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The Challenges of Reflexivity

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Abstract

Perils, Pitfalls & Reflexivity aims to stimulate solutions to qualitative challenges that researchers encounter in countries with less research infrastructure and experience, and to expose to critical gaze the methodological and ethical assumptions that may be taken for granted in countries where there are more formal research processes. I read this book as a novice qualitative researcher with an active interest in reflexivity who lives in Canada, intrigued to learn from others' fieldwork, keen to encounter another point of view of ethics.

Keywords

Reflexivity, Qualitative Research, Ethics

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The Challenges of Reflexivity

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Perils, Pitfalls & Reflexivity aims to stimulate solutions to qualitative challenges that researchers encounter in countries with less research infrastructure and experience, and to expose to critical gaze the methodological and ethical assumptions that may be taken for granted in countries where there are more formal research processes. I read this book as a novice qualitative researcher with an active interest in reflexivity who lives in Canada, intrigued to learn from others' fieldwork, keen to encounter another point of view of ethics. Key words: Reflexivity, Qualitative Research, Ethics

From the start, *Perils, Pitfalls & Reflexivity in Qualitative Research in Education* by Shamim and Qureshi (2010) begins to meet the book title's promise. In chapter one, Holliday (2010) provides different perspectives on data samples from his own ethnographic research. He describes his initial thoughts on his data, and then provides his perspective from several years later, as a more seasoned researcher. Holliday's humility in sharing his thinking opens up a sense of wonder and discovery, as he encourages the novice researcher to reflexively submit to the data to allow findings to emerge, and use growing personal knowledge to engage with the process.

Section Two of the book provides three examples of research being conducted in Pakistan which are written as examples of some of the ethical challenges encountered by researchers working in regions where there is limited formal review of research. Pardhan (2010), a doctoral candidate, describes her foray into a familiar yet foreign culture, and her struggle to apply British University research ethic expectations and guidelines which clashed with the cultural expectations she encounter in the field. Pardhan's perils and pitfalls are well described, but where I hoped for the transparency of reflexivity, Pardhan states, "I found that I often had to trust my own understanding of the culture, my intuition, and my faith in God in making various research and ethical decisions in the different situations that arose in the field" (p. 34). Such a statement raises questions for the reader regarding the researcher's meaning and use of these words. A discussion of the research context, highlighting the religious, development and cultural tensions within Pakistan, and how the researcher negotiated research choices within this context would have been helpful. Instead, her reference to drawing on intuition and faith renders her reflexivity invisible, and left me, as a graduate student, wondering about the role of supportive readings and guidance from a supervisor for this researcher.

Problems and pitfalls were well described in the next chapters of this section, field examples provided, and cautionary notes prescribed, yet the transparency of the reflexivity of the authors could have been made more visible to the reader. Asif (2010) challenges the formal foreign codes in a setting in which no formal research ethics code exists (i.e. in Pakistan). She describes how she followed the teachings of Islam and social norms regarding eye contact, her decision to wear traditional garments, and accepted less male participation in the study by following the social norms of the male role in the

house. Asif states, “In many situations the code of ethics has to be adapted or even relinquished when the researcher comes face to face with various kinds of reality in the field” (p. 74). She is raising a critical issue here, yet I would like to have seen her make a stronger argument to better convince readers of this point.

In the third chapter, in this section, Qureshi (2010), who is conducting research among illiterate rural village people and who seeks to gain entry into the field, is confronted with the dilemma of explaining her research. She asks, “How could I explain to these women that I was interested in how the manipulated interpretation of religion by the British colonial rule had condemned both men and women to the state of illiteracy?” (p. 83). She tells the locals that she was writing a story for a local paper, as “this seemed easier for them to understand,” and continues, “This is not deception, but the right kind of information for participants to understand the purpose of our activities if not the purpose of our research” (p. 83). A concluding chapter highlighting the struggles for the researchers, which seem to include isolation, lack of academic support, and socio-political growing pains within the social context would have made visible the researcher’s contextual reflexivity, and perhaps altered the enrollment strategy.

Section three focuses on methodological dilemmas. Ashraf (2010) provides a scholarly and reflexive account of her research and methodological decisions she made throughout her research process. The story she provides regarding the impracticality of observation and discussion in a culture that values hospitality is well described and insightful (pp.112-114), and worth reading. Similarly, Rarieya (2010) identifies the complexities regarding entry to the field and data gathering regarding her “insider-outsider” (p. 141) status. Her description of the ethical considerations she faced, and her recognition of ethics as a process rather than an administrative detail, is useful. The closing chapters are reports of two different research endeavors. While interesting, the details provided include research findings, rather than the perils and pitfalls encountered.

The text is a revelation of the growing pains confronting researchers in their respective countries. News reports describe Pakistan as struggling between becoming a moderate, modernized state, and one governed by strict religious rules. These tensions make themselves evident in the bulk of this book. Researchers draw from religious icons or practices to make research decisions and enhance entry into the field and fail to provide a critique into their practice. As a formal ethical code doesn’t seem to have been developed in this setting, a foreign ethical code is utilized and generally criticized as problematic. Perhaps these authors might next provide specific suggestions for adaptation with a supporting rationale based upon their experiences. As a graduate student, the value of Holliday’s (2010) principles noted above became clear; this text has taught me to carefully reflect upon my research context, and it also raises important issues which must of necessity be considered by a critical research community.

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