INTRODUCTION:

Transformation in principles and practice

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Welcome to *Qualitative Research in Action*. In the planning of this volume a particular process was adopted. The reasons for this were not only due to the geographical spread of the contributors, but also to permit chapters to be exchanged and commented upon. Overall, the purpose was to enable a thematic coherence to emerge within the volume as a whole. It was also recognized that while we talk about the links between process and product in research practice, along with the need to share experiences, this is often not the case when it comes to the production of edited collections. Given this, the idea of 'pairing' was introduced. The aim here was to make the process of writing for an edited collection more thematic, as well as pleasurable and supportive. The result is a book structured around 'issues in practice' as its main focus.

Before moving on to provide an overview of the chapters, it is necessary to situate them in terms of the issues that have informed, in various ways, thinking about the practice of qualitative research. To detail these transformations, brought about by a number of different traditions – for example, feminisms, social constructionist perspectives, critical theory, critical realism, postmodernism and post-structuralism – is not my task here. Nevertheless, it is to draw out some of the themes in order to provide a context for the chapters and part headings that appear in this volume.

PRACTICE, PROCESS AND TEXTS

We have witnessed in the latter part of the twentieth century a number of critiques concerning the status of social research in society. Although mostly aimed at positivism and empiricism, it has resulted in extensions of particular discourses into terrains that were once presumed to be clear in their demarcation points, for instance the relationships between philosophy, theory, methodology and method. We can now observe that data are produced, not collected, and it is the process of production that is fundamentally related to the product (May 2001). Whether overtly, or as a result of the presuppositions

that are inevitably embedded within ways of thinking that inform practice and so often remain beyond question, the decisions that are made about theory, methods, methodology, ethics and politics are now open to routine scrutiny. Particular ideas of neutrality, such as the maintenance of objectivity through positioning the researcher as nothing but a passive instrument of data collection, are now exposed as falsehoods that seek to mask the realities of the research process. The knower (as researcher) is now implicated in the construction of the known (the dynamics and content of society and social relations).

At this point we might note that this trend is nothing new. In *The Sociological Imagination*, originally published in 1959, Mills had a chapter on 'reason and freedom'. Here he noted how social science had inherited terms which, although outdated, remain rooted in practice. He then moved on to argue that these 'standard categories of thought', if generalized to contemporary situations, 'become unwieldy, irrelevant, not convincing … so now The Modern Age is being succeeded by a *post-modern period*. Perhaps we may call it: The Fourth Epoch' (Mills 1970 [1959]: 184, added emphasis).

There are many other examples that could have been used to illustrate this point. Jürgen Habermas (1992) argues that the opening for postmodernism in western thought began in the late nineteenth century in the writings of Nietzsche, while Barry Smart (1993) finds references to the term in 1930s literary criticism. If the epoch which has given us these critiques, however, is concerned with the search for new values, identities and ways of life, perhaps it is not surprising that we can range, in reaction to these criticisms, from those who argue that nothing has changed to those for whom anything less than total embrace is an act of betrayal. As a result we find calls for a return to a 'scientific basis' for disciplines mixing with those who denounce social research in favour of other mediums of representation, for example, poetry, fiction and art. Those napping in the cosy slumbers of past scientific 'pretensions' can then find their practices being characterized as branches of literary criticism.

Here we can detect movements in opposite directions and this detracts from the productive potential that comes with engagement. Polarizations between an unproblematic science and acts of literary deconstruction do little to aid understanding. While the idea that one can, without question, claim to speak in the name of a separate and unproblematic reality should be exposed to scrutiny, so too should the claim to speak in the name of different realities as mediated by alternative modes of representation. We see the same tendencies in both claims: that is, to legislate over the constitution and nature of social reality. In the process scientism – defined as the belief that science is the *only* form of legitimate knowledge – becomes confused with science. The latter, if mixed with a sensitivity to context and a willingness to engage in an understanding of the relationship between justification and application that is not taken to be beyond question, can be moulded by considerations that lie beyond the confines of its boundaries. These include the desirability of various courses of actions, as well as recognition of different forms of life.

There is also the transmission and effect of these critiques as they become aligned with modes of scholastic communication to consider. A series of acts of demolition on so-called classic texts can assist in the process of accumulating, to deploy the tools of analysis of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), cultural capital within academic fields. The project is to expose the presuppositions of those who were once canonized as representatives of a tradition that budding apprentices are expected to emulate in their practice. These texts may be laid bare in order to render public just how they cannot live up to their own aspirations, let alone those standards which those who charge themselves with this undertaking invoke.

The effect is to produce competing academic camps with those defending established procedures pitted against those who set themselves the task of finding tacit assumptions that represent nothing more than nostalgic yearnings for a bygone age. The search for true knowledge is the target of attack for representing the 'fantasy to seize reality' and thus the solution becomes: 'Let us wage war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unpresentable; let us activate the differences' (Lyotard 1993: 46). We then await the next stage for those thinkers subject to acts of deconstruction: the process of resurrection. At this point those same thinkers, when translated in different ways according to different influences, appear as more subtle and useful to the present age than previous interpretations might have suggested. Careers are then forged in acts of deconstruction against which another set in the intellectual class can then sharpen their pencils.

Such activity is a vital part of the vibrancy of intellectual work and functions as an instrument for sensitizing researchers to the consequences of practices and assumptions. At what point, however, does such activity become counter-productive from the point of view of research practice and understanding itself? When does it cease to inform in order to change practice and instead undermine it and so lead to paralysis and inactivity? Take, for example, methodological translations of the works of Jacques Derrida (1978). These can lead to reflexive accounts that, paradoxically, reproduce the very ego-identity that is the subject of his critical interventions (see Norris 1987). Manifest in confessions of failed attempts to discover an unproblematic reality, what then emerges is a whole new industry for textual reflections on the futility of this enterprise (May 1998). The result is that representations can be rendered so incoherent that engagement is difficult, if not impossible, for the purposes of illuminating the dynamics of social issues. We end up with accounts that can reproduce the very targets of Derrida's critiques: the closure of texts and the centrality of the subject in the production of those texts.

In the face of these trends it is possible to form the distinct impression that methodological discussions are now trapped within descending interpretative circles. With the struggle for academic capital in place, reputations may be forged via interpretations of interpretations. Yet how are the interpreters authorized to make such interpretations in the first place? Would this be something to do with the institutional authority that is bestowed upon them

and that enables a distance to be maintained from the practice and products of systematic social investigation?

Of course there are clear advantages of such distance, particularly when compared with those whose practice is driven by the interests of sponsors who make specific demands according to the pursuit of narrow interests. Yet it can so easily lapse into an indulgence that misses its mark. The limits to reflexivity then inhere in a willingness to subject one's own position and what it does or does not authorize as a result, to critical scrutiny (May 1999, 2000). Add to this the fact that the world is not about to stop and listen to such debates and this tells us something about the ways in which our dominant modes of organizing social relations take their revenge on discourses. If we turn our attention to such matters we might then be able to expose what Michel Foucault (1991) called the 'limits of appropriation' of discourse. In this way we may not see it as all encompassing of social relations and begin to ask how it is that the analyst may claim a privileged vantagepoint in the face of what are taken to be overwhelming social forces?

The issue now turns to reconstruction. Engaged, theoretically informed empirical work, can be conducted in order to illuminate issues and bring to the attention of a wider audience the dynamics and consequences of social relations. From a more critical genre, this provides for the possibility of things being other than they are via a critique of what Roberto Unger (1987) has called 'false necessity'. This same genre can be captured in Foucault's work. For Foucault, to assume that the end of critique is some consensual state of affairs runs the danger of the constitution of a complacent attitude that, by default, disguises non-consensuality in a celebration of finality (Foucault 1984). A critical ethos must be seen as a necessary, but not sufficient condition, to guard against 'power as evil'. This appears as a process without end. The potential for a critical approach to research work, considered genealogically, is its ability not only to 'reveal reality', but also to 'deconstruct necessity' (Hoy 1998). What is at stake is not just how others dominate us, but also how we dominate ourselves. We find the same impulse in feminist-inspired research where reconstruction is identified alongside the need for deconstruction in order to remain sensitive to the working assumptions that inform practice (Harding and Hintikka 1983). Similarly, in order to avoid the traps of a 'false' universalism and particularism, we find Pierre Bourdieu's (2000) concern to conduct research as a contribution to a 'realpolitik of reason'.

These issues are not, contrary to the attitude of those who regard philosophical matters as detracting from the 'real' work, irrelevant. Built into assumptions are epistemological and ontological presuppositions that render the world intelligible. However, if a certain form of practice and contemplation – as that which enables research to be undertaken in the first place – is born in a double movement of reflexivity in terms of possessing a point of view on the point of view (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), it is because researchers have a distance from the necessity they examine in order to turn practice into an object of investigation. Practice, after all, must be

indifferent to the conditions of its possibility in order to be practice *as such.* Imagine the paralysis that would come with repeated reflections upon every act prior and subsequent to its execution. Although language carries a degree of reflexivity (Garfinkel 1967; Harré 1998), continual and conscious monitoring of actions *within* actions would bring them to a halt. Further, what may be omitted from such deliberations are the conditions that enable and constrain actions. The study of the conditions of knowledge production in terms of the positioning of the researcher is thus a guard against not only the conflation of scholastic with practical reason, but also the complacency and arrogance that is born in dispositions that have the potential to accompany *all* modes of thought – whatever their claims may be concerning the constitution of social reality.

Without a gaze turned towards the continuing endeavours and positions of researchers, those who once sought something called an unproblematic 'reality' can turn their attention to past mistakes, while experimenting with new forms of writing. Again, however, the potential for further illumination of social dynamics and situations can so easily slip from being complementary, to having a substitutory role in relation to research practice. It then moves, by default, forms of representation aside from social research from having a regulatory and reflexive function, to a constitutive one. Different forms of representation are then assumed to take precedence over the results of systematic social investigation and in so doing simply reverse the scales. Fiction becomes reality, rather than having the potential to be complementary in its discovery. Yet questions will still be begged when we ask of such forms of representation: whom do they affect? Under what circumstances and for what reasons? Utilizing what resources and with what overall consequences? Systematic social investigation enables us to seek answers to such questions.

We also have to ask another question: what are the costs of these conflations to future generations of researchers? What about those who are under pressure to produce results according to the edicts of institutions and sponsors who, after all, pay their wages? In the face of this how can critical interventions provide those researchers with the resources to challenge organizations that will continue to commission research? It is they who are positioned to completely ignore such critical interventions, but not necessarily the next generation of academics who may now be doctoral students and those on temporary research contracts. Similarly, how can the policy process be informed and changed while noting, of course, that it is often the art of persuasion, rather than the results of systematic social investigation, which informs such outcomes?

Here we can detect another possible consequence in relation to engagements between social research and social life. If there is a withdrawal from fields of current endeavour there are plenty of those who are unfettered by the latest critiques concerning the quest to uncover realities that are only too happy to fill it. These are the armies of 'journalists, pundits, politicians, and pop-theorists, who are always more than willing to supply that need'

(McCarthy in Hoy and McCarthy 1994: 220). In what is taken to be a methodologically post-positivist/empiricist/modernist age, 'instrumental positivism' (Bryant 1985) still appears to find a way of marching onwards.

None of this is to suggest that neatly demarcated boundaries exist. It is to say that a failure to understand the forces which act upon the process of social research and the conditions under which it is enacted, leads to a limited understanding of its place and value in social life. Those who wish to change practice, but do not take this into account, simply miss the target. In the productive agonisms that can and should exist between social research and social life, we need to understand much more about how and under what circumstances it can be deployed without a capitulation to the power of those social forces that seek to mould its practices and findings in their name.

CONTRIBUTIONS: ISSUES, THEMES AND CONTENT

There is no doubt that there are positive benefits in the processes of rethinking the issues, processes and practices of research. Different ways of organizing research can also open up new possibilities (Gulbenkian Commission 1996). Yet it is upon qualitative research that these critiques have so often alighted and it is for these reasons that this volume was brought together to consider their implications for actual practice. In the process new terrains of inquiry have been opened up, or subjected to scrutiny in new ways. These include the relations between fieldwork and social identity, actions, emotions, narratives, reflexivity, participation, representation and generalization. Along with these we have witnessed the introduction of new technologies of data analysis, evaluation research and ways of combining methods to enhance insight into the dynamics of social life.

All of these topics and more are examined in this collection. It has been designed with the intention of assisting the process of reconstruction alongside a continued monitoring of the working assumptions of research practice. What distinguishes this volume, from other collections, is not only the focus and scope of its contributions, but also the contributors themselves. They come from different intellectual traditions and range from those well established in their disciplines, to those who have recently embarked upon their careers. What emerges is a sense of the issues that continue to arise in practice, as well as how they are addressed, under what circumstances and with what effects. The contributors are reflecting upon their experiences in terms of what it has informed them about the process of conducting qualitative research. As a result we learn about what we may *and* may not expect of the product, as well as the actual content and context of its practice. Important, but often-neglected, issues thereby emerge from within these chapters.

For the purposes of assisting the reader, the book is divided into five parts. All of them are informed by the theme of interrogating practice in terms of

its potential for explaining social relations via actual research examples; bearing in mind the transformations that have taken place in thinking about the role and process of research in understanding social relations. The first part, however, is explicitly focused around this general issue. Part 2 is then organized around concerns with generalization, interpretation and analysis and Part 3 examines methodological choices in practice. Part 4 specifically focuses upon issues of power, participation and expertise in the research process. The final part is organized around the themes of reflexivity, the self and positioning. These parts cannot be exhaustive nor can there be any claim of this type. Nevertheless, they are distinctive and so it is hoped that the reader, once equipped with these accounts, will be better able to engage with issues in practice that, as noted earlier, may often be overlooked.

PUTTING THE PRACTICE INTO THEORY

Part 1 opens with a contribution by Dorothy E. Smith. In this chapter we find a detailed overview of her approach to studying social relations by taking a procedural mode of understanding to what has become a highly influential practice rooted, as it is, within the women's movement and focused upon the 'everyday world as problematic'. Using examples drawn from work with collaborators, she considers the relations between material conditions, discourses and school, home and work. The purpose of the analyst, she argues, is to map how social relations are coordinated by and contribute to activities in different sites in order to bring to people's attention how their lives and actions relate to those of others, about which they may not be aware. In the process we gain an understanding of not only the main tenets of this approach in relation to its aims and modes of engagement with the social world, but also how it addresses the relations between the conduct of research and those who are its subjects and co-producers.

In Chapter 2 Sam Porter discusses the extent to which qualitative research can be used to examine the relationship between social structures and social actions. Beginning with an overview of two classic texts – Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* and Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* – he argues that Durkheim did not attempt to provide a methodological justification for his approach, while Weber's idea of *verstehen* was somewhat vague. He then moves on to trace the development of qualitative work, via phenomenology and postmodernist approaches and in so doing notes a gradual drift away from an examination of social structures. This provides him with an opening for an exposition of critical realism via examples drawn from his own work.

Claims to explanation often rest upon the invoking of rational action of some type. In the west we live in a system of organizing social relations that is presumed to be underpinned by actions that aim to maximize individual utility through the selection of particular means; all of which takes place in an environment which is supposed to reflect 'laws' of supply and demand.

As this is the ideological basis of a system that is so taken-for-granted in the habitual actions that inform everyday life, it would appear to be the dominant way of viewing human action. However, when it comes to utilizing such ideas in research, this story is a long way from an accurate description of human actions. Despite this, there is a frequent conflation of this normative background with the presumed neutrality of its modes of description. As a result researchers have to be aware of the assumptions they make in understanding the actions of those they study.

Taking themes from transformations in social thought, including the postmodern insight that the grounds of human action are often irrational, Peter K. Manning (Chapter 3) engages with these issues via examples taken from his work on police detectives. In the course of his account he takes various approaches to rationality to task. While any identified features of actions may be generalizable, this is an issue that requires empirical investigation. Indeed, what we find within police work is a covering, or procedural, rationality, that is orientated to working in a context where legal rules have to be taken into consideration. Nevertheless, this combines with a context-sensitive rationality that also contains what might otherwise be termed 'irrational' behaviour. Yet it is seen in these terms only if the local settings in which human action takes place are ignored.

A concern with a context-sensitive rationality, as opposed to one that is imposed by the observer, finds its expression in the work of Harold Garfinkel (1967). Garfinkel's approach is to start from the analysis of local 'experience structures' and not to generalize from social structures to personalities. Ethnomethodology was born in this move. It is this perspective, in terms of the study of institutional talk and its relationship to ethnography, that is the subject of Chapter 4 by Christian Heath and Jon Hindmarsh.

Using video and conversation data, the authors argue that the issues which arise in research between the subject and object and talk and non-verbal communication, are amenable to study from an ethnomethodological perspective. They present studies to demonstrate how there are continual and concerted efforts, on the part of social actors, to produce a social scene. These are not only context-sensitive and producing actions, but also renewing activities. It is an analysis of these, they argue, that enables the modes of sense-making in local settings and the production of intelligibility to be understood. The authors then move on to demonstrate how conversation analysis and ethnomethodology can provide data that is more usually associated with ethnographic work and this enables a greater understanding of, for example, the interactions between people and technology.

GENERALIZATION, INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS

In the opening chapter to Part 2, Malcolm Williams picks up on the issue of generalization that Sam Porter raises in Chapter 2. While explicitly seeking to avoid a quantitative–qualitative divide, he examines a number of

epistemological and ontological themes. Taking case studies to illustrate his points, he argues that there are clearly ways in which qualitative research seeks to generalize from case studies to other circumstances, often by invoking the notion of 'typicality'. Seeking to steer a course between ideographic and nomothetic approaches, he employs *moderatum* generalizations within a pluralist approach to research practice. This is regarded as being able not only to take on board the issues that he raises and so account for the claims often made by qualitative researchers, but also to provide for a politically informed engagement which is necessary for social transformation.

Now add issues of generalization to one of the most important issues that researchers face: the movement from fieldwork to writing up. While qualitative work seeks to represent social processes, this is associated with the issues of confidentiality, sequences of thought, action and meaning and how many supporting data need to be included in field reports. A consideration of these matters often derives from a phrase that is indicative of the naturalistic underpinnings of observation-based research: that is, 'what you see is what you get!' Nevertheless, this does not relieve the researcher of some core responsibilities, including not only generalization, but also reliability.

Chapter 6 by Martín Sánchez-Jankowski seeks some practical solutions to these core issues. By examining the sequencing of actions there are ways in which an account can represent facets of observed action. At the same time, we often read accounts and ask of the observer how did they know that? Particularly when it comes to unobserved phenomena. To these questions, however, we must also add the matter of *how* observed actions should be reported. In a wide-ranging discussion he notes how errors may be reduced in observation research through attention to a set of core issues. This also has the benefit of addressing the prejudice, often reproduced by qualitative researchers themselves, that it is only survey work which is reliable.

'Solutions' to methodological and theoretical issues often appear in the form of 'techno-fixes'. In terms of a practical-political problem of representation, it is often the case that as long as the researcher can somehow become 'detached' from the production of their findings, its validity and reliability is assumed to be greater. Thus, arithmetical and graphical forms of representation still hold power over an audience *as if* the process of selectivity had not taken place. In qualitative research matters relating to selectivity for the purpose of producing accurate representations were to receive a boost with the introduction of dedicated computer software. Originally designed for the purpose of data analysis, its use has now extended to encompass collection, literature searches and the writing-up process itself. Nigel G. Fielding, while noting in Chapter 7 that 'epistemological preoccupations are more enduring than any technology', examines the history of different packages and their relationship to the qualitative research process. This history, underpinned by the story of code-and-retrieve, then provides a basis for him to move on to demystify these technological changes and examine their effects upon the practices, procedures and principles of qualitative research itself.

Aside from the role of technology in analysis, there is also the place of the researcher in the process. With this in mind, Valerie Walkerdine, Helen Lucey and June Melody (Chapter 8) examine fantasy, transference and counter-transference in relation to not only data analysis, but also production. Using examples from their work, there is an examination of subjectivity and its relation to the production of fieldnotes and how differing subjectivities inform interpretations of the same data. We thus return to an earlier theme raised by Peter K. Manning, only this time focused upon a different question: how is it that a non-rational understanding of the actions of researchers themselves affects the fieldwork process and product? The concern here is to move beyond ideas of narratives and discourses, without necessarily abandoning the insights that they have generated, to consider how people live with the contradictions and demands that are placed upon their everyday lives.

CHOICES IN CONTEXT

With choices in context in mind, Kathleen Gerson and Ruth Horowitz consider the relations between interviewing and observation-based studies. Chapter 9 compares and contrasts these two main research techniques via examples drawn from their own work. They note that observational methods provide information concerning how individuals and groups behave in a range of social settings, while interviews uncover the perceptions, motives and accounts that people offer for their actions and beliefs. Although often taken to be methods with different epistemological assumptions and theoretically at odds with one another, they are also seen to complement each other in significant ways. What we end up with, therefore, is a demonstration of how what are often maintained to be opposing positions can, when combined in practice, enrich our insights into social life.

Jennifer Mason continues in Chapter 10 with the theme of choice in methods. By asking what interviews are and what they do, in conceptual and epistemological terms, she is then in a position to explore issues associated with generalization. At this point interviewers are often faced with the act of interviewing being a static-causal snapshot when they actually seek to understand social processes. A decontextualized form of knowledge gathering thus becomes highly problematic. To overcome this tendency she argues that the interview should be seen as a process of co-participation in which both parties regard it as a site of knowledge production. To elaborate upon this idea she considers it in terms of her own work on families and kinship noting, during the course of the discussion, how some aspects of the 'social' cannot be captured through a concentration on talk alone.

Jennifer Mason's chapter raises issues associated with time, subjectivity and narratives. Just what is the significance of narratives in terms of how they are deployed in social life in order to construct accounts and social identities? It is these types of questions that Steph Lawler raises in Chapter 11 by taking narratives as accounts that bring together past and present with self and

other. These are expressed in terms of transformations over time, along with actions and characters, within an overall plot. To understand narratives it is necessary to situate people within particular historical and cultural milieus in order to see how they are indicative of what may and what may not, be said. The result, to borrow a characterization from the work of Paul Ricoeur (1994), is to steer a middle course between Cartesian 'epistemic exhaltations' of the self and its apparent 'humiliation' in the hands of Nietzsche.

POWER, PARTICIPATION AND EXPERTISE

Power, participation and expertise are clearly matters that inform the conduct of research in the field. Thus, in the opening chapter to Part 4, Linda McKie notes that it is often assumed qualitative fieldwork enables the voices of respondents to be heard in ways that quantitative work does not permit. Mix this with evaluation studies and it can raise expectations among participants that may not be met by the process and its product. Add to this the flow of power and its sites of production and this will have an effect upon how researchers can engage with communities and other stakeholders in the research process. Drawing upon her own experiences in two evaluation projects in Scotland, she then notes the tensions between informing the policy process in order to improve conditions for local people and the generation of information that enhances policy-makers' 'power over' communities.

   Linda McKie provides us with a very good illustration of the practical issues that arise in the conduct of evaluation work and how this affects its credibility and potential within different settings. By considering her own experiences in these contexts and how the projects unfolded and what actions were taken during the process, she highlights the importance of dialogue and deliberation. What is then required on the part of the researcher is a heightened sense of the dynamics of power in terms of how they inform the design, conduct and dissemination of the research itself. It is this theme that informs the next two chapters.

   Lynne Haney (Chapter 13) examines the roles of power and negotiation in the context of two ethnographic studies – one in California and the other in Hungary – she has conducted on the state. These studies, she argues, provide critical cases for viewing the dynamics of the fieldwork process. Following the work of Dorothy E. Smith, state institutions are viewed as spaces in which 'relations of the ruling' are contested among women who, as state actors, exercise power over women as clients. As a result these conditions create particular issues for reflexive researchers. In order to consider how and under what circumstances these arise and the manner in which they may be acted upon, she discusses feminist-inspired debates about co-participation. She then turns to how a blurring between 'rulers' and 'ruled' occurred in terms of the methodological injunction to listen to the 'voices of women'. However, her own research practice did not then turn inwards, but outwards via an analysis of structural forces and 'ethnohistory'.

Lynne Haney regards an inward-looking practice as one that focuses upon the position of the researcher without due regard to wider social processes. Such thinking may be argued to have informed debates concerning the position of white female researchers researching black women. This does not suggest a balance of power, simply that the assumption of the powerful researcher and the powerless research subject requires a more nuanced understanding. Tracey Reynolds (Chapter 14) brings this to her account of being a black female researcher interviewing other black women in contemporary Britain. By taking a relational approach, she argues that power should be seen as shifting and renegotiating itself according to differing contexts in terms not only of race, but also gender and class. From this point of view, to automatically assume an imbalance of power in favour of the researcher is highly problematic when it comes to the dynamics of the fieldwork process itself.

REFLEXIVITY, THE SELF AND POSITIONING

Contributors have sought to illuminate issues surrounding representation, generalization, analysis and power in fieldwork, but how does this relate to the idea of the reflexive turn in social research, the self and positioning? The final part thus starts with Amanda Coffey considering the literary turn in ethnographic writings and its relationship to the self. While, as I noted earlier, this has sensitized us to important issues for practice, it has also had the effect of diverting attention away from what is discovered as a result of the research process itself. An understanding of social issues is thereby in danger of being abandoned in favour of introspection without engagement. To this extent the idea of producing selves within research texts should be viewed as only one part of the ways in which relations between the researcher and the social settings they seek to understand should be considered. Amanda Coffey therefore turns our attention to these issues and the limits to autoethnography for the purpose of representation.

Lisa Adkins then moves our focus to the politics of reflexivity in Chapter 16. Drawing upon her studies of gender, sexuality and work, she argues that the turn towards particular ideas on reflexivity in social research entails relations between the knower and known that permit only certain voices to be heard. A vision of the mobility of the knower, in terms of their identity, is underpinned by the assumption that they are able to move across boundaries. This raises key questions: what kind of self is required to be a reflexive researcher? What kind of narratives do research subjects/ co-producers need to perform in order to be reflexive? In asking such questions, she produces an account which questions the so-called reflexive turn in terms of its ability to amplify marginalized voices.

Beverley Skeggs picks up the idea of mobile selves in Chapter 17. In the grander claims of social theory there is often a conflation of two dimensions of action: ability and capability. The former refers to an agent's ability to monitor and account for their actions, while the latter is concerned with the

power to act. This, following the work of Pierre Bourdieu, concerns dispositions and positions within fields of relations characterized by the distribution of differing forms of capital (Bourdieu 1992). With this in mind the issues surrounding and informing mobility should not be the assumption that all are mobile, as Lisa Adkins also argues in Chapter 16, but who, under what circumstances and utilizing what resources? In drawing upon her own fieldwork, Beverley Skeggs argues that attention should be turned to understanding and explaining why some people are not mobile and how their fixed positions are relied upon for the mobility of others. Without this consideration in place, calls to reflexivity become nothing more than a licence to confess, as opposed to a study of practices in relation to positioning. In the course of her discussion she thus uncovers boundaries to potentiality whose existence creates a refusal, on the part of some, to see reflexivity and mobility as privileges born of positioning.

An assumption is often made that emotions are a block to objective analysis. Such a belief is frequently perpetuated within the conditions of knowledge production itself. In university departments, for example, aloof detachment can mix with the posturing that accompanies positions informed by the accumulation of cultural capital. In these circumstances individualism may flourish and the commitment and passion to conduct research can be bracketed. This is particularly paradoxical when a discipline certainly respects and celebrates the individual, but for which individualism is a totally false description of the social world. Sherryl Kleinman (Chapter 18) thus starts with such conditions and their effects upon her identity and understandably uncertainty. Nevertheless, she charts how she took such feelings as an impetus for further understanding through her own fieldwork. The result is an insightful account of how it is that emotions can inform not only a greater understanding of ourselves, but also those who are the subjects and co-producers of qualitative research.

SUMMARY

All of the chapters in this collection constitute core insights into the perspectives, experiences and issues that inform and arise from the process and practice of qualitative research. As I noted at the beginning of this introduction, there is a tendency to regard textual critiques as somehow sufficient for the changing of practice. Without sensitivity to the pressures and experiences that inform research, however, this so easily lapses into a constructivist idealism that misses its mark. In the first instance this necessitates an understanding of the issues that arise within research practice, as well as an understanding of the conditions of knowledge production itself. The potential to inform practice may then be derived from an explanation of the relations that exist between dispositions, positions and practices. The chapters in this volume are a valuable and insightful contribution to that process.

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