



Citation for published version:

Gabriel, Y 2015, 'Reflexivity and beyond – a plea for imagination in qualitative research methodology', *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management : An International Journal*, vol. 10, no. 4, pp. 332-336.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/QROM-07-2015-1305>

DOI:

[10.1108/QROM-07-2015-1305](https://doi.org/10.1108/QROM-07-2015-1305)

Publication date:

2015

Document Version

Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication](#)

University of Bath

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Reflexivity and beyond – A plea for imagination and diversity in qualitative research methodology

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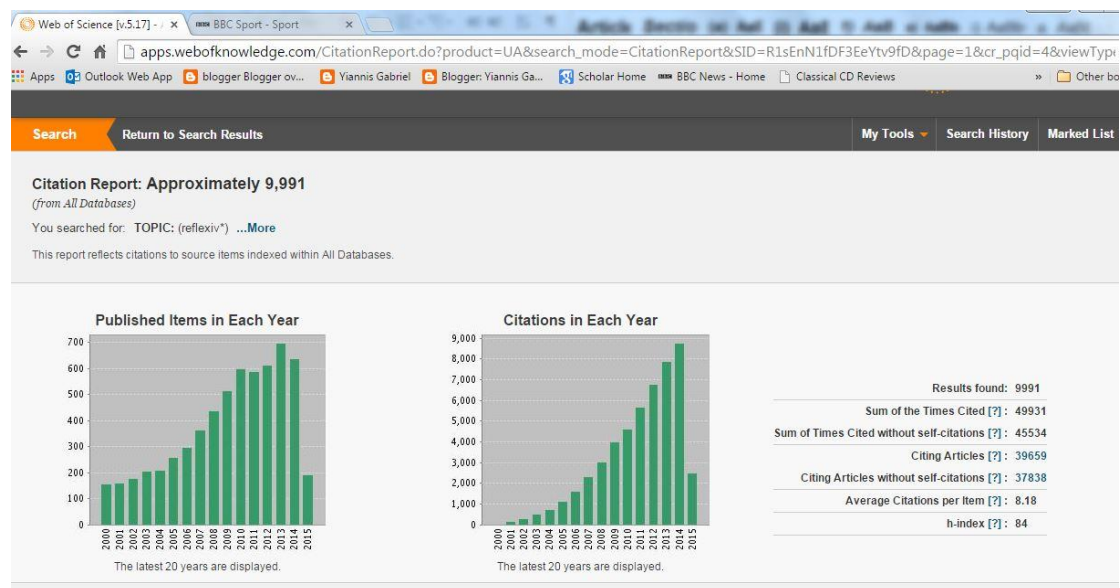
Ten years is a relatively short time in academic publishing. Yet, since the launch of QROM in 2006, certain trends in qualitative research in organizations and management have become clear. These, in my view, result from the emergence of the 'standard qualitative doctoral thesis' which is now firmly established, first, as the starting point of an academic career, second, as the inspiration for innumerable qualitative articles published jointly by younger scholars and their supervisors, and, thirdly, as the exemplar for qualitative research against other outputs are frequently measured. In this short reflection piece, I examine some of the consequences of this, focusing specifically on the role of reflectivity in qualitative research, indicating some potential shortcomings and advocating a wider repertoire of approaches and qualities in qualitative research. In particular, I wish to emphasize the importance of imagination in all stages of the research practice.

The 'standard qualitative doctoral thesis' starts with vacuum cleaning every single article published in the last fifteen years or so with the words X, Y and Z in the keywords field. This is said to lead to an identification of a 'gap' in the literature and a potential for contribution. This, in turn, is succeeded by a methodology section which, following some pious platitudes about ontology and epistemology, justifies the use of some 45-50 interviews, sometimes supplemented by some observations, to address the gap. Data is then diligently collected and processed through a carefully detailed coding procedure usually involving an electronic resource like nVivo. This has now become highly mechanized as the qualitative equivalent of number-crunching in quantitative research, leading to a findings section involving a variety of verbatim quotes from the interview transcripts, often summarized in a number of tables. The standard qualitative doctoral thesis concludes with a discussion and a concluding section, in which claims are made about having filled the gap, having identified some further gaps and acknowledging certain shortcomings in the research, especially the methodology section. These almost invariably include an acknowledgement of not having obtained *enough* data and carried out *enough* interviews. Not enough quantity is thus acknowledged as a chief shortcoming of qualitative research.

All this would not be so important if it were not for the fact that scholars who have served their doctoral apprenticeships in this manner go on to become authors, reviewers of articles and examiners of others doctoral dissertations, expecting them to fit precisely this mould and mercilessly criticizing any deviations or omissions. If coding and nVivo heroics are the qualitative

equivalent for number-crunching, it would be fair to claim that reflexivity has emerged as one of the qualitative researcher's best responses when challenged to defend the reliability or validity of his/her claims, most especially those working within a discursive, critical or poststructuralist paradigm. Within these paradigms, claims to absolute truth, correct interpretation, accurate representation and even impartial description are unsustainable, and reflexivity is rapidly emerging as the new gold standard for researchers (e.g. Alvesson & Sköldböck, 2009; Cunliffe, 2003; Hardy, Phillips, & Clegg, 2001; Hibbert, Coupland, & MacIntosh, 2006; Tsoukas, 1992).

This is indicated in the table below which demonstrates the rapid rise in the number of times that 'reflexivity' and cognate terms have been used in or cited by articles listed in the ISI Web of Science database in the last 15 years.



Reflexivity is a difficult concept to define and an even harder one to deploy or practice. It can be used simply as a pretentious synonym for 'reflection', i.e. the ability to take a step back from a situation in order to reflect on it. According to this view, reflexive researchers are those who question their own assumptions, the interests served by their research, the ramifications of their findings and the ethical foundations of their practice. All this is good, but risks reducing reflexivity to a box-ticking exercise which scarcely guarantees the academic merits or rigour of a qualitative piece of research.

One of this journal's major contributions in recent years has been the promotion of a dialogue on the meaning of reflexivity and its place in the qualitative researcher's craft (see, e.g. Donnelly, Gabriel, & Banu Özkazanç-Pan, 2013; Haynes, 2011; Hibbert et al., 2006; Koning & Ooi, 2013; Mahadevan, 2011; Munkejord, 2009; Orr & Bennett, 2009; Tomkins & Eatough, 2010). Several important insights have emerged from this: that reflexivity involves a questioning of one's emotions as well as one's assumptions (Munkejord, 2009), that it should not result in a solipsistic or narcissistic undertaking (Tomkins et al., 2010) but should aim for a dialogue with multiple 'others', including audiences, research collaborators and field respondents (Mahadevan, 2011;

Orr et al., 2009). As I see it, reflexivity amounts to the ability of human statements to alter the state of what is being stated, the person who states it and often too the person who listens. More generally, a reflexive activity is one in which subject and object co-create each other. Catching a glimpse of myself in a mirror, I adjust my position, I change my expression and I consider myself from the position of the other; as Lacan argued, by recognizing ourselves in the mirror as children we begin to constitute ourselves as subjects (2006). Later in life, many others, including parents, colleagues, audiences and so forth hold mirrors in which we perceive ourselves and which sustain our subjectivities. In telling a story about myself, I construct a protagonist who helps me make sense of past events and create a person living in the present as a continuation of the story. In this way, I as the author of the story and the story's central character co-create each other. At every moment the storyteller creates a protagonist, whose predicaments redefine the storyteller. In a similar way to stories, my thoughts, my relations, my contacts, my research and so forth continuously and reflexively constitute my subjectivity.

Reflexivity then is inseparable from the quality of being a subject, of being human. Hence, even 'non-reflexive' researchers exercise reflexivity, albeit not consciously. They can be thought of as staring away from mirrors or denying their existence. Conscious reflexivity, on the other hand, begins with a recognition that what we do as researchers and also what we say or write defines and redefines both ourselves and the texts we produce. This has some significant implications. A consciously reflexive researcher is constantly aware of the effects of her own presence in the field. A consciously reflexive researcher does not pretend to be value-neutral and is alert to the ways that her research expresses, reinforces or undermines the values that she holds. She is also alert to the fact that she may not be aware of some deep values, needs and insecurities that may surface while conducting her research. Above all, a consciously reflexive researcher is aware that in undertaking a serious piece of research they embark on a journey whose end will see them emerge as different subjects.

The consciously reflexive researcher then cannot deal with her empirical material as something separate from her self – as something stored in a computer file, to be processed, squeezed or distilled to generate knowledge at a later date. Data are not facts or representations of facts but records of particular types of social encounter. Some data may be capable of generating knowledge but it seems to me that reflexivity alone cannot deliver knowledge from data. All the reflexivity in the world will not turn a dull piece of fieldwork into an interesting one. What reflexivity cannot replace is the researcher's intelligence and craft first in generating the empirical material and then in probing and questioning it, seeking similarities and exceptions, continuities and discontinuities, plans and improvisations. Above all, what reflexivity cannot replace is the active and inquiring *imagination* that persistently asks three related questions "Why?" "What if?" and "So what?"

In handling empirical material, it seems to me that one of the researcher's first concerns must be filtering out large amounts of material that is routine and predictable. This may be important for sustaining particular types of relations

and identities but of limited interest in generating new and original insights. Being able to claim that a large number of interviews were conducted and that they yielded a huge number of words when transcribed may be an important part of a game that qualitative researchers play, and it may even earn them some respect and credibility. To me this seems irrelevant, ritualistic and pointless, although a consciously reflexive researcher may ask herself "Why is it important for me to claim x interviews and y thousand words of transcript material?" Indeed, I have a considerable mistrust for *transcripts as a data genre* – they contain vast amounts of predictable or even 'dead' material and obliterate considerable amounts of potentially fruitful stuff. Several pages of stock answers, platitudes and clichés hold less interest for me than a single vocal inflection or a facial expression that go unnoticed by the transcript. Take, for example, the word 'No' which can be uttered in many different ways denoting many different ideas, feelings and dispositions - confidence, determination, denial, doubt, guilt, shame, disgust, anger and so forth. All of these are wiped out when you read 'No' as a categorical monosyllable in the transcript. Of course, some people want to 'lose' data - the world becomes too complex otherwise. I personally, however, prefer to discard data consciously rather than through the whims of the transcription process.

In general, I don't think that there are right or wrong ways of dealing with qualitative research material (Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013; Mills, 1959), although advocates of the standard qualitative research thesis seek to establish precisely this. Different researchers find their own ways of working with it or maybe getting it to work for them, often working 'against method' (Feyerabend, 1975). I am a listening type of person and like to listen to recordings of interviews and focus groups, sometimes many times over, to the point where I learn every vocal inflection and every linguistic idiosyncrasy almost by heart. I then feel able to focus on a few moments during a conversation that pose persistent questions and may hold significant clues to me. I am not of course recommending that everyone should use the same approach to work through their empirical material. Yet, there is something about my approach which can be of use to other researchers. Instead of treating an interview or other empirical material as 'data', i.e. as distinct fragments of information, I tend to treat them as a terrain where certain things can be found that are capable of yielding meaning, insights and even pleasure. In this sense, when working through empirical material, I see myself in a similar way to someone surveying a beach, observing certain significant events or seeking to identify some interesting gems in the midst of mostly undifferentiated and predictable stuff.

A beachcomber is not after facts but, rather, after possibilities or 'affordances' (Gibson, 1977) that are latent in the environment. To a beachcomber a piece of driftwood may suggest things as diverse as a bonfire on the beach, an artistic installation or the existence of a nearby shipwreck. It seems to me that the qualitative researcher's success ultimately lies in the recognition of possibilities afforded by her empirical material rather than the constant exercise of conscious reflexivity, important as this is.

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