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Toward a Critical Reflexivity in Qualitative Inquiry: Relational and Posthumanist Reflections on Realism, Researcher's Centrality, and Representationalism in Reflexivity

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To critically understand the complexity of the concept and practice of reflexivity, I offer an exploration of some of its epistemological and ontological foundations. Specifically, I discuss 3 assumptions that tend to be entailed in most views of reflexivity: realism, humanism, and linguistic representationalism. I provide for each of them a social constructionist or posthumanist reinterpretation on the basis of relational views of ontology and on constitutive understandings of knowledge. I suggest some alternatives to these 3 assumptions in order to foster a plurality of viewpoints about practices of reflexivity and entanglements of objects and subjects. In particular, posthumanist theories may provide the language to counter postpositivist inclinations within qualitative inquiry and to offer horizontal, diffractive, and transformative modes of knowing that more fully embrace reflexivity not as a tool or strategy but as a discursive and performative practice—that is, as inquiry in itself.

Keywords: reflexivity, social constructionism, relational ontology, posthumanism, qualitative psychology

Often seen as a defining feature of qualitative research, reflexivity can be described as the process of exploring the ways in which researchers and their subjectivities affect what is and can be designed, gathered, interpreted, analyzed, and reported in an investigation. The concept of reflexivity therefore assumes that researchers are unavoidably present and influential in the inquiry. In the literature on qualitative research, three kinds of reflexivity are most commonly described: personal reflections on the influence of the researcher's identities

and positions on the inquiry; analyses of the mutual relations between participants (or data) and investigators and how they affect the research; and critical considerations on assumptions, expectations, and boundaries of the researcher's specific discipline (Wilkinson, 1988).

Although reflexivity is undoubtedly important and useful for research, the general consensus about its "goodness"¹ (Lynch, 2000, p. 26) runs the risk of hiding some of its epistemological and ontological foundations. To promote a more critical understanding and engagement with the practice of reflexivity, I start by examining three implicit theoretical assumptions that often underpin reflexive practice. First, most traditional views of reflexivity seem to adopt a realist position by assuming that research processes and positions function as entities that preexist the relational act and context of researching. Second, taking for granted the centrality of the researcher's position and the uni-

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¹ Lynch (2000) discussed this idea of "goodness" as being an "academic virtue" and similarly argued against reflexivity as being a source of privileged knowledge (p. 26).

versal goodness of reflexivity tends to encourage humanist² and romantic positions about knowledge. Third, linguistic representationalism, or the aspiration to direct correspondence of language and reality, is implicit in methodologies that see reflexivity as a tool or practice to increase accuracy and validity in qualitative research. In the latter part of the article, I reflect further on what a constitutive reflexivity that is critical, posthuman, and performative may look like.

Posthumanist and social constructionist interpretations of research can prove useful to reconceptualize reflexivity in the aftermath of the crisis of representation (MacLure, 2013; Papadopoulos, 2008) and of arguments for a process or relational ontology (Barad, 2007; Gergen, 2009, 2015b). I seek to put forward a more-radical reflexivity that calls researchers to embrace the negotiated, relational, and socially constructed nature of the research experience. I argue that reflexivity still plays an important role for qualitative inquiry, not as a realist and humanist tool of research but as a constitutive and performative practice. Here, reflexivity is not merely *about* something but *for* something. My hope is that freeing reflexivity from post-positivist and realist demands for research validity or fidelity will contribute to nonreductive, diffractive, and transformative understandings of knowledge (Braidotti, 2013; Gemignani, 2014).

Realism

Views of research that aim to identify or discover final realities or “facts” tend to see the process of inquiry as a sort of jigsaw puzzle, whose pieces need to be systematically ordered and arranged to identify, describe, and explain the properties of phenomena. Objects, events, and processes exist independently from observers and from people’s ability to be aware or concerned about them. As a realist viewpoint assumes a “one-to-one correspondence between scientific theories and reality” (Barad, 2007, p. 41), the presence of the observer or scientist does not and should not influence what is going to be seen, studied, and reported. In Searle’s (1995, p. 155) words, “realism is the view that there is a way that things are that is logically independent of all human representations.”

From a realist view of reflexivity, the different dimensions, dynamics, or elements that are involved in the research process operate as entities that preexist the acts of researching, the contexts of inquiry, and the theoretical and experimental practices used to identify the topics of a reflexive analysis. In this ontological framework, then, the topics of concern that are typically involved in a reflexive analysis (e.g., assumptions, preconceptions, personal histories, social positions, and subjectivities) are seen as independent of the processes, discourses, contexts, and experiences of inquiry and reflection. In other words, these aspects exist a priori of the research process, and they are always present, regardless of the researcher’s ability to be aware of them. The researcher can of course engage in practices to control the effects of these elements but cannot exclude or eliminate their presence.

Realist understandings of reflexivity can be found even in approaches that, although emphasizing the central role of interpretations, still espouse subtle forms of realism. In some versions of hermeneutics, for instance, “the agent qua self-interpreter learns to see hitherto taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions as implicated in hierarchical and discriminating practices and, thus, is put in a position to react to them” (Kögler, 2008, p. 154). From this perspective, the content of reflexivity is not interpreted as a discursive creation or as a coconstruction that is embedded in the process of inquiry and in the theoretical frames adopted to notice and problematize what falls within the concerns of reflexivity. Rather, values and assumptions are seen as realities, with which researchers “deal” and to which they “react.” Following the initial identification of beliefs and assumptions through reflexivity, their ontological status is considered stable, and thus, it is not questioned. It becomes therefore difficult—and often impossible—to engage in transformative processes through which the inevitable preunderstandings, beliefs, and positions evolve creatively. The risk is for them to be negatively identified as “biases,” to be relegated to a secondary sphere as “subjective,” and to be crystallized in labels and definitions that reify them,

² In my use of this term I embrace a philosophical, modern Western cultural view of humanism that has, in turn, contributed to the evolution of humanistic psychology.

making them even truer to their observers. To an extent, this process is similar to the consolidation of realities that occurs through narratives and acts of narrating (Gemignani, 2014). The main difference, however, is that, in the case of realist understandings of reflexivity, the discursive nature of biases and assumptions is neglected to make room for the confession of their presence (Pillow, 2003).

The belief about an essential, reified reality that affects researchers promotes a mechanistic view of the process of inquiry, in which they act and react to positions and assumptions that—at least potentially—direct the researchers' choices and practices. By “clearly exposing the influences that have shaped the design and conduct of the research” (Garnham, 2008, p. 193), reflexivity becomes “a way for researchers to inform their audiences about their perspectives as well as to manage their subjectivities” (Morrow, 2005, p. 250) and to help avoiding arbitrariness (Hoshmand, 2005). The content of the reflexive analysis is to be disclosed, described, and analyzed, so that the researcher can realize, manage, and somewhat control or bracket it. From a realist perspective, the researcher's values, positions, and subjectivities appear as issues to be controlled, rather than embraced as I suggested elsewhere (Gemignani, 2011a).

In contrast, constructionist, poststructural, and critical epistemologies emphasize the co-constructive, discursive, and performative grounds on which the processes of research and, in general, knowledge-making are based (Barad, 2007; Gergen, 2009; McNamee & Hosking, 2011; Watzlawick, 1984). Issues, participants, and the data concerning them are not seen as self-evident and are never taken at face value. Rather, they are coconstructed and become relevant through interpretative processes that are contextual, relational, and political. Foucault, for instance, talked about the crucial role of discourses for the genealogy of specific truths and problems that then appear as real and even obvious at specific historical times (Foucault, 1976, 1977). The point of Foucault's genealogy is not to uncover the historical origins of a phenomenon but to explore the conditions of possibility that make something appear as a true phenomenon that can be identified and recognized. Such recognition happens through the discursive creation of specific boundaries that delineate a phenomenon and construct an inside

and an outside to it, including the insights of a reflexive analysis. A genealogical focus moves from describing what is contained inside these boundaries (e.g., the issue, bias, position, experience) to enabling an “analysis of how boundaries are produced, rather than presuming sets of well-worn binaries in advance” (Barad, 2007, p. 30).

The process of researching—especially in psychology and the social sciences—should not be isolated from the performances and discourses that inform the presence and relevance of data, phenomena and findings. Beyond the direct application of methodological steps and analytic strategies lie epistemic positions that contribute to the formation of ontologies that, even when unacknowledged, are discursive and political. For example, issues are often redefined through the very process of engaging in the inquiry and reporting about it (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005); data are inevitably tied to questions of agency, evidence, and beliefs (Denzin, 2013); methods partially behave as self-fulfilling prophecies (Gergen, 2015a); and the researcher's role and agenda always carry ethical implications for knowledge and its consequences (Fine & Weis, 1996).

Critical understandings of reality as linked to personal and political processes and performances may offer a possible alternative to realist assumptions in reflexivity by assuming instead that positions and subjectivities are, first and foremost, constructions. As such, they are not simply the product of internal developments or process but are influenced by relevant discourses and their ability to impose realities and truths. Rather than realist underpinnings in which reflexivity is reduced to a “method of self-positioning [that] remains caught up in geometries of sameness” (Barad, 2007, p. 72), a critical form of reflexivity emphasizes the constitutive role of research. Here, biases, agendas, and any other content of reflexivity are seen as fluid and localized processes rather than entities. “All interpretations are provisional; they are made by positioned subjects who are prepared to know certain things and not others” (Rosaldo, 2009, p. 170). Whereas positions influence what is and can be known in a study, the boundaries of knowledge (i.e., what researchers in specific contexts or discursive circumstances can and cannot know) are not fixed: At times, they are borders; at other times, bridges; most

often they are frontier and liminal spaces of undetermined and (im)possible communication (Anzaldúa, 2002).

The following excerpt provides an example of the ways in which realism tends to be implicit in reflexive analysis:

We experienced strong emotional responses to participants' distress. Some responses were immediate: frustration or a sympathetic "wave of sadness." At other times, emotions unfolded over days or weeks. Of the range of emotions that we experienced, sadness and anxiety predominated. Throughout the interviews we did emotion work on behalf of our participants, managing our own emotions and emotional displays. (Fitzpatrick & Olson, 2015, p. 51)

The researchers openly described their feelings and their influence in the inquiry. The humanity of the researchers and the research relation is brought to the forefront both as a sign of care for the participants and to ensure transparency and validity in the inquiry. From a realist position the existence of research emotions and the centrality of the research rapport do not need to be questioned. By taking their reality for granted, however, they become trapped in their own "sameness," and "reflexivity does not more than mirror mirroring" (Barad, 2007, p. 88). Here, authors embrace epistemological positions that privilege the stability, continuity, and familiarity of being as separate from considering the ways in which difference and incoherence also interplay with discourses of sameness to create the real. In other words, from a post-structural position, the content of reflexivity is simultaneously epistemological and ontological, and it is not reducible to either knowledge or being.

Seeing the contents of reflexivity as constructions opens up new interpretative possibilities. For instance, from a relational and critical perspective, a discursive genealogy that led to acknowledge the presence of specific emotions and relational styles may invite a reflection on the games of truth and disciplinary power that are entailed in assumptions about the goodness of this kind of reflexivity. Instead of reifying emotions and assuming their face-value reality, they could have been seen as processes, narratives, actions, or questions that contribute to the existence of specific discourses and orders. In this sense, a relational perspective moves from the analysis of the thing in itself to a bifold reflection, first on the conditions that made

those specific emotions real and present to the researchers and, second, on what those particular constructions allowed for in the specific historical, scientific (or disciplinary), and power-based contexts of the inquiry. This last aspect could concern, for instance, the definitions of data and the constructions of boundaries between what is or should be considered a worthwhile emotion to include in the reflexive analysis. Additional topics of reflections could concern the separation between participants and researchers, the privileged position of the latter, the discursive and disciplinary realities that tend to be shared in a research team, or the participants' reactions to being the subject of the researchers' compassion. Instead of seeing reflexivity as a sort of confession (e.g., "this interpretation of mine was influenced by my experience of X"), which is done at the beginning of a report as a disclosure, after which the research can move on (Pillow, 2003), a discursive understanding of this practice could highlight its relational, genealogical, and process-oriented dimensions.

The authors of the earlier mentioned study, for instance, shared feelings of sadness that "brought us together to reflect and write this article. To facilitate reflection, we discussed our experiences of conducting these interviews" (Fitzpatrick & Olson, 2015, p. 51). Although it is surely interesting to realize, discuss, and analyze this shared experience, it would have also been productive (although probably less therapeutic and person-centered) to ponder on what realities and orders the researchers' positioning in the field and their subsequent gatherings to do emotion-work facilitated and privileged, both for authors and for participants. For example, although Fitzpatrick and Olson (2015) aptly mentioned the discursive realities implicit in having boxes of tissue near the interviewees (which "indicated the appropriateness of crying," p. 51) and in following disciplinary norms and relational styles ("We were anxious about our capacity to maintain the required emotional displays required of professional researchers" or "Another source of anxiety was navigating the ambiguous and sometimes contradictory emotion norms that govern qualitative research interviews"; Fitzpatrick & Olson, 2015, p. 52), the reflexive analysis did not explore the genealogical and discursive origins of the emotions (i.e.,

sadness). It focused instead on analyzing and managing it.

The Centrality of the Researcher

As an epistemological process, humanism is “a mode of self-understanding for the social sciences” (Paden, 1987, p. 128) through which researchers see knowledge as a function of cognitive processes finalized to boost self-awareness and self-reflection. In a reflexive analysis, the goal of increasing the investigator’s self-awareness passes necessarily through practices of disclosure and confession (Foucault, 1976, 1982; Pillow, 2003). Making explicit the content of reflexivity progressively increases the researcher’s awareness of her or his role in the research, with the result of producing “a more complete account of the research project” (Marecek, 2003, p. 63) and conclusions or observations that are less partial to the researcher’s subjectivity.

Humanistic, phenomenological, and existential traditions are complex and sophisticated schools of thought, inside which alternative voices have historically developed. Some scholars in humanistic psychology, for instance, have argued for a relational humanism against any individualistic model that seems to transcend the cultural and historical contexts of psychology (e.g., O’Hara, 1992). In particular, Heidegger’s and Merleau-Ponty’s hermeneutical and existential phenomenology prominently introduced “topics of intersubjectivity, sociality, embodiment, historicity, language, and interpretation” to complement Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology (Zahavi, 2008, p. 662).

In general, however, as a scientific enterprise humanism tends to focus on and look for essences about human thoughts, feelings, experiences, and behavior, which are seen in terms of a common human nature. The search for universal human essences is deeply individual, not so much in its performance (humanist inquiries can be done collectively) but in locating its results through or within the individual mind. Reflexivity becomes an individual act performed by “discrete individuals with inherent characteristics, such as intelligence, temperament, and intentional states of mind” (Barad, 2007, p. 5). It is typically the case that this humanistic underpinning of reflexivity is finalized to limit or control the researcher’s influ-

ences. Reflexivity, in other words, contributes to saving the qualitative researcher from the risks of oversubjective practices and interpretations, with the consequent loss of transparency and credibility.

The humanistic position on reflexivity asserts the importance of giving voice to and respecting the research participant’s experience combined with the process of dialogic openness and authenticity to move “beyond the partiality of our previous understandings” (Finlay, 2003, p. 108). Often the use of self-dialogue is prized as researchers embrace their own humanness to deepen psychological understanding. They turn a critical gaze on the emotional and intersubjective investment they have in the research, highlighting how conversation or text affects the research and reflecting on what they bring to it themselves.

To give an example, one may consider Halling and his colleagues’ dialogic, phenomenological research (Halling, Kunz, & Rowe, 1994). In describing their approach, these authors assumed that dialogue is critical in both therapy and research and that it can overcome the dichotomy between the personal and professional without sacrificing objectivity. Of particular interest is the reliance on group dialogue to analyze and interpret “data” toward deeper understandings. To this end, Halling described working in dialogue with his students to compare personal experiences of forgiveness and interview results. “Out of this dialogue, a collective understanding emerges” (Halling et al., 1994, p. 120). Through freedom and trust, which are two key components of liberal humanist ideology and view of agency (Mills, 1997), researchers came to a rich, collective understanding of forgiving another:

freedom infuses the process with a spirit of exploration and discovery, and trust allows for respect toward each other’s descriptions and stories. [...] Trust provides the capacity to be genuinely receptive to what is new and different in the others’ experiences and expressions. (Halling et al., 1994, p. 122)

In this example, reflexivity is not only concerned with disclosure, positionality, and accuracy. The process seems to involve also the subject formation of the researcher. As for confession, the disclosure and reflection on the interpretative process involves a move toward a form of redemption to assert the goodness and

growth of the researcher. In this case, the redemption is not of the spirit (as in confession) but of the researcher's abilities to be open to the other and to be a respectful listener and an imaginative interpreter. What's most interesting is that the value of developing these abilities is finalized not only to improve the understanding of the other but more incisively to contribute to the formation of the researcher's subjectivity. In this sense, the act of telling in a reflexive analysis entails a form of disclosure finalized to regulate behaviors and the narratives through which people think of themselves and others (Foucault, 1976, 1982).

From a humanist perspective, the use of reflexivity situates the individuality and humanness of the researcher at the core of the process of inquiry. It is a process of reflecting on the mirror's mirroring and, especially, on the person who holds the mirror, all of which are seen as separate moments and agents. By becoming aware that the search for knowledge and the modes of knowing pass through knowing one's self, the researcher ends up being the screen or looking glass through which reality is interpreted. In such centrality of the individual, it is then inevitable that the researcher "becomes a human instrument" (Guba & Lincoln, 1988, p. 83).

On the one hand, humanism promotes a mode of knowing that opposes scientific reductionism and determinism to embrace more-comprehensive understandings—rather than explanations—and the need for intersubjective dialogue. On the other hand, both humanism and the concept of reflexivity assume the centrality of the researcher's consciousness, cognitive abilities, and personal insights to understand and develop knowledge. Such centrality of the human mind is also exemplified through the belief in and use of dichotomies that may result from the individual's research activity, such as distortion versus fidelity, partiality versus neutrality, or manipulation versus transparency, because the desirable end of these dichotomies is seen as attainable through acts of individual will and agency (Paden, 1987). In other words, a metaphysics of logical dichotomies and individualism seems to pervade traditional views of reflexivity (Braidotti, 2013), with the additional dimensions of a general belief in the universal goodness of this practice.

Linking the formation of knowledge to the researcher's skills, practices, and use of sanctioned methodologies discounts the possibility that, first, knowledge may result from social practices and normalizing disciplines (Foucault, 1976) and, second, the performance of knowing something contributes to the existence of this object or phenomenon (Gergen, 2015a; Watzlawick, 1984). I expand on this last point later, in the Linguistic Representationalism section and its Relational Ontologies subsection.

Universality

The combination of humanism and realism is just a slingshot away from a revitalization of psychological and methodological universals (Sartre, 1946). Assuming the universal goodness of reflexivity runs the risk of jeopardizing one of the main assets of qualitative research: its attention to context, whether this refers to discourses, social constructions, and relations in which and through which inquiries take place or to influences of social positions and "desires" on data. Critics could say that what is universalized here is the process, not the content of a reflexive analysis, which could therefore respect historical circumstances and social idiosyncrasies. Yet, the assumption that content and process are separate is typical of realist ontologies as opposed to relational, narrative, and discursive viewpoints in which the acts of being concerned, telling, and representing contribute to the very existence of the object under consideration (Foucault, 1973, 1977, 1984; Freeman, 2010; Gemignani, 2014; Gergen, 2009, 2015a).

In the same ways as qualitative researchers are suspicious and critical of inquiries that neglect or remove the temporal, spatial, and relational positionality of their work, they should likewise not do this for reflexivity and its analysis. A critical experiment for a reflexive analysis would be to avoid reducing its content or the objects of inquiry to fixed, self-contained, and coherent entities, which have definite and mostly tidy boundaries located in space (with centers and boundaries), time (with specific moments of departure and ending, such as methodological steps), relation (with predefined roles and scripts), and historical development (with the tendency to reuse relations and structures over different historical times, so that contemporary concepts and understandings of ex-

periences can be used to interpret past events). The result of such an experiment would be a qualitative inquiry that, although murkier and less organized (Lippke & Tanggaard, 2014), would show much more potential for the development of lines of thoughts that would be innovative, fluid, and, hopefully, revolutionary.

Linguistic Representationalism

Tied to researchers' tendency to embrace realist, reflexive positions toward knowledge is the implicit aspiration to produce research that is increasingly accurate, unbiased, and valid. The assumption that specific qualities of the objects of their experience can be directly and unequivocally represented through language is called linguistic representationalism. In this view, language is seen as a tool that depicts reality and, as such, has no constructive, creative, or ontological power over its contents and forms.

In the context of the conscious exercises that are involved in a reflexive analysis, representationalism assumes that reflections are intentional states wholly determined by what they represent. Let's suppose, for instance, that my research concerns issues toward which I feel very close, and therefore, I decide that, in my reflexive analysis, I should reflect on my empathy toward the participants. According to representationalism, the predicates and narratives that I use to describe my feelings derive directly from the qualities of the stories I heard. If these qualities change, my emotional reactions (that form the phenomenology of my experience of the participants' stories) will change too. By attending to my empathy, I assume that I am able to use my cognitive abilities to look at the qualities of my feeling and, hopefully, generate some insights about my participants' experience.

Similar to a looking glass, reflexivity is seen as a transparent tool in the same way as my sensory experience of a green apple tells me about the color of the fruit. As Sextus Empiricus originally argued in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, instead of believing that my eyes give color to the apple, I consider "yellow" to be a quality of the fruit (Annas & Barnes, 2000). Similarly, I assume, first, that my reflexive analysis represents the content of my reflexivity; second, that my reflexivity about my empathy tells some-

thing about the data or the research process; and, third, that neither the content of reflexivity nor the research data change through my act of reflecting. By focusing on the stable reality of the researcher's subjectivity, uncritical reflexivity runs the risk of essentializing positions, assumptions, and influences, with the result of reifying its content. Seen as a representation of the ways in which the world of the researcher influences the inquiry, reflexivity becomes a sort of cartographic exercise to draw a map of the researcher-researched territory.

For representationalism, the knowledge that is generated through reflexive analysis results directly from the context of reflexivity, in the same way as the lines of a map derive directly from the territory. What's missing in this approach is a reflection on the genealogical processes that guided the awareness and identification of specific biases, experiences, assumptions, or positions as being worth reflecting, problematizing, and reporting by the researcher. Drawing a parallel with historiography,

the real question is not why it was that Elizabeth Tudor chose not to marry, but rather how it came to be that there was a social structure in which her refusal to marry could have such enduring political consequences. (Abbott, 2005, p. 1)

Implicit in a representationalist view of reflexivity is the understanding that this practice adds structural content to research. From a more-poststructural take, instead, rather than seeing reflexivity as an analysis of content, it would be more productive to reflect on the conditions under which such content emerged and stabilized as part of the research process or the researcher's subjectivity.

Relational Ontologies

Constructivism, postmodernism, and post-structuralism have seriously challenged the belief that language and scholars could positively depict an absolute reality and its meaning and content. With the effacement of referents (Lather, 1997) and the consequent questioning of fixed relationships between signifier and signified, the mandate to reproduce, describe, and explain events and phenomena through language becomes not only problematic but also marked by political reflections on the constitutive role of language and on claims of univocality, impartiality, and objectivity (Gergen,

1994). The process of direct information gathering and the idea of a progressive accumulation and depth of knowledge are seen as specific political positions rather than impartial aspects of science (Denzin, 2013; Lather & St. Pierre, 2013; MacLure, 2013). Poststructural reflections on the process of knowledge making underscore the inevitable location of knowledge, the links between power and knowledge, and the role of narratives and discourses in the performative creation of realities—aspects that are at the foundation of the so-called crisis of representation.

Ken Gergen (2015a) invited qualitative researchers to embrace a form of critical knowledge (including reflexivity) that is neither representational nor empirical. Renato Rosaldo's (2009) reflections on the experience of losing his wife during an ethnographic study provide an example of a relational ontology that is infused with critical reflexivity. Instead of either neglecting or fully embracing the self-centered dimensions of research brought forward by such a tragic event, he acknowledged the tension between the two positions. Rather than resolving it, he thoughtfully and bodily considered the complex entanglement of emotions, responsibilities, and positions that is not uncommon in studies in which an additional "force, among other things, opens to question the common anthropological assumption that the greatest human import resides in the densest forest of symbols and that analytical detail, or 'cultural depth,' equals enhanced explanation" (Rosaldo, 2009, p. 167) and better representations. Seeing reflexivity as a tool to analyze symbols, gain analytical depth, reduce biases, or control agendas still carries a research mandate to represent. Such a postpositivist view of reflexivity neglects the constitutive properties of language and the multiplicity of positions, which should instead be central to reflexive analysis.

An instance of critique of linguistic representationalism is the argument that ethnicity is not observed or even less discovered (Hall, 2006). Instead, as with everything else, ethnicity is created within and through representation, so that there is no explanation or "understanding of ethnicity outside culture and representation" (Procter, 2004, p. 125). The separation between ethnicity and its representation becomes challenging; at the same time, a critical awareness of its political and constitutive processes be-

comes necessary: "The problem of representation therefore includes both an epistemological and an ethical-political dimension" (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 200). In any qualitative framework that sees knowledge as based on articulations of meanings, contexts, and instructions, the representations that are produced by or through the inquiry participate in contentious and located separations between epistemology and ontology. In other words, a key realization of qualitative research concerns the constitutive role of researchers in constructing, shaping, or influencing (at least in potentiality) the researched as an object and as a linguistic, context-based, and political phenomenon (Gemignani & Hernandez-Albujar, 2015).

Reflexivity as Inquiry

One of the main consequences of a relational understanding of reflexivity is that, instead of seeing it as an analytical strategy to represent an external (or externalized) reality, the content and practice of reflexivity become inseparable from the inquiry itself. The focus of one's reflexivity moves from the rules and accuracy of representations to the genealogical process through which some specific contents have been constructed or become visible and problematized. Although a map is not the territory (Korzybski, 1933), a map creates particular understandings, realities, and possibilities based on what and how it represents. In other words, from an epistemological practice concerned with knowledge about the researcher, a relational interpretation underscores that reflexivity is an ontological practice through which possible realities are socially created (Gergen, 2009, 2015a).

To an extent, this shift toward relational ontologies radicalizes the rapport between and the inseparability of observer and observed, which is at the base of constructivist and interpretivist epistemologies. This very inseparability is also the ground on which reflexivity becomes both necessity and virtue. Whereas phenomena are based on interpretations of objects, events, or experiences, a relational view of knowledge underscores that the ontological centrality of specific phenomena is itself a construction and a process. From a relational perspective, reality is a network or an open system of fluid interpretations of interpretations, with no end or definite

answers. Objects, subjects, observers, issues, and dynamics do not precede their mutual constitution and do not exist as discrete elements. Experience in general—and in the specific, the experiential content of a reflexive analysis—

is at once always already an interpretation *and* something that needs to be interpreted. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, and always therefore political. [...] Experience is, in this approach, not the origin of our explanation, but that which we want to explain. (Scott, 1991, p. 797)

As I wrote above, reflexivity is not simply an inquiry about something, but an experiential and discursive process that constructs knowledge.

Toward a Critical, Posthuman, and Performative Reflexivity

Reflexivity as Constitutive Practice

The focus on the discursive aspects of knowledge helps one to move from simplistic humanistic and realistic versions of reflexivity to more-relational and context-based understandings of the mutual and recursive coconstructions that may occur between researchers and those researched (Gemignani, 2011a), both of whom are seen as processes, instead of objects. A relational ontology does not invite one to neglect the importance of structures and agents (e.g., the researcher's or participants' roles and scripts; the institutional knowledge they carry with them). Rather, it shifts the attention away from analyzing each term or party as a self-standing entity to understand them in relation to each other and to the discursive contexts that allowed for their phenomenological presence.

For qualitative inquiries of this kind, the exploration of what knowledge does for agents and relations is critical (Gergen, 2015a). Taking an epistemic and ontological position in which representations are not seen as “reflexive but constitutive and therefore have a real, material impact” (Procter, 2004, p. 125) means to adopt a performative and agentic view of knowledge. Instead of mirroring or representing something, agentic knowledge is concerned about the ways in which it makes or constructs realities (Barad, 2007) and the ways in which objects and their representations mutually construct each other. This epistemological position leads scientists to

forms of critical engagement with the research, as the focus of science shifts from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality (i.e., mirroring and representation) “to matters of practice or doing or actions” (Barad, 2007, p. 28). Stepping away from the assumption of the centrality of interpretation and the thickness that characterizes “deep” research opens the inquiry toward horizontal explorations of knowledge and toward ongoing critical negotiations and constitutions of power, which is seen as a force that is both limiting and constitutive (Braidotti, 2013).

Posthumanist Reflections on Reflexivity

But, is there a guarantee that oppressors will be less oppressive just because they become self-conscious? Consciousness-raising can only be preparatory to a critique that might have a chance of being truly subversive. (Fabian, 1990, p. 768)

Interpreting power and knowledge as both limiting and constitutive is useful to thinking creatively about reflexivity in qualitative research. Specifically, this view counters one of the implicit assumptions of many versions of reflexivity: that reflecting dialogically about different positions, assumptions, and preconceptions will lead to better and more-complex representations of the subject matter. Instead of being better, interpretations that are informed by reflexivity are potentially critical of the researcher's positions, but they are not necessarily more accurate.

If the goodness of reflexivity is due to its mere practice, then reflexivity becomes a humanistic celebration of the researcher's centrality. The same outcome would of course result from the absence of reflexivity. Between these two extremes one can conceptualize a view of reflexivity that underscores the critical function of opening possibilities by engaging in ongoing questioning and doubting. That is, good qualitative research or, better, inquiry is found in ongoing questioning rather than the description of findings and the assertion of conclusions, which still tend to be typical in most qualitative research articles and dissertations.

From this critical perspective, reflexivity should not aim at better representing a phenomenon but rather at diffracting its perception against any form of authority, including the researcher's (Barad, 2007). Whereas traditional

forms of reflexivity concern issues of correspondence and validity, the relational and critical interpretation of reflexivity that I suggest in this article attends to patterns of difference, away from the illusion of describing essences and fixed positions. If everything moves, but yet one perceives and desires continuity and stability, then the key epistemological question for the social scientist concerns the exploration of the ways in which the discursive boundaries that create an object, concern, or issue, and with it the perception of its continuity and importance, are produced.

A critical, discourse-oriented, relational, and posthuman practice of reflexivity can help one to move away from understandings that are marked by individualism, romantic aspirations to purer representations, and tendencies to essentialize the content of reflexivity and the object of inquiry. The risk for representational, humanist, and realist forms of reflexivity is not only “the tendency for the self-absorbed Self to lose sight altogether of the culturally different Other” (Rosaldo, 2009, p. 170), but also the effect of legitimizing politics of knowledge that are based on sameness and commonality and tend to reproduce the status quo of dominant discourses rather than difference and diffraction (Barad, 2007). Although a certain awareness and sensitivity to power–knowledge dynamics and regimes, including relations between researcher and those researched (Gemignani, 2011a), is crucial in any form of social research, one must be careful about “geometries of sameness” (Barad, 2007, p. 72), in which reflexivity becomes a representation of the researcher’s stable, interior world and its influences over the inquiry.

In traditional views, reflexivity operates as a mirror, whose image is assumed to reproduce the object, and the observer is distinct from the observed. The focus is on objects and contents, which are seen as separated from the subjects and the practices that are implemented to recognize, interpret, and report them. “The shift towards diffraction” instead, allows one “to study both the nature of the apparatus and also the object” (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 52). That is, critical reflexivity is concerned with both constructions of the researched–researcher relation and the genealogical processes that guide such constructions, with the

results of producing an entanglement of subject and object.

An alternative to epistemological humanism is a form of rhizomatic becoming that sees knowledge as discourse and therefore as generative and self-feeding or, in Maturana’s words, *autopoietic* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Maturana & Varela, 1987). For instance, Foucault’s genealogical method does not aim to expose “deep” dynamics or processes that underlie the phenomena, but rather “it studies the visible body and the surface rules of discourses and practices” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 28). The attention is not only on the properties of the phenomenon under study but also on the disciplinary and personal apparatuses, knowledges, and practices that problematize it and, at the same time, exclude other objects of concern or other interpretations of it. In a typical Foucauldian style, the focus of a relational reflexivity moves from object or content to its making and the consequences of such making (Foucault, 1973). For instance, the concept of “migrant” is embedded in significations about home, citizenship, belonging, othering, and subjectivity for both immigrants and nonimmigrants. Moving the migration scholar’s attention from the purpose of representing the plight of refugees to the productive nature of discursive practices that underscore, narrate, and re-present refugees as living in pain allows for critical considerations about this common focus and style of reports about this migrant population. Considering what is taken for granted as a discursive production encourages the development of alternative constructions and interpretations in light of both an appreciation of the effects that such stories may have for the well-being, positioning, and social becoming of displaced people and for the consequential distinction between natives and foreigners or Others (Gemignani, 2011b; Hayden, 2006).

Discussion and Conclusion

This article on reflexivity does not want to distort attention from its usefulness and importance, which I somewhat took for granted here. I consider, in fact, reflexivity to be a trademark of qualitative research because, when this concept is interpreted critically, it first implies the relational nature of qualitative inquiry; second, it questions the possibility of a finite and stable

reality that can be merely observed; and, third, it brings attention to the contextual and discursive aspects of research and interpretation. Along these lines, the concept of reflexivity is inevitably linked to the crisis of representation, although there are major epistemological and ontological differences concerning whether reflexivity is a strategy to solve or improve the issue of representation, to critically recognize the impossibility of positivist and realist positions in the social sciences, or to experientially engage with the research process.

My arguments on the three epistemological positions described in this article do not aim to point out possible fallacies but rather to highlight what may otherwise be taken for granted and invisibly implicit in a reflexive analysis. Once one knows what is assumed, one can consider alternatives. So, this article is a sort of metareflexivity and it is not exempt from the application of some of the critical considerations that I am using in it. My argumentations are processes and constructions that are situated within my own field and epistemic framework, which prize critical and poststructural theories. As such, I hope I can remain open to revisions and alternative perspectives on them. Although I risk adding another contribution to the growing pool of ways in which “reflexivity is used in polemical efforts to promote theoretical and methodological advantage in a noisy field” (Lynch, 2000, p. 27), it is valuable to interrogate my own position further. For instance, I recognize that my argument has the potential to lead me to collapse realist, humanist, and representationalist positions together at one end of an essentialist–constructionist continuum, whereas I take up a more-discursive, critical, and post-structural position at the other end. In this rhetorical strategy, I run the risk of polarizing the debate instead of promoting a dialogue. Yet, I find it important for researchers who may uncritically adopt realist positions to reflect on them so that everyone can be suspicious and, as Spivak said, “vigilant about our practices” (Grosz, 1985, p. 184).

The impossibilities of a dialogue between observer and reality, witness and first-person agent, told and untold, experienced and reported, are at the center of rigorous approaches to forms of reflexivity that explore what and how one knows, the multiple realities of the subject of concern, and the limits and responsi-

bilities of the practices of representations. On the one hand it seems fair to inform readers about “what the observer was in a position to know or not know” (Subedi, 2006, p. 575). On the other hand, the intent of this communication should not entail that, by engaging in reflexivity, the observer or researcher does not participate in the relational construction of what is researched or reported (Denzin, 2013; Gemignani, 2014; Koro-Ljungberg, 2015).

Writing this article to explore some of the foundations of the idea and practice of reflexivity was not only a scholarly project for me. Rather, it was an attempt to do justice to the interpreter and the witness of a research (e.g., the *testimonio* of Mestiza and Cultural Studies; Beverley, 2004) without adopting a realist epistemology and to underscore the important role of not-knowing (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992) and *nepantla* (i.e., undetermined and often invisible liminal spaces between worlds; Anzaldúa, 2002) for qualitative inquiry in psychology.

It was, in other words, a question of ethics that prompted me to explore reflexivity critically. These ethics are not simply personal, because I do not believe that researchers operate as isolated subjects who reflect on themselves through a process of externalization. They are part of disciplinary and institutional discourses and forms of knowledge that contribute to make the content of a reflexive analysis appear as an external reality, which researchers can observe, analyze, and represent. The content and results of the reflexive analysis then substantiate the view of the researcher’s mind itself, which is seen as being concerned about true issues and influences “to the degree that they adequately ‘represent’ or ‘refer to’ facts or states of affairs in ‘reality’” (Madison, 1999, p. 247). The discursive process of asserting the existence of phenomena and issues through their problematization and analysis (Foucault, 1983) is further validated by the formation of apparatuses of knowledge and practice (*dispositifs* in Foucault’s terms) dedicated to study, assert, and defend its ontological reality (Foucault, 1977), such as research and practice institutions, scientific communities and journals, and funding and governmental agencies that include reflexivity among the standards for quality of qualitative inquiry.

It is nonetheless relevant to bring this reflection back from institutional and disciplinary concerns to the reflexive practices of individual researchers. Echoing Ruth Behar's famous question "As a storyteller opens her heart to a story listener, [. . .] do you—the observer—stay behind the lens of the camera, switch on the tape recorder, keep pen in hand?" (Behar, 1996, p. 2), I wonder about the responsibilities that we, as researchers, may carry toward the construction of others, problematizations, and actions. This is not just a matter of how we position ourselves toward the research process but of how we relationally create ontologies and constitutive narratives for and through our inquiries (Gemignani, 2014). Realizing that our research practices are performative is

simultaneously a matter of method, politics, ethics, and inspiration. Realities are not flat. They are not consistent, coherent and definite. Our research methods necessarily fail. [. . .] it is time to move on from the long rearguard action which insists that reality is definite and singular. The long rearguard action conducted in many locations including what counts as good social science method. (Law, 2007, p. 605)

Thinking of qualitative inquiry as being an act toward an external knowledge deceives its potentials for creative and subversive knowledge. From this perspective, rather than being a strategy and criterion based on romantic practices such as introspection, self-dialogue, and authenticity, the critical reflexivity that I presented in this article underscores that the whole process of qualitative inquiry is a relational practice that transcends the limits of representationalism, humanism, and realism. Reflexivity and qualitative inquiry become, then, ongoing exercises of critical awareness about the genealogy of knowledge and method as well as the partial, situated, and performative constructions that are fundamental properties of inquiries and methodologies. In this view, reflexivity is not a strategy, a tool, or a criterion; it is inquiry in itself.

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