10th Annual Liverpool Symposium
‘Reflection in Action – taking stock of ten years of Ethnography Symposia’

August 2015

Submission Title: From reflection in professional practice to reflexive research practices: Convergence and divergence of concepts.

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ABSTRACT

Am I an academic or a practitioner; an objective investigator or an experiential researcher? Can I or do I need to distance my ‘self’ from the research project? Will the ‘self’ impact and impose on the data and the analysis? Is there a middle ground and if so, where is it located? These are just a selection of the reflexive questions explored during the development of a recent ethnographic study, based in the West of Ireland. The research project, which focused on the relationships between mothers and early years practitioners, will be used to illustrate an engagement with reflexive approaches to ethnography, aligning this with a reflective approach to professional practice and to teaching. The intent of the presentation is to interrogate the convergence and divergence of reflexivity in research with reflection on practice, exploring the usefulness of their application in the ‘field’.

The creative and developmental process of establishing a new undergraduate programme of study, designed for early childhood educators, was strongly underpinned by the concepts of reflection on practice (Kolb, 1984) and experiential learning (Schon, 1983). Building on the work of Dewey, Kolb, Schon, Moon – reflecting on the ‘self’ is considered crucial to developing an awareness of how we come to our practice and why we make the decisions we do. Reflective and experiential approaches provide a method for applying theory to practice – moving from the how to the why – from a technical focus to a value laden approach. As student/practitioners develop reflective capacities and a comfort level with self-scrutiny, they can move to greater depths in their reflections. Thompson and Thompson (2008) discuss the
various dimensions of reflection, highlighting the cognitive, affective and value dimensions, facilitating greater balance and self-awareness in practice-based reflection.

Conceptualising the notion of reflexivity in the research process, is not too far removed from the role of reflection in practice (Lindon, 2010). As Doucet (2008) highlights, the role of reflexivity in research, is to illuminate the ‘personal, political, intellectual and theoretical autobiographies of ourselves’, and to reflect on these and their potential to impact research. While these two approaches – reflection and reflexivity - have separate purposes, each require an introspective analysis of self.

Acknowledging past experiences as an early years practitioner, working with and supporting families, as a parent relying on childcare services, and now as an academic and researcher, developing and expanding an understandings of various theoretical concepts, these were all areas that the reflexive process opened up. In further exploring this area of the developing methodology, issues pertaining to potential researcher biases, as well as issues of insider/outsider researchers (Smith and Pangsapa, 2007) well developed from a feminist perspective by Oakley (2005; 1981), were explored.

As Doucet and Mauthner (2006) state, ‘being an insider – whatever this actually means – is not a straight forward route to knowing’, and indeed, this researcher, while conscious of past knowledge and experience, was not of the belief that she ‘knows’ the story prior to the actual research occurring. Engaging with reflexivity was an imperative to ensure the voice of the participant was heard, and not filtered through the assumptions of someone who has experience in the world under investigation. Taking a reflexive turn contributed to a heightened awareness of the researcher’s own perspectives based on past experiences, assumptions, biases. This allowed the study not to negate the history of the researcher, but to benefit from a wealth of past knowledge and experience of the sector to frame the overall research project.

While the reflexive research process requires researchers to ‘turn inwards to their self/selves’ (Doucet, 2008), we are warned that ‘the boundaries between self-indulgent and reflexivity are fragile and blurred’ (Doucet, 2008). It was the aim of this researcher to use the reflexive process to clarify and makes sense of the meaning making of others and to understand that other factors may assist in understanding the perspectives from which participants create these meanings. This presentation will outline the role of reflection in practice, reflexivity in research, drawing on the experience of engaging with both concepts in the field and through the analysis and theorising that followed. While the divergence and convergence of reflexivity and reflection in the research process will be shared, the intent of the presentation is to contribute to the ongoing exploration of these concepts within the ethnographic community.