Reflections on Self in Qualitative Research: Stories of Family

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KEY WORDS
• research
• research methods

Reflexivity is a qualitative research strategy that addresses our subjectivity as researchers related to people and events that we encounter in the field. Reflexivity also addresses the subjective nature of the research account as a narrative constructed by us as researchers. Reflexivity enhances the quality of research through its ability to extend our understanding of how our positions and interests as researchers affect all stages of the research process. The reflexive account presented here frames the analysis and interpretation of previously published findings on work and play in families by highlighting aspects of the researcher’s reflexivity across the entire research process, including situating the study, gaining access, managing self, living in the field, and telling the story. Its purpose is to demonstrate use of reflexivity in qualitative research as a strategy to consider our subjectivity as researchers and serve as signposts for readers about what is happening throughout the research process.


I’m in Bill’s home observing his interactions with his son, Michael. Bill is working at his computer with his back to Michael and me. Michael is playing with a construction toy and builds a circular object. He picks it up and holds it to his eye, looking through it at me. He says with a giggle, “Say cheese!” Without thinking, I smile and laugh back. Michael continues to play with his toy, taking it apart piece by piece. I begin to watch the news on the television. He pulls off a piece of the toy and puts it on his thumb, squealing, “A ring! A ring on my finger!” I try not to look at him, but he continues to squeal. Finally, I look over and smile in affirmation. He takes a second piece and puts it on his other thumb. “Look! Two rings!” I try to look engrossed in the news on TV, but it’s a losing battle and, finally, I look over at him in acknowledgment. Bill remains deeply engrossed in his work on the computer and does not turn around once during Michael’s playful interaction with me.

This excerpt from my fieldnotes of a qualitative study that I conducted on work and play in families demonstrates my struggle to come to terms with my “researcher as participant” role; a role that is dependent upon my “self,” both the self that I bring to the research setting and the self that I create in that setting (Reinharz, 1997). Additional documentation in my fieldnotes reflects my feelings: helplessness at my inability to ignore this cute and engaging child; annoyance with Bill for his failure to engage in play with his son, thereby leaving me to fend off Michael’s overtures to play; and discomfort at my realization that I needed to work harder not to respond to Michael if I wanted to minimize the effect of my presence and allow the events that I was observing to unfold on their own. I wrote that one of my main concerns was that if I responded to Michael’s play overtures, I would be relieving Bill of the necessity to respond to his son. If I weren’t there, would Michael have approached Bill in the same playful manner as he did me? Had my presence irretrievably affected my data?
These observations in Bill’s home and my thoughts about them provide an example of reflexivity in action. Reflexivity, a qualitative research strategy that dates back to the late 1930s, is related to the emergence of a self-consciousness in anthropological and sociological fieldwork that made it increasingly difficult for researchers “to maintain an image of the field as essentially independent” of their research activities and roles (Emerson, 1983, p. 11). Reflexivity addresses our subjectivity as researchers related to people and events as we encounter them in the field (Frank, 1997). Reflexivity also addresses the interpretive nature of the research account as a narrative constructed by us as researchers (Eaves & Kahn, 2000). Based on the understanding that we are the primary data-gathering instruments in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and that the self is the “key fieldwork tool” (Van Maanen, Manning, & Miller, 1989), reflexivity requires that we be aware of our presence in the research process (Barry, Britten, Barber, Bradley, & Stevenson, 1999; Harding, 1987). Such awareness comes through our internal dialogues with ourselves and continuous, intensive scrutiny of “what we know” and “how we know it” as we participate in the research process (Hertz, 1997). Qualitative research accounts are more than factual reports; they are actively constructed interpretations of our experiences in the field. Reflexive researchers interpret their experiences in the field and then question how they arrived at those interpretations (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Hertz, 1997; Van Maanen, 1988). The account from my fieldnotes demonstrates that I was aware of my active participation in the data collection process; I was not simply a passive observer or note taker. Although my notes reflect concern, our active participation as researchers is recognized and acknowledged as inevitable in qualitative research (Hertz, 1996). The purpose of reflexivity is to enhance the quality of the research through its ability to extend our understanding of how our positions and interests as researchers affect all stages of the research process. The questions that we ask or ignore, whom we choose to study or not study, how we formulate our research questions and gain access to study participants, how we act and interact with others in the field, how we collect and analyze our data, and the way in which we write up our findings all influence the direction of our research (Barry et al., 1999; Hertz, 1996). Decisions that we make such as these are dependent, in part, on our “location of self (e.g., within power hierarchies and within a constellation of gender, race, class, and citizenship)” (Hertz, 1996, p. 5), our theoretic concerns and grounded commitments (Frank, 1997), our social biographies (Crepeau, 1997), and, of course, our passions and prejudices (Norum, 2000). Thus, we all become a part of the phenomenon that we are studying (Barry et al., 1999) and we construct that which we think we have “found” (Steier, 1991).

Because our subjectivity as researchers permeates every aspect of the research process (Hertz, 1996), reflexivity, in the form of an account of our continuous self-critique and self-appraisal, reveals signposts for readers that tell them “what is going on” (Koch & Harrington, 1998). Reflexive accounts, consisting of autobiographical narratives or introspective material, are typically “used to frame the substance of an analysis” (DeVault, 1997, p. 218). Frequently separated in introductory chapters or methodological appendices from the text that provides the substantive analyses and reports of studies, they contain stories about our gaining access to and entering the field, our researcher roles, and other methodological, analytical, or observer comments. When placed in a section of the text on methods, they are used to legitimize the analysis that follows, establish our authority as researchers (DeVault, 1997), and demonstrate the trustworthiness of the research report (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reflexive accounts are meant to demonstrate our awareness of our biographies, assumptions, and personal values, and to provide a context in which our analysis and interpretation of the data can be understood (Ahern, 1999; Smith, 1999; Sword, 1999). They have also been used as analytic tools (Banning, 1997) to intensify our insight (Frank, 1997), guide our understanding (Dickie, 1997), and shape our data analysis (Crepeau, 1997).

Traditionally, reflexive accounts are published separately from the research report and usually after the results themselves have been published. Although the purpose of reflexivity is to extend our understanding of how our subjectivity affected the research process, this separation between presentation of analysis and reflection can be seen as indicating that subjective aspects of the research are not essential to its core (DeVault, 1997). Autoethnography, a relatively new genre of writing in social science research, addresses this problem by displaying “multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). Autoethnographers use iterative cycles of shifting their focus back and forth between social and cultural aspects of personal experience and introspective reflections on their personally engaged selves to explore the interplay between the cultural and the personal (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). For examples of autoethnographies, see Berger, 1997, Butler and Rosenblum, 1991, Ellingson, 1998, Ellis, 1993, Kiesinger, 1998, Norum, 2000, and Tillmann-Healy, 1996.

This article will follow the style of the traditional reflexive account in that it frames the analysis and interpretation of findings from my research on work and play in families.
that have been published elsewhere (Primeau, 1998; Primeau, 2000a; Primeau, 2000b). Ten two-parent families (17 children between the ages of 6 months and 5 years) from the Los Angeles area participated in a qualitative research, multiple methods study (participant observation, intensive interview, questionnaire). A total of 46 participant observations (over 109 hours) and 20 interviews (43.5 hours) were conducted in the families’ homes. I wrote extensive fieldnotes following each observation, including methodological notes on my presence and actions in their homes and my personal thoughts and feelings about my observations. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. To preserve the participants’ anonymity, pseudonyms are used. In this reflexive account, I will present data from my fieldnotes that serve as signposts to indicate what is going on across the entire research process (Koch & Harrington, 1998), including situating the study, gaining access, managing self, living in the field, and telling the story.

Situating the Study

I’m outside watching Brent working in his yard as his two children are playing under his supervision. He is talking about how marriage is difficult and that having children really changes things. He says that there were times when he would have left Peggy, his wife, or had an affair because he was so angry with her, but that he didn’t because of the kids. He asks me about my boyfriend and how long we have been together. I tell him that I’ve known him for six years, but that we’ve only been living together for three months so that we really are just “newlyweds.” He laughs and asks if marriage is in the future. I say, “Probably not because we’re not planning on having children.” He expresses surprise, “You’re not?” I say that we’re not sure, but that the more I watch my friends with their kids, the less sure I am that I want to have children.

Sixteen months later, I’m talking to Linda about how cute her children are. I say that I’ve been thinking about having kids for awhile now, since I’ve been doing this study, and that watching parents like her and her husband, who make management of their home and work lives look easy, has made me think that maybe my boyfriend and I could do it too. I laugh as I say that, of course, this is why I’m doing this study, to see how other people manage so that I can learn from them.

Lofland and Lofland (1995) point out that qualitative research encourages one “to start where you are” (p. 3). They state that “we make problematic in our research matters that are problematic in our lives” (p. 13). These connections between our research and our private lives are not often publicly acknowledged because “the norms of scholarship do not require that researchers bare their souls, only their procedures” (p. 13). Through reflection in my fieldnotes, I began to understand how the conceptualization and design of my research were situated in my questions about the role of marriage and children in my life, and how the meanings that I was attaching to the data I was collecting were affecting me personally. Reflexivity illuminates the connections between my examination of the social and cultural aspects of orchestration of work and play in families and my personal biography at a transitional point in my life.

My personal identification as an occupational scientist and feminist also situated the study. The research questions arose from my beliefs about the beneficial effects of orchestration of occupations into daily routines on people’s health and well-being, and from feminist thinking related to gender-based divisions of paid and unpaid work. Thus, I viewed data collection and analysis through the dual lens of occupation and gender. As an occupational therapist skilled in arranging the physical environment to facilitate optimal occupational performance, I often noted, during my observations, mismatches between the child’s performance and the home environment, but I also learned how parents made their own adjustments to these mismatches.

Dawn stirs the fudge mixture in the pot while Jennifer watches from her child-sized chair pulled up next to the stove. As I observe their interaction, I’m thinking that Jennifer needs a higher chair and restrain myself from pulling over one of the dining room chairs. Dawn asks Jennifer if she can see. Jennifer shakes her head, “No.” I say, “You need a bigger chair, don’t you?” Dawn reaches over, picks her up, and cradles her on her hip. She pulls the chair closer, putting her foot on it to support Jennifer’s weight on her knee. Jennifer smuggles into her mother’s body and sighs contentedly. I laugh inwardly at the therapist in me who wanted to set up the physical environment to improve Jennifer’s occupational performance and note sheepishly to myself that my strategy would not have included the physical contact, closeness, and connection experienced in this mother–daughter co-occupation.

Similarly, my feminist perspective shaped the research process of this study, especially around issues related to gender-based divisions of paid and unpaid work. My beliefs were frequently very different from those expressed by study participants. Reflexivity helped me to listen to and explore their views without prejudice and judgement, so that I could learn from and understand them.

Donna is talking about her choice to stay at home with the kids instead of working outside the home. She says that one thing that all the feminists say that she really disagrees with is that day care is just as good as the mother staying home with her children. She really believes that day care couldn’t possibly be as good for children as having a parent stay at home with them. She concedes that maybe it’s not harmful to the child, but it just isn’t as good as a parent being home with the child. Initially, I disagree with her. I say that I don’t think that feminists are saying that day care is as good as stay-at-home par-
Gaining Access

Since my study required that I gain access to families, which are among the most closed and private social groups (Daly, 1992a), I was faced with the challenge of finding willing participants. I was asking families with young children in a large and sometimes hostile urban environment to allow a complete stranger into their homes to observe them as they went about their personal lives. I was interested to find out what was special or unique about the families who chose to participate in the study's recruitment letter and consent form, that I wouldn’t know what it is. They’re talking about how they saw themselves as “grown-up children” never really playing as children. Because of this, they tell me that they want their children to have the joy of playing and having fun. Later in this same visit, Carol plays with her 9-month-old daughter, Kellie. She takes out a set of wooden alphabet blocks with pictures on them. She holds one out to Kellie, saying, “Look: kitty. Kitty, this is a kitty.” Suddenly, she stops, looks at me, and says, “Every time I sit down to play with them, I want everything to be a learning experience.” She picks up a yellow plastic triangle and says, “I want to say, ‘This is a yellow triangle.’” She says that sometimes she thinks that she takes all the fun out of things. She doesn’t know if, as a parent, she is doing too much or pushing them too much. She says with a sigh, “I’m not very playful.” As I listen to her, I realize that the concern that she is describing her is similar to her and Paul’s earlier portrayal of themselves as “grown-up children” and is probably what has led them to participate in my study. I muse to myself about how each family seems to have their own reasons, or “hook,” for their participation. I usually get some indication of each family’s unique hook during my first visit with them.

I came to attribute this hook phenomenon as an inevitable result of conducting fieldwork within family settings, a part of the reciprocal nature of the relationship that was formed between myself as researcher and the family members as participants. It was one of the trade-offs for my being allowed access into their homes. According to Lofland and Lofland (1995), “the issue of trade-offs is a legitimate component of the naturalistic process. . . . People who are tolerating a known observer or an interviewer in their midst have every reason to ask, What do I get in return? What’s the trade-off?” (p. 59). Most often the trade-off is for some type of assistance, including sincere listening to the participants talk about something that interests them. One family’s trade-off turned out to be my agreement to listen to a small business recruitment and sales pitch. While doing fieldwork in each family, I made a concerted effort to listen and look for their hook so that I could be aware of their particular trade-off.

Frequently, parents seemed to be looking for validation of their child rearing practices. I was often cast in the role of expert and I was asked for my opinion on, among other things, a 4-year-old girl’s reading skills and the sleeping habits of a 3-year-old child. Generally, I tried to respond in a relatively innocuous and neutral manner. As is common in the course of qualitative family research, my opinion was solicited “in the form of a question of normality: Are other families like us?” (Daly, 1992a, p. 7). Many of the families asked some variation of the above question. Again, I tried to give a neutral response, such as:

Susan asks me how my other families were. We talk for a few minutes about my study. I tell her that I can let her read my findings when I am done. She says that she wants to know if they are normal or how abnormal they are. I laugh, saying, “There is no abnormal, that I wouldn’t know what it is.” Or:

Katie joins us at the front door carrying Meg who is now clean and in her nightgown. She asks me, “So David knows what’s happening next? Do we get to read your report? How do we compare with your other families? On a scale of 1 to 10?” I laugh and say that I’m not rating or making those kinds of judgments.

Managing Self

Three “ways of being” contributed to how I managed my “self” inside the families’ homes: an absence of threat, self-disclosure, and acceptable incompetence. To establish an absence of threat (Lofland & Lofland, 1995), I tried very hard to present myself in a nonthreatening light throughout the home visits. I acted pleasant, interested, courteous, friendly, and sensitive to the feelings of the family members. The first visits to a family’s home were often initially uncomfortable and awkward. I used self-disclosure (Daly, 1992b) to counteract this discomfort. I spent time during these visits answering the parents’ questions and talking about the study. I emphasized the statement, also included in the study’s recruitment letter and consent form, that they, as parents, were experts in the area in which I was interested. My self-disclosure included the fact that I did not have children, which reinforced the parents’ role as experts and my own stance of acceptable incompetence (Lofland & Lofland), that is, I was someone who did not understand parenting and, therefore, I needed to be taught.
In addition, I satisfied family members’ curiosity about other aspects of my personal life. On at least four occasions I was asked by different children if I had a boyfriend or kids. When I responded that I did not have children, but that I had cats, I was often pressed for more details, which I willingly provided.

Initial discomfort and awkwardness were most frequently demonstrated by the adults in the setting, not the children, as the following excerpt from my fieldnotes demonstrates.

This is my first visit with this family and they are in the middle of their dinner when I arrive. I join them at the dinner table. I am already feeling somewhat overwhelmed by the loud, jovial, and almost overly friendly greeting from David, the father, and the quiet, self-conscious manner of Katie, the mother, who is 6 months pregnant. I ask if they are excited about the baby and then internally reprimand myself for asking such a silly question. I think to myself, “Of course they are excited.” They reply that they are. Their daughter, Kristin, wants a baby sister and David wants a boy. Katie says that one day David and Kristin had been playfully arguing about it until finally Kristin had said, “You can have a baby boy after my baby sister.” Katie and David laugh and say, “No, this is it! No more children after this one!”

I’m feeling awkward during this interaction because they are trying to finish their dinner, and here I am, a total stranger, at their dinner table watching them eat. Katie is sitting rather primly at the head of the table. I interpret her body language as indicative of her self-consciousness. Similarly, I interpret David’s effusive behavior as a cover-up for his nervousness.

Over the course of repeated visits within each family and as I became more comfortable with managing my “self” in their homes, the family members and I established a rapport that seemed to facilitate the research process. I joined the families as they got up in the morning, readyed themselves for work and day care, came home in the evening, prepared and ate their meals, took their baths, and went to bed at night. I was invited to come into the bathroom and assist parents and their children during bath time. I was frequently unsuccessful and often still watching parents and their children during bath time. In one family, I stood outside the closed bathroom door as the father showered with his son. I watched countless bedtime routines, complete with stories and affectionate goodnight rituals. I shared a bed and Winnie the Pooh videos with a child and his mother during one bedtime routine. In one family, I was present when the girl went to bed at night and was there again when she woke up the next morning. I went along on neighborhood walks and trips to the park. I watched children play in small backyard pools and a father and son swim together in their apartment complex pool. I had the opportunity to see parents interact not only with their children, but also with the neighbors’ children as their homes became neighborhood centers for play. I met grand-

parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, and neighbors. I was invited to a family birthday party. Throughout all of these experiences, I tried to remain in the background, an unobtrusive observer who participated minimally and only when asked and, all the while, remaining pleasant, courteous, and benign in manner.

Living in the Field: Participating and Observing

Nevertheless, I was unprepared for how much my presence in their homes would draw the children’s attention and their invitations for me to participate in their play. I found myself in the throes of a dilemma with which ethnographers are typically faced, that is, how to simultaneously strive for connection and rapport with my participants and yet minimize my intrusiveness and the inevitable effects of my presence on their daily life experiences (Lawlor & Mattingly, 2001). My fieldnotes are peppered with reflexive accounts of the ways in which I tried to avoid participating in the very events that I was there to observe. Eventually, I developed a standard response to children’s requests for me to play.

Jennifer is standing in front of me, trying to get my attention. Dawn tells her to leave me alone and not to bug me, but Jennifer continues to stand in front of me, trying to get me to interact with her. As Dawn tells her again to leave me alone, I say to her that I’m not here to play with her tonight. I say that I want to watch her, Daddy, and Mommy together and that I will come back another time to play with her. I interrupt myself to ask Dawn and Mike if I have told them about my babysitting for them, when our visits are completed, as a token of my gratitude for their participation in the study. Dawn nods. I tell Jennifer that I will come over another time and we can play together the whole time that I am there.

At odds with these attempts to limit my play with the children were my professional inclinations, as an occupational therapist who was working with children, to play and the playful nature inherent in most children that beckons one to join them. I was frequently unsuccessful and often found myself participating in play with the children because it would have been extremely unnatural not to play with them. Lawlor and Mattingly (2001) point out that “the unobtrusive researcher becomes highly intrusive when he or she fails to respond to the interactional solicitations of children. . . . Failure to engage can lead to the child’s profound disengagement, an undesirable consequence of the researcher’s attempt to be unobtrusive” (pp. 149–150). The following example is typical of my playful interactions with the children in this study.

Jennifer’s father, Mike, is on the telephone. She is standing in front of me with a balloon raised above her head. She throws it towards me. I pick it up and throw it back to her. We con-

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Carole described her experience of my presence. At the end of her interview, Monique confirmed Stuart's new level of awareness because she felt the need for personal growth and development in this area of parenting. Two fathers reported insight into their participation in unpaid work in the home after their interviews with me. Both fathers were from families with traditional gender-based divisions of unpaid work in which the majority of household work, including child care, was completed by the mothers. Sam shared the following insights at the conclusion of his interview.

Now that you've brought some of the stuff to my attention by asking questions, I'm going to do things different. . . . It kind of opens up my eyes. Well, maybe I should do more of this or maybe I should do more of that or maybe I should look at this. . . . Just the questions you've asked. [Pause.] Just the questions. And the combination of your questions and my answers. . . . Especially the thing about Linda and the chores, I was like, "Wow!" [Chuckles.]

At the end of his interview, Stuart said that answering the interview questions made him think about things, such as "what things I'm doing right and what things I'm doing wrong." He stated that the process of putting his actions into words made him more aware and gave him the opportunity to think about what he was doing. At the end of her interview, Monique confirmed Stuart's new level of awareness when she commented on their participation in the study.

I think we enjoyed it. I even think that it did Stuart some good. Just different little things. Like he made a comment to me, "You really do carry a lot on your shoulders, Monique." And I [thought], "Maybe his talk with Loree did some good the other night." So that was kind of neat. For him to make a comment like that I thought, "Good. Maybe it did open your eyes a little bit." So after he made that comment, then I said to him, "Get up. Richard [their 6-month-old baby] is crying." [Laughs.] . . . I definitely think it put some thoughts into his head.

Although my intention was not to act as an agent of change within the families in my study, my presence in their homes and my interview questions, arising from my personal biography that framed the research process, inadvertently acted in that manner. Qualitative research "involves the creation and ongoing renegotiations of relationships"
Telling the Story

Telling the study’s story requires the researcher to consider the concept of voice. Voice is the aspect of reflexivity in qualitative research that addresses issues of representation and writing. It is how the researcher simultaneously presents his or her self and the participants’ selves in the story (Hertz, 1996). The rules of scholarship have long admonished scholars to be silent, to mute their voices, to keep their voices out of their written accounts. This “myth of silent authorship” (Charmaz & Mitchell, 1997) obscures the reality that any story has potential for multiple voices: the researcher’s voice, the participants’ voices, and the voice used by the researcher during self-reflection (Hertz). The researcher has ultimate authority over whose voice and, therefore, whose story is heard. Participants’ voices are sifted through the researcher’s filter of his or her personal biography. Self-reflexivity and consideration of representation and voice reveal hidden agendas in our writing (Hertz).

In my study, my personal biography, including my identification as an occupational scientist and feminist, situated the study, shaped the processes of data gathering and analysis, and influenced my presentation and writing of the study’s findings. The dual lens of occupation and gender led me to choose, or privilege, certain participants’ specific words or actions over others as I developed and presented concepts and theories out of the data I collected. Ultimately, as the researcher, I “decide whose stories (and quotes) to display and whose to ignore” (Hertz, 1996, p. 7). For example, my personal beliefs and values about equity in divisions of unpaid work in the home divided, but also to demonstrate through these accounts some of the consequences of inequitable, gender-based divisions of unpaid work in the home for men’s and women’s relationships with each other as well as with their children.

In the final analysis, use of reflexivity should eventually lead us all to the same conclusion as that reached by Haynes (1999) when she reconsidered the statement, “You are the writer of your own story.” In her words, “we all create our own life stories, using and relating only the memories that seem most relevant, serve our purpose or those we are prepared to share at the time of telling” (p. 670). In a similar manner, I have shared selected reflexive accounts from my fieldnotes to demonstrate use of reflexivity in qualitative research as a strategy to address our subjectivity as researchers and serve as signposts for readers about what is happening throughout the research process.

Acknowledgment

The study described above was supported by the California Foundation for Occupational Therapy and was conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a doctor of philosophy degree in occupational science at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

References
