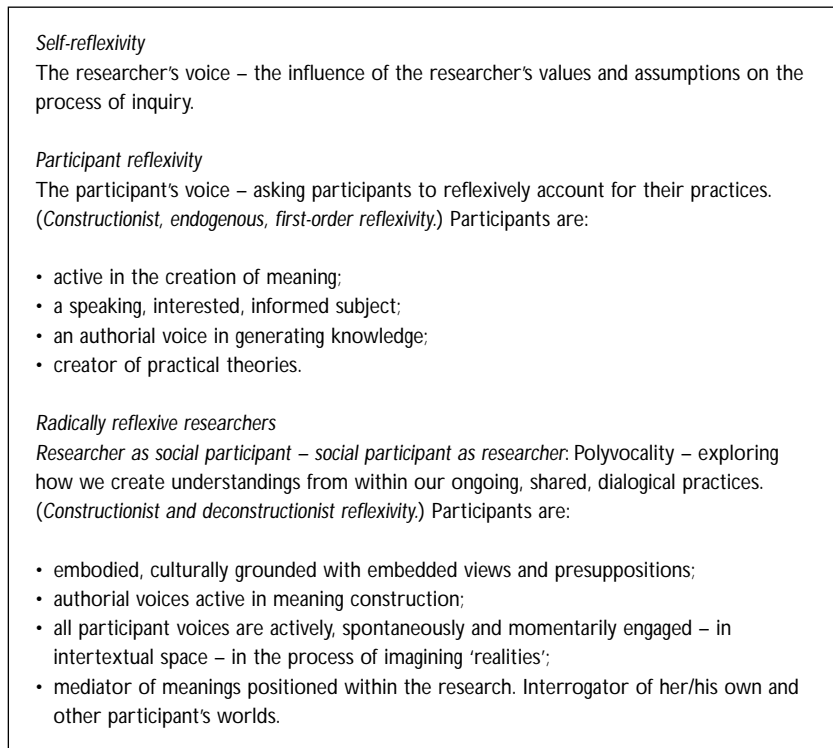


Figure 1 Reflexive researcher–participant relationships

outsider-expert stance by objectifying self/feeling in the construction of causal explanations.

Participant reflexivity: Asking participants to reflexively account for their practices

Garfinkel (1967) suggests reflexivity involves recognizing and studying the problematic and taken-for-granted aspects of the 'ongoing accomplishments of organized artful practices of everyday life' (p. 10). However, because implicit understandings are shared between participants, a researcher may not be privy to that understanding because s/he works from within another web of meaning (Clifford, 1986). We therefore need accounts from 'subjects' in order to surface implicit understandings. For example, Garfinkel asks students to report what was actually said in their conversations along with

an interpretation of what they thought they were talking about. This form of endogenous reflexivity focuses upon studying how participants reflexively construct and maintain their world, perhaps with a goal of helping participants act in more self-reflexive ways. For example, Mumby (1988) studies how organizational participants create and maintain power through symbolic meanings (stories, actions, logos, memos . . .) and uses this as a basis for emancipation by encouraging the formation of alternative meanings. This assumes that researchers can change power dynamics by helping actors become reflexive, but does not necessarily incorporate a radically reflexive stance unless the researcher opens up his/her own advocacy and assumptions of privileged expertise to reflexive critique.

Researcher as social participant – social participant as researcher: Exploring how we create understandings, in intertextual space, through our dialogical practices

Radical-reflexivity questions the traditional elitist relationship between the researcher (expert observer/interpreter) and subject (passive recounter of stories), seeing it instead as intersubjective, in which all are participants in constructing meaning. Together, researcher and participant focus on how a shared sense of the situation unfolds in the responsive, interactive moments in the research conversation (see Cunliffe, 2002, for an example). Together participants question their suppositions and examine how language creates meaning and helps us connect, make sense, act in, create, and negotiate our way through our organizational lives. This in itself raises the reflexive question of *who chooses what to talk about and include in the account?*

4. Can we engage in reflexive 'theorizing' and 'explanation'?

What is 'useful' knowledge and how can we produce it within a reflexive frame?

Can I offer meaningful explanations without creating a subject/object, researched/researcher distinction, and either general theory or total relativism?

Reflexive researchers suggest reductionist forms of inquiry incorporating the logic of the Gaze (observation, data collection, and encoding social life) lead to the paradox of representation (Cooper, 1989). Our academic theories and models are assumed to be accurate descriptions of reality, when they are our own orderings and representations – do organizations really operate as

systems, or is the organization as a system just our theoretical representation? The process of reflexive inquiry attempts to address this representational paradox by claiming to be inventive – constructions rooted in the historical, social, linguistic and institutional practices of research participants. So, can we construct grounded and thoughtful reflexive accounts that have some meaning for participants and readers, are taken seriously, yet avoid both the certainty/universality implicit in conventional theorizing and the egotistical nature of solipsistic navel gazing? Latour (1988) identifies three paradoxes relevant to the construction of explanations. I add my own interpretations:

How to be here and there (*in the manager's setting/experience/language/emotions and the academic's setting/experience/language/emotions*)?

How to be here, there and in between (*how to span the boundaries between those worlds, between theory and practice, between different language games, to develop accounts plausible to both? How can I become 'involved', yet record 'data'? Can I interpret, explain, just present dialogue as collaborative sense making in the moment, draw conclusions . . .*)?

How to avoid being believed too much (this is the absolute truth) or too little (*this is too trivial, local, convoluted . . . to be convincing*)?

Radically reflexive inquiry imagines local narratives based on the criteria of know how, knowing how to live, knowing how to listen (Lyotard, 1984) – in which meaning is embedded in the active subjectivity of participants and the communities within which we live and work. A number of reflexive studies focus on fictionalizing accounts by using a variety of textual strategies such as irony (Ashmore, 1989), deconstruction (Martin, 1990), or second voice (Pinch & Pinch, 1988). From a constructionist perspective, Weick (1998) suggests theorizing, or reflexive interpretation, is akin to 'essaying' ongoing, incomplete performances and rehearsals in which research participants work through possibilities. In his view, essaying brings us closer to lived experience than preconceived theoretical constructs.

We can reveal the indexical nature of our research conversations by highlighting emerging practical theories (Shotter, 1993), taken-for-granted ways of shaping, ordering, and accounting for our experiences, of relating with others, of making connections in our talk-entwined activities. These 'theories' may be seen as a complex weave of explicit knowledge, embodied responses, and tacit knowing – a contextualized imagining, sensing and connecting occurring in subjectal space (Kristeva, 1984) as research

participants respond in taken-for-granted ways to what they perceive as features of their social world and linguistic communities. Organizational members often create practical theories to help them deal with their surroundings. Such 'theories' include intuition, rules of thumb, or gut feelings about what to do and when, and may be crafted, as Gabriel (2002) suggests, from traditional theories, ideas from books, colleagues, or training programs. A reflexive awareness of these practical theories and how they help research participants create meaning and act in situations – along with a (deconstructionist) consideration of their limitations and impact, offers a way of thinking about how we constitute our organizational 'realities' through our taken-for-granted linguistic practices. By using the logic of the Glimpse, we may surface these taken-for-granted, provisional, contextualized, in-the-moment, ways of making sense, acting, and being and their impact in opening up opportunities to create new ways of talking and acting. Deconstructionist reflexivity takes research participants further by helping them question their assumptions about how 'local reality' is constructed, who it empowers or marginalizes, and if and how it can be changed.

Summary

Intellectuals may live off scientific knowledge but not by it. Such 'ignorance', fed by traditional habits of acquiring knowledge, costs us a great deal. . . .

(Czarniawska, 1997: 21)

Reflexivity challenges us to address fundamental questions about the nature of reality, knowledge and our own ways of being – to take a leap into a constantly shifting ocean rather than studying organizational life from the security of the shore. Specifically, reflexivity raises a need to be critical of any self-sealing processes in our research, and the possibility of transforming our contexts as social actors and researchers (Jun, 1994; Lewandowski, 2000; Weick, 1999). Why make research more complex by adopting a reflexive stance? Can reflexive approaches contribute anything to our understanding of organizational knowledge and practice? These questions have been debated in many arenas. I suggest that reflexive inquiry *can* offer valuable insights into organizational studies and practice by stimulating a critical exploration of how we constitute knowledge and enact our own practices as researchers. In doing so, it raises possibilities for different forms of inquiry and new ways of understanding experience.

First, by uncovering the limitations and possibilities of our assumptions, we are less prone to becoming complacent or ritualistic in our research practices. As a consequence, reflexivity can stimulate new 'methods' and ways of accounting for our experiences thereby enriching our sociological imagination (Pollner, 1991). By unsettling established ontology and research practices, we can begin to construct different and richer understandings of our context-sensitive, complex, uncertain, and indeterminate social experience. Reflexive deconstructionists claim that by identifying contradictions and inconsistencies we can engage in deeper and more illuminating research. Reflexive constructionists suggest that accepting the tentative, intersubjective, and multiply-constructed nature of explanation can lead to more circumspect, critical and symmetrical relationships in researching, teaching, and practice. It can also stimulate diverse perspectives and uncover taken-for-granted practices, relationships, and 'forgotten voices'. New readings may emerge which result in context-transforming action by researchers and organizational participants. In terms of our own research practices, reflexivity leads us to question the limitations we may unknowingly impose on ourselves and others, and in doing so open up new ways of 'theorizing' practice. Radical-reflexivity may therefore form a basis for developing a more critical and articulate grasp of both organizational practices and the research process itself.

Notes

- 1 See Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000) for an in-depth discussion of the philosophical roots of reflexivity.
- 2 Derrida defines aporia as an unfathomable paradox, for example, 'The trace is in fact the absolute origin of sense in general. Which amounts to saying once again that there is no absolute origin of sense in general . . .' (*Of grammatology*, 1976: 65, in Lawson, 1985).
- 3 See Lawson (1985: 15–22) for a discussion of these approaches.
- 4 See *Organization Studies* (1995, 16, 4) for further debate on this issue.
- 5 These issues are explored by Van Maanen (1988) in *Tales of the field*.
- 6 Sometimes associated with meta-reflexivity (see Chia, 1996b and Latour, 1988 for elaboration). This approach still takes an outside-expert stance, a subject-object distinction.
- 7 At the extreme, we become schizophrenic, reduced to 'an experience of pure material Signifiers, or in other words of a series of pure and unrelated presents in time' (Jameson, 1984: 72), passive transmitters of language and/or images where everything is related to everything else.
- 8 See Alvesson and Deetz (1996) for elaboration.

References

- Alvesson, M. & Deetz, S. Critical theory and postmodern approaches to organization studies. In S. Clegg, C. Hardy & W. Nord (Eds), *Handbook of organization studies*. London: Sage, 1996.
- Alvesson, M. & Sköldböck, K. *Reflexive methodology: New vistas for qualitative research towards a reflexive methodology*. London: Sage, 2000.
- Ashmore, M. *The reflexive thesis: Wrioting a sociology of scientific knowledge*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Bodily, C.L. Ageism and the deployments of age: A constructionist view. In T.R. Sarbin & J.I. Kitsuse (Eds), *Constructing the social*. London: Sage, 1994, pp. 174–94.
- Boje, D.M. The storytelling organization: A study of story performance in an office-supply firm. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1991, 36, 106–26.
- Boje, D.M. Stories of the storytelling organization: A postmodern analysis of Disney as Tamara-land. *Academy of Management Journal*, 1995, 38(4), 997–1035.
- Boje, D.M., Luhman, J.T. & Baack, D.E. Hegemonic stories and encounters between storytelling organizations. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 1999, 8(4), 340–60.
- Burrell, G. & Morgan, G. *Sociological paradigms and organizational analysis*. Aldershot: Gower, 1979.
- Calás, M. & Smircich, L. Past postmodernism? Reflections and tentative directions. *Academy of Management Review*, 1999, 24(4), 649–71.
- Chia, R. *Organizational analysis as deconstructive practice*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1996a.
- Chia, R. The problem of reflexivity in organizational research: Towards a postmodern science of organization. *Organization*, 1996b, 3(1), 31–59.
- Chia, R. & King, I.W. The organizational structuring of novelty. *Organization*, 1998, 5(4), 461–78.
- Clair, R.P. Organizing silence: Silence as voice and voice as silence in the narrative exploration of the treaty of new echota. *Western Journal of Communication*, 1997, 61(3), 315–37.
- Clifford, J. Introduction: Partial truths. In J. Clifford & G. Marcus (Eds), *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, pp. 1–26.
- Clifford, J. & Marcus, G. (Eds) *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.
- Cooper, R. Information, communication and organization: A post-structural revision. *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*, 1987, 8(3), 395–415.
- Cooper, R. Modernism, postmodernism and organizational analysis 3: The contribution of Jacques Derrida. *Organization Studies*, 1989, 10(4), 479–502.
- Cooper, R. Organization/disorganization. In J. Hassard & D. Pym (Eds), *The theory and philosophy of organizations*. London: Routledge, 1990, 167–97.
- Cunliffe, A.L. Social poetics: A dialogical approach to management inquiry. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 2002, 11(2), 128–46.
- Czarniawska, B. *Narrating the organization: Dramas of institutional identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.
- Derrida, J. *Speech and phenomena*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973.
- Derrida, J. *Of grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- De Saussure, F. *Course in general linguistics* (trans. W. Baskin). New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959.
- Gabriel, Y. The unmanaged organization: Stories, fantasies and subjectivity. *Organization Studies*, 1995, 16(3), 477–501.
- Gabriel, Y. Essai: On paragrammatic uses of organizational theory – a provocation. *Organization Studies*, 2002, 23(1), 133–51.
- Garfinkel, H. *Studies in ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967.

- Gergen, K.J. & Gergen, M.M. Toward reflexive methodologies. In F. Steier, (Ed.), *Research and reflexivity*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1991, pp. 76–95.
- Gouldner, A.W. *The coming crisis in western sociology*. New York: Basic Books, 1970.
- Gubrium, J.F. & Holstein, J.A. Narrative practice and the coherence of personal stories. *Sociological Quarterly*, 1998, 39(1), 163–88.
- Hardy, C. & Clegg, S. Relativity without relativism: Reflexivity in post-paradigm organization studies. *British Journal of Management*, 1997, 8, S5–S17. [Special issue.]
- Hassard, J. Postmodern organizational analysis: Towards a conceptual framework. *Journal of Management Studies*, 1994, 31(3), 303–24.
- Hatch, M.J. Irony and the social construction of contradiction in the humor of a management team. *Organization Science*, 1997, 8(3), 275–88.
- Heidegger M. *Discourse on thinking: A translation of Gelassenheit*, by J.M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund. New York: Harper and Row, 1966.
- Holland, R. Reflexivity. *Human Relations*, 1999, 52(4), 463–84.
- Jameson, F. Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism. *New Left Review*, 1984, 146 (July/August), 52–92.
- Jun, J.S. *Philosophy of administration*. Seoul, South Korea: Daeyoung Moonwha International, 1994.
- Katz, A. & Shotter, J. Hearing the patient's voice: Toward a social poetics in diagnostic interviews. *Social Science Medicine*, 1996, 43(6), 919–31.
- Kristeva, J. *Revolution in poetic language*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.
- Latour, B. The politics of explanation: An alternative. In S. Woolgar (Ed.), *Knowledge and reflexivity: New frontiers in the sociology of knowledge*. London: Sage, 1988, pp. 155–76.
- Lawson, H. *Reflexivity. The post-modern predicament*. La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1985.
- Lewandowski, J.D. Thematizing embeddedness: Reflexive sociology as interpretation. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 2000, 30(1), 49–67.
- Linstead, S. From postmodern anthropology to deconstructive ethnography. *Human Relations*, 1993a, 46(1), 97–120.
- Linstead, S. Deconstruction in the study of organizations. In J. Hassard & M. Parker (Eds), *Postmodernism and organizations*. London: Sage, 1993b, pp. 49–70.
- Linstead, S. Objectivity, reflexivity, and fiction: Humanity, inhumanity, and the science of the social. *Human Relations*, 1994, 47(11), 1321–45.
- Lynch, M. Against reflexivity as an academic virtue and source of privileged knowledge. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2000, 17(3), 26–54.
- Liotard, J.F. *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- MacIntyre, A. *After virtue*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.
- Martin, J. Deconstructing organizational taboos: The suppression of gender conflict in organizations. *Organization Science*, 1990, 1(4), 339–59.
- Mumby, D.K. *Communication and power in organizations: Discourse, ideology and domination*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1988.
- Pels, D. Reflexivity: One step up. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2000, 17(3), 1–25.
- Pinch, T. & Pinch, T. Reservations about reflexivity and new literary forms or why let the devil have all the good tunes? In S. Woolgar (Ed.), *Knowledge and reflexivity: New frontiers in the sociology of knowledge*. London: Sage, 1988, pp. 178–97.
- Pollner, M. Left of ethnomethodology: The rise and decline of radical reflexivity. *American Sociological Review*, 1991, 56(June), 370–80.
- Richardson, F.C. & Fowers, B.J. Interpretive social science. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 1998, 41(4), 465–86.
- Richardson, L. Paradigms lost. *Symbolic Interaction*, 1999, 22(1), 79–92.
- Samuels, W. Truth and discourse in the social construction of economic reality: An essay

- on the relation of knowledge to socioeconomic policy. *Journal of Post Keynesian Economics*, 1991, 13(4), 511–24.
- Searle, J.R. Rationality and realism: What is at stake? *Daedalus*, 1993, 122(4), 55–84.
- Shotter, J. Social constructionism and realism: Adequacy or accuracy? *Theory and Psychology*, 1992, 2(2), 175–82.
- Shotter, J. *Conversational realities: Constructing life through language*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1993.
- Steier, F. (Ed.) *Research and reflexivity*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1991.
- Turner, A. Embodied ethnography. Doing culture. *Social Anthropology*, 2000, 8(1), 51–60.
- Tyler, S.A. Post-modern ethnography: From document of the occult to occult document. In J. Clifford & G. Marcus (Eds), *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, pp. 122–40.
- Van Maanen, J. *Tales of the field: On writing ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- Watson, T. *In search of management. Culture, chaos and control in managerial work*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Watson, T. Rhetoric, discourse and argument in organizational sense making: A reflexive tale. *Organizational Studies*, 1995, 16(5), 805–21.
- Weick, K.E. *Sensemaking in organizations. Foundations for organizational science series*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1995.
- Weick, K.E. That's moving: Theories that matter. Paper presented at the Academy of Management, San Diego, August, 1998.
- Weick, K.E. Theory construction as disciplined reflexivity: Tradeoffs in the 90s. *Academy of Management Review*, 1999, 24(4), 797–806.
- Wittgenstein, L. *Philosophical investigation*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1953.
- Woolgar, S. & Ashmore, M. The next step: An introduction to the reflexive project. In S. Woolgar (Ed.), *Knowledge and reflexivity: New frontiers in the sociology of knowledge*. London: Sage, 1988, pp. 1–13.

Ann L. Cunliffe, PhD, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Public Administration at California State University, Hayward. Her research interests lie in exploring how administrators and managers construct organizational experiences, identities and meaning through their everyday conversational practices, and in developing reflexive approaches to management research and learning. She has published in the *Journal of Management Studies*, *Management Learning*, the *Journal of Management Inquiry* and a co-authored article in the *American Communication Journal*.

[E-mail: acunliff@csuhayward.edu]