

A CASE FOR REFLEXIVITY IN ACADEMIC PARKS, RECREATION AND TOURISM WRITING

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Abstract

As an academic practice, reflexivity asks researchers to consider the reasons for approaching a subject from a particular angle and with the chosen methodology. This process helps reveal the position and point of view of the researcher. Reflexivity is a valuable tool for acknowledging our multitude of experiences and the complexity of our place in the social world. Thinking and writing about reflexivity can lead to larger discussions about alternative research methods. However, although even subtle acknowledgments of transparency can enhance without overpowering our work, reflexivity is rarely seen in the field of parks, recreation and tourism. Those working in parks, recreation and tourism scholarship should explore the use of reflexivity and use it to engage more personally with their material and bring increased clarity to their research and analyses. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to introduce the concept of reflexivity to parks, recreation and tourism academics and professionals and to make a case for including reflexivity in our various forms of writing.

1.0 The concept of reflexivity

“Everything is autobiography, even if one writes something that is totally objective,” said Pulitzer-Prize winning poet Lisel Mueller. “The fact that it’s a subject that seizes you makes it autobiographical” (Preston, 1997; p. 2).

At first glance, Mueller’s words may not seem to apply to academic research, which sometimes derives its motivation not from autobiography but more pragmatic issues such as theoretical or funding needs. However, at a core level, our research pursuits are motivated by personal interest or passion for specific areas within our chosen field. In addition, research that examines human behavior is itself a uniquely formed product of our own human behavior that creates it. As Abram explains, “The scientist does not randomly choose a specific discipline or specialty, but is drawn to a particular field by a complex of subjective experiences and encounters, many of which unfold far from the laboratory and its rarefied atmosphere. Further, the scientist never completely succeeds in making himself into a pure spectator of the world, for he cannot cease to live in the world as a human among other humans...” (Abram, 1997; p. 33)

If this is true, can we acknowledge our complex humanity in our writing without endangering our academic credibility? Just how much of ourselves *should* we reveal when presenting our

results? This paper introduces the concept of reflexivity to parks, recreation and tourism academics and professionals and proposes that it is important to think about and apply reflexivity to increase necessary transparency and trustworthiness. Experimenting with the boundaries of notions of authorial and academic anonymity, while sometimes confusing, will ultimately allow us new opportunities to acknowledge the reality that our work is created by humans as complex, unique and interconnected to the world as our subjects.

2.0 What is reflexivity?

In a broad sense, reflexivity grapples with a very basic question: “Out of what autobiographical ground and experience did the topic emerge? What stands out . . . that creates a puzzlement, curiosity, passion to know?” (Moustakas, 1994; p. 183) In addition to looking generally at what draws the attention of the researcher, reflexivity can also be a tool to “monitor, or even audit, the research process” (Finlay, 2002a; p. 210) by asking us to consider how the subject is approached, examining our reasons for approaching the subject from our particular angle and with the chosen methodology. This process helps us uncover the position and point of view of the researcher (Finlay, 2002b; Lincoln, 1985).

Most commonly found in the methods and evaluation sections of qualitative research manuscripts, reflexivity can serve as a tool for examining the researcher’s underlying motivations behind the research project, from design choices to analysis and conclusions (Doyle, 2013; Finlay, 2002). The practice of reflexivity has been common for many years in social sciences writing (Salzman, 2002), including anthropology (e.g. Fournillier, 2009; Howell, 2007), sociology (e.g., Fortune & Mair, 2011), public health (e.g., Trenholm, 2013; Wray, 2007), and education research (e.g., Gouthro, 2004; Hastings, 2010), where it is discussed as an accepted and nuanced practice (Bott, 2010; Davies et al., 2004; Riach, 2009). However, reflexivity appears only occasionally in tourism and recreation research, often showing up in that which arises from an anthropological groundwork or uses ethnography as a research method.

Although some view reflexivity as an exercise that exclusively examines gender (Andrews & Gupta, 2010; Riach, 2009), reflexivity is not simply the domain of feminists seeking to raise consciousness; it can also be useful for contextualizing the researcher in terms of socioeconomic status, ethno-cultural identification, and more. Above all, reflexivity can help the qualitative researcher locate him/herself in relation to whatever “other” is being investigated (Bott, 2010). This is especially important, Bott (2010) writes, when “exploring the especially thorny ground of researching into a group whose ‘otherness’ on some levels manifests in ‘good’ data, partly because the group’s opinions and discourses jar with one’s own political ideology” (p. 159).

The acknowledgement and examination of otherness is essential to the practice of reflexivity. However, as Merriam et al. (2001) point out, locating oneself in terms of insider/outsider status is a complicated and thorny issue fraught with assumptions from both sides of the research relationship. Their work presents case studies that illustrate some of the ways power, positionality and representation complicate insider/outsider dynamics in ways that can surprise even seasoned researchers. For example, when interviewing Black women with whom she shared racial, gender and educational similarities, Juanita Johnson-Bailey assumed she would feel a credibility-enhancing bond (Merriam et al., 2001). This proved to be partially true but not entirely helpful; she found her sisterhood with the subjects to be complicated by notions of class and color, but in practical terms, the symbiotic connection between the women created an

assumption of understanding that meant the subjects left important ideas unspoken. A different researcher may have lacked the trust necessary to elicit honesty from the women but may have made the subjects feel a greater need to articulate their thoughts more explicitly.

Reflexivity can also help academics deal with issues that arise from conducting intensive qualitative research that may spark powerful or disturbing emotions (Doyle, 2013; Connolly & Reilly, 2007). As an extreme example, Trenholm (2013) listed “the continuous practice of reflexivity” as an element of her ethnographic methodology, alongside conducting participant observation and interviews, when conducting research into the phenomena of rape and war in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

Personal experience with a research topic can inspire interest in a subject area, but while the prior knowledge can inform research, it can also create a troublesome set of assumptions that find their way into the work, especially if not acknowledged and challenged (Holloway & Biley, 2011). In a study examining the effects of parental cancer on adult children, Levesque reveals her experience of parental cancer as an adolescent (Levesque & Maybery, 2012) and describes the process of making journal entries throughout data analysis in order “to note possible interpretive options, uncertainties regarding the interpretation of the data, insights into how the first author’s presuppositions might have influenced the data interpretation, her emotional reactions to the data, and points of interest to pursue in additional readings of each transcript” (p. 400). Levesque and Maybery (2012) argue that while it may not be realistic to entirely bracket out the author’s presuppositions, Levesque’s transparency in revealing her experience of parental cancer and her rigor in examining potential bias enhance the work.

3.0 Reflexivity in parks, recreation and tourism scholarship

Studies using reflexivity are somewhat harder to find in parks, recreation and tourism scholarship, but the notion does occasionally appear. For example, in contrast to the insider/outsider experience of Johnson-Bailey, Wray (2007) examined the health, exercise and wellness of a diverse group of midlife British women realizing that, unlike the ethnic minority participants she interviewed, she is insulated from the experience of ethnic marginalization and discrimination. Wray could not, therefore, access the easy camaraderie of a shared background but instead attempted to build trust with her subjects through developing a long-term research relationship.

Trust and access are also themes that Edwin Gómez discusses in his research detailing recreation participation among a Puerto Rican community in Massachusetts (Gómez, 2002). He describes the way he gained access through his inside knowledge of the community: “Because I am bilingual and a member of Southbridge’s Puerto Rican Community, cultural immersion within the community was possible. “This facilitated contact with several key community leaders for the solicitation of research participants” (p. 59). Gómez details his methodology of conducting personal interviews through a two-part process; community norms required a social call before official business (the interview) could take place. This information not only helps the reader understand the methodology but can also provide information or sensitivity training for other researchers seeking to gain entrance into minority communities if they do not inherently have the same type of access as Gómez: “Community involvement is recommended. I incorporated this into the study design by using key informants as consultants and establishing a public forum for participation, i.e., speaking with the congregation on Christmas Eve mass. This was possible

because I am a member of the congregation, and I was able to speak with the priest in person and in writing. This pattern of informality followed by formality worked well for garnering support” (p. 59). As a potential limitation, Gómez acknowledges that selection bias can creep into the equation “depending on how and who is asked to help garner support” (p. 59), a limitation that must be controlled through careful methodology.

Another study looked into the motivations and attitudes of triathletes and again grappled with the notion of bias in relation to insider/outsider status: “The researchers’ own participation in triathlon positioned them as ‘insiders’ within the triathlon social world. Some may argue this position could induce bias (Merriam, 1998); however, this insider’s perspective seemed to facilitate open and frank responses from the triathletes. Interviewees were also able to utilize jargon terms without feeling obligated to provide technical explanations” (Lamont & Kennelly, 2012; p. 242). In this case, reflexivity is being used as a methodological audit tool to acknowledge the possibility of bias but assure readers that measures have been taken to mitigate it.

Occasionally, researchers use reflexivity to express their lack of insider status and consciously distance themselves from their subjects. One study examined the notion of serious leisure through the lens of the extreme behavior exhibited by University of Florida football devotees: “Some of the research team were undergraduate students at UF and are avid Gator fans while others are relatively new to Gator football and stand on the periphery of the social world and watch with incredulity” (Gibson, Willming, & Holdnak, 2002; p. 2). In this case, by positioning some of themselves as outsiders, the authors subtly reveal an opinion through the choice of the word “incredulity,” which suggests an inability or unwillingness to believe what is being observed.

These examples illustrate how much rich information can be conveyed by even the smallest inclusions of reflexivity. Still, despite these examples, reflexivity remains relatively rare among scholarship in parks, recreation and tourism. This is true even when reflexivity seems especially important, such as in research into environmental justice or disability studies that is conducted by those with a vested interest in the topic. In these contexts, reflexivity could provide even more valuable insight into the work being presented. For example, in a research note, Macbeth argues that scholars of disability leisure research should use reflexivity to help address some of the field’s inherent ethical challenges and grapple with insider/outsider controversies (2010).

4.0 Why do some researchers resist reflexivity?

Several possibilities could explain the resistance to practicing reflexivity among parks, recreation and tourism researchers. Finlay (2002b) argues that the field’s traditional academic positivist power structures can make it difficult to publish research featuring reflexivity. Along these lines, researchers may be reluctant to remove the “cloak of authority” (Feighery, 2006), especially when operating in a relatively new discipline that may fear that its credibility or legitimacy is threatened or questioned by others in the academy. Especially among researchers more comfortable operating in a positivistic world view, reflexivity might be “dismissed as self-indulgent, or narcissistic, or lacking in method or validity, or too literary and not theoretical enough” (Davies et al., 2004; p. 361). Finally, if not self-censored by the perceived norms seemingly required to maintain academic credibility, researchers can simply be limited by

journals' restrictive word counts that make explorations of reflexivity seem like an expendable luxury (Finlay, 2002b).

4.1 Overcoming resistance to reflexivity

Despite the legitimate concerns of those resistant to it, the fact remains that reflexivity is an important element to prioritize. As demonstrated in the examples above, giving reflexivity a toehold does not mean it will hijack an entire manuscript; even small acknowledgments of transparency can enhance methods and evaluation sections without overpowering the overall work (Finlay, 2002b). Thinking and writing about reflexivity can prove valuable to researchers and the field as a whole because it inevitably will lead to larger discussions about potentially valuable alternative research methods (Feighery, 2006). For years, researchers have studied the ways our diversifying populations are changing the practice of parks, recreation and tourism. As researchers, we are part of this cultural shift. Reflexivity can be used as a way to acknowledge our multitude of experiences and the complexity of the social world (Andrews & Gupta, 2010).

Educators also have the opportunity to teach the value and importance of reflexivity to their students. The process of teaching reflexivity should combine analyzing pre-existing data with hands-on experience, so that students can deepen their understanding through the practice of using the abstract concepts they have learned (Hsiung, 2008). Students need encouragement and support to explore reflexivity in their own work since the practice requires a vulnerable, sometimes uncomfortable process of digging for potential bias, mistakes or inadequacy (Hsiung, 2008). Specifically, Gerstl-Pepin and Patrizio (2009) recommend asking students to keep research journals documenting memories and reflections throughout the research process. Later, their students work with peer debriefers who help them review their reflective journals, attempting to uncover patterns, links, subjectivity or other blind spots. Gerstl-Pepin and Patrizio argue that such partnership creates a useful opportunity to interpret data and methods from multiple points of view, which helps students see that the construction of research is ultimately a subjective, personal process (2009).

5.0 Conclusion

Examining our own experiences can bring deeper understanding into our academic lives and work, even if what we discover does not become part of our official scholarly output. Simply thinking about reflexivity can bring about useful insights. For example, the current exploration into reflexivity came about from questioning that arose during the data analysis phase of a research project that examined behavioral motivations influencing park use in a low-income, minority community. While analyzing the data for normative influences and notions of self-efficacy, it was impossible to ignore the fact that safety was emerging as an important influencing factor, even if safety was tangential to the project's stated research question. This leads to a secondary project re-analyzing the data to tease out meanings around the notion of safety. However, the first author was also drawn to critically examine whether the perception of safety's importance among study participants arose from the data or whether it was influenced by her own assumptions about urban parks or her personal experiences with park danger. While the reflexive examination did not significantly change the study's results, the process of questioning added to the study's rigor by inspiring the author to look more critically at her own motivations and beliefs.

We have seen through this introductory overview that reflexivity can be a useful tool in academic writing. Unfortunately, it is rarely seen in the field of parks, recreation and tourism. It is our hope that those working in parks, recreation and tourism scholarship will begin to explore the use of reflexivity and use it to engage more personally with their material and bring increased transparency to their research and analyses. At the same time, it is important to teach reflexivity so that future scholars can recognize and use it.

6.0 References

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