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## RESEARCHER REFLEXIVITY IN ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

<sup>a</sup>Köngäs, Mirja, <sup>b</sup>Kaarina Määttä

<sup>a</sup>PhD., post-doc researcher, Faculty of Education  
University of Helsinki

PL 8, Siltavuorenpenger 10, 00014 Helsinki, Finland

<sup>b</sup>PhD., Professor of Educational Psychology (emerita), Faculty of Education  
University of Lapland

Yliopistonkatu 8, 96101 Rovaniemi, Finland

### **Abstract**

*It has always been desired to describe and understand the reality of human life and its various elements. When the ethnographic research approach is combined with reflexivity, the ability to see a different reality is more possible. In this article, we look at what reflexivity means in an ethnographer's work, as well as its requirements and challenges. In the conclusions, we present the circle of reflexivity to outline the nature of reflexivity as well as the course of the research process and the choices made in it. By adopting a reflexive way of interpreting, the researcher can find the authentic special features of the research field and objects freed from the shackles of their own ingrained ways of thinking. The benefits of reflexivity are not limited to research processes but overlap over the course of the life cycle, so research on the benefits of reflexivity for the development of people's lifelong well-being would be welcome.*

**Keywords:** reflexivity, ethnography, observation, subcultures, context

### **Introduction**

Ethnographic research has gained an increasingly strong foothold in the study of various social phenomena and subcultures. Ethnography is qualitative research and is considered to be a particularly suitable research approach under the following conditions: 1) The nature of the social phenomenon is studied, 2) The material is unstructured, 3) The subject of the study is a small number of cases, 4) The analysis aims to elucidate the purposes and meanings of human activity, and 5) The interpretation leans mainly on descriptions and explanations of concrete situations [1][2].

Ethnography refers to the terms people (ethno) and writing (graphics). Ulla-Maija Salo [3] stated in her research that "graphic" could also allude to "drawing" or "narration" as a word. However, within cultural research, it is mainly interpreted as descriptive writing [4] [3] [5]. Ethnographic research is characterized by 1) approaching the phenomenon with empirical observation, 2) not approaching the study according to a predetermined coding, in which case the researcher must be willing to change his or her perceptions as the research progresses, and 3) integrating research results as a part of a wider historical and cultural framework [1] [6] [7] [8].

Ethnography requires the researcher to make different choices and find solutions regarding how to make the reality of the research phenomenon and the voice and world of the people being studied open to the researcher, who often comes from different context. For example, an ethnographer conducting childhood research is representative of adult culture. How can he or she get in and give a realistic picture of the culture or world under study [9]? The researcher has to reflect on the culture he or she is studying in order to get into it [10]. Reflexivity must be implemented time and time again. The researcher may need to reflect multiple times on the same manifestations in different contexts that might feel straining. On the other hand, this is often also the high point of research for the ethnographer and provides an experience of understanding the phenomenon under study and getting inside the culture [11] [12].

When an ethnographer open up his or her own interpretive starting points, knows the effect of the specific features of the culture under study on the ways the subjects interpret, keeps context and

solipsism in mind, and examines his or her material in light of several divisions, the results can be considered reliable [13]. In her dissertation, Raija Raittila [14] aptly wrote on the topic using the term "reflektiivinen tiedontuottaminen" [reflective information production]. Reflexivity is essential in the work of an ethnographic researcher to obtain reliable information, as in qualitative research in general [15]. What is reflexivity, and what does it mean in a researcher's work? We sought answers to this question in this article. In this article, we also intend to **look at the challenges of reflexivity and what reflexivity requires in childhood research. We base this article on the scientific literature in the field and our previous research** [9] [16].

### **What is Reflexivity?**

References to the concept of reflexivity can be found as early as the 13th century, when there was talk of the mind turning towards itself, the moment when a person stops outside of the situation he or she is in. More broadly, the concept of reflectivity was described by John Dewey [17] as a profound reflection in which one seeks justifications for the contradictions in the mind and in which the individual seeks arguments in his or her thinking that support both current and past thought patterns [2].

In his article, Jack Mezirov [18] described seven levels of reflectivity (awareness of one's own thoughts, feelings, causation, values, terminology, limitations, and culture concerning the object under consideration) that relate to perceptions, thinking, or actions and how an individual is accustomed to viewing them within himself. Often, studies cross the terms reflexivity and reflectivity. The terms are also used synonymously although they differ ontologically. Similarly, the terms reflection and reflection are used crosswise. Reflexivity is often referred to in the description of reflection [19].

Reflectivity can focus on certain areas of research, in which case the rationale for the research topic and choices is considered. However, in reflexivity, the researcher is also the subject of the research as a research boundary, analyst of results, and presenter. In some studies, reflexivity has been distinguished from theoretical or methodological reflexivity [2]. In both terms, the core meaning is experience. Reflectivity is a perspective of an outsider (the so-called pilot position), while reflexivity specifically looks at one's own feelings, thoughts, and connotations of the event at hand, from within the experience (the so-called swimmer position). Who am I in this situation? [20]. Why do I feel like this in this situation? How do I assume that others will interpret me in this situation? Why? Is the event relevant to me? How much? Why? Reflectivity is also often described as conceptualizing what has already been learned, while reflexivity is described as unprepared learning in an instant [19] [20].

Reflexivity is an individual's personal awareness of certain experiences as part of himself or herself; thus, they also have the power to regulate emotions and thoughts about the experience [21]. Reflection is most often referred to as self-reflection [22] and is an individual's attempt to form a whole range of conscious and unconscious images that explain his or her current feelings, thoughts, beliefs, assumptions, or desires [2] [19] [20].

### **How Does Reflexivity Work in the Actions of an Ethnographic Researcher?**

There is no clear instruction manual on ethnographic reflexivity, so the requirements lie in the ethnographer's reasoning. According to Pierre Bourdieu, a critical examination of the researcher must be carried out in all scientific research. Bourdieu also involves evaluative reflection in ethnographic research on the researcher's background, starting points, research fundamentals, and relationship to the research phenomenon [23] [24] and how the researcher perceives, interprets, and conceptualizes his or her research context [1] [25]. The awareness and personal questioning of current scientific assumptions are also worth noting.

Reflexivity lives through research [26]. Toskala and Hartikainen [27] separated reflexivity into stages in the process. According to them, the process proceeds by perceiving the emotional state itself, identifying the experience behind the emotional state, and analyzing and conceptualizing it, after which the individual can create both a new understanding of his or her experience and a

new meaning for his or her emotional state. The individual moves away from the facts interpreted in the past, assimilating new thinking and renewed facts into himself or herself about his or her experiences and emotional states. Emotions are centrally linked to reflexivity.

Reflexivity is a strong part of research evaluation: what choices were made, what was excluded, and on what grounds these choices were made. Although reflexivity is often seen in writing at the end of the study, it is underpinned right from the beginning [28]. Reflexivity grows the researcher as the research progresses. The researcher locates himself or herself in relation to his or her privacy and community through which he or she seeks a new understanding of the phenomenon under study from alternative perspectives. Through reflexivity, the phenomenon under study appears as a much broader whole, which can be deduced from the preliminary data. Important in the realization of research reflexivity through the research process is the transformation of reactivity (i.e. emotion-based observation) into reflexivity (i.e. toward critical evaluation) [29].

The process of reflexivity questions the researcher's information production processes and challenges the representations achieved, despite which research findings should refer to the purest research outcome possible, regardless of the researcher's personality [30]. In most cases, ethnography is expected to provide the reader with a perspective on the researcher's thought patterns as well as their change as a result of the field [31]. Sometimes it is also considered skilful reflexivity to write a researcher out of a text rather than into it. Reflection is then assumed to occur in the field and the analysis phases but is no longer necessary when the ethnographer moves on to the writer.

### **What Are the Challenges of Reflexivity in Ethnography?**

When studying a foreign culture ethnographically and by observation, we may ask whether the researcher's knowledge and social interaction do not affect the knowledge he or she forms [32]. Reflexivity is particularly relevant in revealing the researcher's own starting points with the phenomenon under study [33]. It was precisely the perception of foreign cultures by anthropologists that highlighted in a new way the need for reflexivity, interpretations specifically based heavily on the scholar's analytical ability to describe the uniqueness of an unknown people as objectively as possible. It has been questioned whether the researcher's identity influences interpretations too much and blinds readers to novelty [31].

In general, the ethnographer's philosophical commitments to science shape his or her research thinking. While actions take place in the field, they take place with certain meanings and symbols in the researcher's thinking, which affects perception, interpretation, and analysis [34]. Reflexivity can be thought of as the ability to look at these meanings objectively and bring significant findings into a verbatim form in research and to use this information in one's activities, such as doing research or social interaction. Reflexivity has also been described as the ability to communicate the contents of one's own experiences in social interaction [2]. In ethnography, the researcher must look at both the effects of his or her physical presence concerning the material and the effects of thought patterns in relation to the results [24] [3].

Ethnographic observation can be a cumbersome process, both mentally and physically. The time in the field itself may also require its own reflection process. An ethnographic observer can prepare for this by keeping a research journal. The research journal is separate from observational material and includes the researcher's feelings, difficulties, successes, ideas, interpretations, or linking observations to theoretical knowledge. Field notes, on the other hand, are those in which the aim is to write as authentically as possible the event and context seen and heard with the dates and times. Today, research journals can be blogs and can be compiled into their own section of the research text. The research journal can later support both reflection and analysis [7] [35].

Just as research is an excerpt from the reality of the moment, the field is also captured and examined as stagnant on the pages of research. Even after years, the ethnographer may perceive the subjects exactly as they were at the time of the study. Reflexivity also has to outsource itself from the field when the data collection is over and from the whole study when it is complete. Thanks to successful reflexivity, it is possible for a researcher to grow through his or her research in different

roles. A researcher entering the field with prior knowledge can develop through self-reflection from an analyst of the material to a narrator of the completed research text. It should be understood that the researcher is always an extraordinary part of the reality of the field. Where the researcher momentarily affects the field, the field can affect the researcher for the rest of his or her life [31].

In ethnographic research, the researcher can also use his or her reflexivity to describe his or her own relationship to the field. When data collection takes place through participatory observation, the researcher's presence will likely create a context in the field during the study, one that was not before the researcher and will not be after the researcher. This does not remove the reliability of the research results but requires the ethnographer to bring out reflexivity in the analysis phase [31].

In emotional research, it is a good idea to observe and, to some extent, record one's own reactions so that the reader can interpret the significance of the researcher's emotional frame of reference for the research settings and report [36]. One can also consider whether it is worth discussing the phenomenon of excessive efficiency in conducting research if it is not required to stop at reflectivity [2].

### **What Does Reflexivity Require in Childhood Research?**

Over the past two decades, ethnography has emerged as a viable starting point for looking at children's lives [28] [37]. Children have been studied with an ethnographic approach, especially in the context of school and kindergarten [38] [2] [9] [39] and in the home environment [40]. Ethnography can also be used to obtain information about the reality of the life of children with disabilities [41] [42].

How can we produce ethnographic research so that it reaches a different spectrum or specificity of children's perspectives? How are we able to understand the symbolic messages within children's culture, such as words, sounds, and expressions, which the researcher seeks to interpret to understand children's experiences, feelings, and understanding of childhood? [43].

Reflexivity manifests in childhood research throughout the research process. One key step is the acquisition of material. Observation provides information about real events, although the perception of children's culture is not straightforward for the adult-centred researcher [44]. Interviews may also not be able to reach children's voices [45]. Similarly, taking on the role of researcher and securing the child's consent is not straightforward because it is not easy for the child to understand the process and meanings of research [1] [46] [7]. Reflexivity and sensitivity to children's views and experiences require the researcher to be able to search for more unspoken words in interview and observation situations than for the interpretation of spoken words [47] [2]. Reflection of the obtained material requires the researcher to be vigilant to look at both the effects of his or her physical presence in relation to the material and the effect of his or her mental thought patterns and adulthood in relation to the results [48] [37].

We wish to emphasize that in good child-centred ethnographic research, reflectivity is seen in the researcher's activities throughout the research process. As researchers, we must be able to arouse interest in understanding children's development, emotional world, emotional behaviour, and culture. At its best, an accurate description of the collection of research material, a careful description of the analysis of the material, and a detailed description of the results will make the reader experience the research reality and be convinced of the phenomenon under study from the children's world [16] [49].

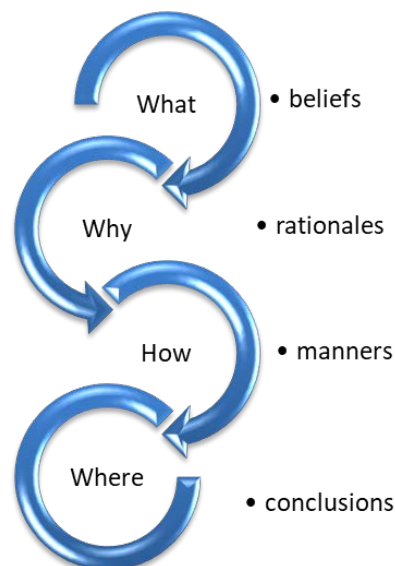
### **Conclusions**

Reflectivity is a major asset when there is a genuine desire to enter a different culture. Reflexivity continues in the footsteps of ethnography to more deeply open up cultural understanding. Ethnography seeks to understand the phenomenon under study, enter the field of study, and record the voice of the subjects. In ethnographic research, as in all qualitative research, ethical issues are of particular importance [50]. To achieve this, we have to make several choices

during the research process. Reflexivity is also involved in the various stages of research, from the beginning to the end [4] [12].

Moving ahead in stages and growing along with the process are important elements of reflexivity. This is realized both as self-reflection (reflection on the researcher's own conscious and unconscious effects, such as emotions, beliefs, and prospects) [2] [19] [20] and as a reflection of research (such as starting points, rationale, familiarity) [1] [23] [25] [37]. In the finished research text, reflexivity can be read in the choices made, such as methodological commitments, ontology, and epistemology, even if it is not specifically mentioned.

We formed a design describing the nature and process of reflexivity to illustrate the practice of the researcher's work (see Figure 1). The circle is in the shape of an endless spiral as it rotates towards the supposed truth on the subject, modifying the researcher's original perceptions. Each layer provides a new insight into the nature of the subject [51]. The starting point is pre-understanding, and the points of the circle are experiences whereby a new insight shapes the understanding of the subject [52] [53]. Likewise, the researcher transports reflexivity through research design, implementation, analysis, and reporting. At the same time, he or she asks questions that clarify the content of concepts related to the phenomenon in the context under study and the meanings of the material described [52] [53]. but also by considering self-reflection. Reflexivity can be described as unintended learning in an instant [19] [20].



**Fig. 1. Circle of reflexivity**

The circle of reflexivity combines both the inter-reflective and intra-reflective levels. The researcher reflects on what he or she thinks and believes that he or she knows about the phenomenon under study, as well as what feelings and meanings it personally evokes in him or her, taking into account his or her personal background and starting points. The researcher wonders why the topic is relevant, both personally and in research. Why is this particular phenomenon selected as its own research topic and field? The researcher reflects on how he or she is accustomed to conceptualizing things and feelings related to the research topic. In what ways does the researcher's personality lead the research process, and is it necessary to detach from it or question one's own operating models? The researcher wonders where he or she wants to end up in his or her research, what the answers the researcher wants to reach are, and why. What is the aim of the research questions and the results of the research, and in what way is it important for the researcher himself or herself, for the research subject, the research phenomenon, and society? [1] [23] [25] [37].

The reflective circle seeks to understand intrinsic values by describing recurring connections between contexts and emotions [54]. Emotions appear as significant transmitters of information about reality. Emotions make it possible to create contexts in a way that reason alone cannot deliver

[2]. Because ethnographic analysis does not seek to create a new theory, overturn paradigms, or unambiguously define phenomena, it leaves room for the continuing cyclical nature of reflective truth [52] [53]. The actions of individuals are always believed to be guided by some intrinsic meaning. These meanings are sought to be understood by describing recurring connections between contexts and events. Understanding takes place as a continuous process of development of the phenomenon according to renewed individual interpretations in social interaction. Ethnographic research seeks forms and adaptations to the demands of time. We need to pay attention not only to the challenges and goals of current research but also to different and new forms of data acquisition [55].

In this hectic time, it is also important to emphasize how conscious implementation of reflectivity could contribute to people's well-being and flourishing [56] [57]. A reflective model of action could go hand in hand with the changing and hectic world of different people's lives, providing perspectives and support. Human well-being and success could benefit from the implementation of active reflexivity at any stage of life in perceiving an emotional state, recognizing its underlying experience, and reflecting on and defining an experience that creates new understanding and a new meaning for the situations and emotions we experience.

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Article received 2021-12-08