

Academic Rigour as *Praxis* and the Question of Reflexivity: Towards an Empirical Study of Reflexive Academic Journaling

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"...Narcissus' tragedy then is that he is not narcissistic enough..."

(Babcock 1980)

Background and Introduction

Methodological literature on social research considers keeping a reflexive academic journal one among a number of methods to ensure that a researcher maintains a critical and self-reflexive theoretical attitude towards the research object. For researchers in the interpretivist and social constructivist traditions, keeping a reflexive academic journal may be considered a requisite for maintaining their respective theoretical attitudes. Interpretivist philosophers may keep a reflexive journal to maintain a theoretical attitude of disinterested or uninvolved observation (Schwandt 2000). Conversely, for researchers committed to social constructivism, keeping a reflexive journal may serve as a tool to enhance critical self-awareness of their agency in the knowledge production process which, in turn, is a necessary condition for moving beyond naïve social constructivism to a self-reflexive, second-order social constructivism (*compare* Steier 1991). Enhancing the self-awareness of researchers in the process of knowledge production is, however, only one among a number of benefits of keeping an academic journal noted in the literature. Arguably, keeping a reflexive journal of the research process has ethical and methodological benefits in social research (Smith 1999).

In this paper, I discuss literature on academic rigor in the light of an unfolding research interest in establishing a theoretical-methodological understanding of the different purposes, practices, uses and benefits of keeping an academic journal. I do so both as a means of self-reflexivity and for the purpose of knowledge production.

As a novice researcher trained in the critical-interpretivist tradition I was advised that it was an academic best practice to maintain a personal, reflexive, academic journal. Having done so for years, I have come to a point where I want to now investigate systematically in what ways this method contributes to academic rigour.

Now, let me also declare some of my fundamental beliefs and assumptions about the social world in which this study is embedded. Most importantly, I believe that social action is meaningful. I believe that this meaning can be understood by means of careful study. I believe that in order to understand the meaning of a social phenomenon, a researcher needs to gain access into the life world of the research object. Hence, my research is conducted in the natural setting of the social actors concerned - it is naturalistic - and the quest to understand, I believe, requires a certain degree of *emphatic identification* (Schwandt 2000). Thus, knowledge production is therefore primarily a matter of authentically grasping social actors' subjective meaning of action, which involves gaining a deep insight into the actors' perspective and understanding it, and interpreting it, within the relevant context.

Thus, even in this paper, my purpose is not to explain (*erklären*) but to understand (*verstehen*) the practice of reflexive journaling within the context of academic life and knowledge production in particular. Thus, the aim here is to eventually be able to interpret the practice of keeping a reflexive journal within the context of rules that govern the production of knowledge . a process which may be called *theoretical generalization*. Moreover, the idiosyncratic nature of the research may lend its resulting knowledge claims appropriate to yet another type of generalization; that termed *analytical generalization*, which is defined by as "*a reasoned judgment about the extent to which the findings of one study can be used as a guide to what might occur in another situation. It is based on an analysis of the similarities and differences of the two situations*" (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 262-3). In order for this type of generalization to be successful, a study must be rich in detail so that the reader can assess the transferability to other contexts and subjects (2009: 265).

These research aims structure the research project in various ways. In the first phase, the aim is to explore the established ~~rules~~ that govern knowledge production for qualitative social research. The aim is to arrive at a preliminary conceptual-analytical framework . a theoretical context, if you will - which will assist in the analysis of actual practices and products of reflexive journaling in the second phase. The present paper can address itself only to the first phase. In the following section, I therefore discuss various questions related to academic rigour and methods and criteria governing ~~rigorous~~ knowledge production in qualitative social research. In the second section, I look in more detail at previous research on reflexive academic journaling. I will then conclude proposing a way of using the existing literature in terms of a preliminary conceptual-analytical framework to guide an empirical study of the different purposes, practices, uses and benefits of reflexive journaling in the process of knowledge production.

Ensuring Academic Rigour in Qualitative Studies: Verification and Falsification

The term ~~academic rigour~~ can be defined in terms of a set of methodological standards or criteria *and* as the application of methods that ensure the attainment of these standards. Whereas the former may be summarized as the quest for valid knowledge, the latter refers to a number of strategies or methods to be applied at various stages in the research process to ensure academic rigour (Guba and Lincoln 1982; Lincoln and Guba 2000). A seminal contribution to the understanding of academic rigour in qualitative (or, more precisely, naturalistic) social research has been made by Guba and Lincoln (e.g. Guba and Lincoln 1982). These authors are credited with the development and elaboration of new criteria for assessing rigour appropriate to qualitative research (de Wet and Erasmus 2005) and have been defining the related debate for over two decades (see Lincoln and Guba 2000).

Ensuring academic rigour involves an acknowledgement of the crucial link between method and criteria, or means and ends. Failure to acknowledge their interrelationship can lead into methodological quagmire, as the article by Morse, Barrett, Olsen and Spiers (2002) illustrates. Morse *et al* (2002) argue that criteria for trustworthiness have come to be used “...to determine the extent to which the reviewers [of a research product] have confidence in the researcher’s competence in

conducting research following established norms" (2002: 6). They contend that, "while strategies of trustworthiness may be useful to evaluate rigor, they do not in themselves ensure rigor". Hence it is their purpose to establish a number of verification strategies as mechanisms used during the process of research to incrementally contribute to ensuring the rigor of a study (2002: 9). Whereas their emphasis on *rigor as practice* is adequate, there is a problem with their conception of research and the research process in particular, the purposes of research, and related to that the purposes of academic rigor.

Once we understand research as *knowledge production* and knowledge production as a *social process*. as Mafeje said, knowledge is not created alone. the place of academic rigor becomes clear. My argument is that rigorous practice neither involves only the researchers or their reviewers (although the main responsibility for ensuring academic rigor is with them) nor is it not distinct to a particular phase in the research process.

Rather, I propose a conception of academic rigor as *praxis* (whereby praxis refers to the application of theory in social practice) which provides a more astute way of understanding the relationship between the sprawling *epistemology* and the equally mushrooming methodology of academic rigor. Furthermore, I argue that academic rigor should not only be understood as researchers' adoption of *verification* strategies and self-correcting mechanisms in the analysis of qualitative data (de Wet and Erasmus 2005: 28, following Morse *et al* 2002) but as the praxis of both, verification *and* falsification at each stage of the process of knowledge production. In order to understand this point, let me return to the source.

In one of their earliest contributions, Guba and Lincoln (1982) provided four criteria for judging the trustworthiness of qualitative (or rather naturalistic) enquiry and related methods. The following provides a summary of their proposals:

- The criterion of *credibility* refers to the truth value of research findings. As means to ensure credibility (and safeguard against its loss), Guba and Lincoln suggest prolonged engagement; persistent observation; peer debriefing; methodological and theoretical triangulation; referential adequacy materials; and member checks.

- As a criterion of the extent to which the findings of a research are applicable to other contexts or other actors (i.e. its generalizability), Guba and Lincoln propose the criterion of *transferability*. Related methods include ~~%theoretical/purposive sampling+~~ and ~~%thick description+~~.
- The criterion of *dependability* answers to the question of the consistency of research findings. The aim here is not to attempt to provide methods that can make the findings of an entire research project replicable . rather, Guba and Lincoln propose ~~%stepwise replication+~~ (through collaborative work) and the maintenance of an ~~%audit trail+~~ to enable a ~~%dependability audit+~~. In later work, they argue that ~~%since there can be no validity without reliability (and thus no~~ *credibility* ~~without dependability)~~ a demonstration of the former is sufficient to establish the existence of the latter+ (in Babbie and Mouton 2001: 278). In effect, the methods proposed in relation to credibility are sufficient.
- Lastly, the criterion of *confirmability* is meant to answer to the question of the neutrality of the research findings (e.g. freedom from the biases of the researcher). The authors suggest ~~%triangulation+~~, ~~%practicing reflexivity+~~, as well as the use of ~~%confirmability audits+~~. (Guba and Lincoln 1982: 246-248)

Evidently, the criteria of trustworthiness provide a theoretical rationale for the application of the various methods. As criteria and methods meant to ensure the academic rigour of research, they define academic rigour as a praxis i.e. as the application of theory in social practice. Moreover, it is *prima facie* evident that while some methods . such as dependability audits, confirmability audits, and member checks . chiefly apply at the end of the research process i.e. as *post-hoc* evaluation of the trustworthiness of the research product, in terms of Morse *et al* (2002), it is equally evident that a greater number of methods actually apply at one or several stages during the research process. The nature of qualitative research provides that a method such as peer debriefing applies at all stages in the research process, while others like triangulation may be involved in only some stages e.g. the designing, data collection and analysis stages, and others again are distinct to one particular stage during the research process e.g. prolonged engagement and persistent observation to the stage of data collection.

Lastly, it is also apparent that the strategies of the different methods for ensuring trustworthiness cannot . and should not - be purposed in terms of verification. In the contrary; some methods may be conceptualized to rather aim at the *falsification* of the research findings, e.g. member checks; while most other methods, including those of triangulation, prolonged engagement and persistent observation, are strategies aiming at both verification and falsification.

Reflexivity as Objectivity and Authenticity

In my rehearsal of the original contributions to questions of academic rigour in qualitative research, Guba and Lincoln(1982: 248) note ~~%~~practicing reflexivity+ as a praxis of confirmability which, in turn, relates to the vexed question of objectivity (as neutrality). I will therefore turn my attention briefly to the relationship between objectivity and reflexivity and the potential role of journaling therein.

Objectivity is first and foremost ~~%~~doing justice to the object of study (Smaling 1989 in Babbie and Mouton 2001: 274). Babbie and Mouton argue:

“In the qualitative paradigm, objectivity is understood in at least two ways. Firstly, given the central place and role of the researcher (as observer, interpreter), it is acknowledged that the researcher is the most important “instrument” in the research process. This ... places an added responsibility on the qualitative researcher to be unbiased in his or her descriptions and interpretations. Secondly, given that the main challenge of the qualitative researcher is to get close to the “research subject” in order to generate legitimate and truthful “insider” descriptions, “objectivity” here takes on different meanings: gaining trust, establishing rapport, and so on. Ultimately, objectivity consists less of “controlling for extraneous variables” and more of generating truthful and credible inter-subjectivity.” (Babbie and Mouton 2001: 273)

Babbie and Mouton’s conception of objectivity in qualitative research is therefore not much different from Kvale and Brinkmann’s (2009) notion of good craftsmanship. The latter, however, consider objectivity as an ~~%~~ambiguous term+. one which requires careful conceptualization; a term the meaning of which is best clarified by looking at its common language usage, of which they consider five. Kvale argues:

- Firstly: Objectivity as *freedom from bias* refers to reliable knowledge, checked and controlled, undistorted by personal bias and prejudice. They propose that freedom from bias requires first and foremost good craftsmanship; producing knowledge that has been systematically cross-checked and verified+ (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 242).
- Second is the conception of objective as meaning *intersubjective knowledge*. In qualitative research, communicative validation among researchers as well as among research and their subjects is key. In this sense, objectivity comes to mean *dialogical intersubjectivity* [which] refers to agreement through rational discourse and reciprocal criticism between those interpreting a phenomenon+(Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 243)
- I consider closely related to the aforesaid the conception of objectivity as “*allowing the object to object*” (Latour 2000 in Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 243). Here the basic idea is that by objecting and thus frustrating the researcher’s intentions and preconceived ideas, an object is able to reveal itself. This requires a situation where the objects are allowed to raise questions in their own terms and not in the researcher’s terms+ (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 243-244).
- Fourthly, objectivity is also used to mean representing an object adequately i.e. being adequate to the object+and thus to reflect the nature of the object truthfully. Kvale and Brinkmann argue that with the object of the interview immersed in a linguistically constituted and interpersonally negotiated social world, the qualitative research interview obtains a privileged position in producing objective knowledge of the social world+ (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 243).
- Lastly, Kvale and Brinkmann also consider reflexivity as a kind of objectivity. They call the researcher’s self-awareness of his/her subjective contribution to the production of knowledge *reflexive objectivity*. Reflexive objectivity primarily involves striving for objectivity about subjectivity+ (242). They argue that in the language of hermeneutics, we can only make informed judgements, for example, in research reports, on the basis of our pre-judices (literally pre-judgments) that enable us to understand something (see Gadamer 1975). The researcher should attempt to gain insight into these unavoidable prejudices and write about them whenever it seems called for in Thierry Luescher (2010). Academic Rigour as *Praxis* and the Question of Reflexivity:

relation to the research project. Striving for **sensitivity** about one's prejudices, one's subjectivity, involves a reflexive objectivity+ (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 242).

Reflexivity (along with related notions such as sensitivity and self-awareness) has clearly a more central role to play in questions of academic rigour than perhaps previously assumed. In 1982, Guba and Lincoln argued for a praxis of confirmability as, amongst others, reflexivity; by 2009, Kvale and Brinkmann consider reflexivity as *such* as a criterion of objectivity. What is going on? According to Gergen and Gergen (2000: 1027) %Among the primary innovations [in qualitative research methodology] have been those emphasizing reflexivity.+The increasing emphasis on reflexivity is a response by researchers to the perceived %crisis of validity+that has accompanied an increased skepticism in the scientific community whether %scientific accounts can accurately and objectively represent the world as it is+ (Gergen and Gergen 2000: 1026). Whereas this development has spared many new forms of research and writing . including a %flourishing of autoethnography+. Gergen and Gergen (2000: 1028) argue that %Ultimately, the act of reflexivity asks the reader to accept itself as authentic, that is, as a conscientious effort to ~~tell~~ the truth~~about~~ the making of the account+. Authenticity thus enters the debate . albeit in a form which we have already considered it . namely as objectivity about subjectivity.

Let us take stock. For me, who is researching and writing this paper primarily as a building block *en route* to an empirical consideration of the diverse purposes, practices and uses of journaling, I fear that there are now so many balls in the air that it becomes difficult not to miss the implications of all the aforesaid for the larger project which, after all, addresses itself to a far less demanding problem. For one it is clear that the discussion has so far been able to dispel one lingering fear, namely, that keeping an academic journal is nothing but a narcissistic self-indulgence. There are apparently good methodological reasons for keeping a reflexive academic journal.

Ethical and Methodological Benefits of Reflexive Journaling

Smith (1999: 359) considers %the researcher's written reflections on the qualitative research process as a valuable source of data and as a means of enhancing ethical

and methodological rigour+. In accord with Koch (1996) and others, Smith (1999: 360) argues that by means of reflexive journaling %self-awareness can be cultivated and recorded+. He illustrates this with reference to several stages of a concrete (interview-based) research project: the early stage of planning and designing the research; the stage of gaining access to, and consent from, research participants; the interviewing stage; the stage of data analysis, interpretation, and writing-up; and finally that of participants validation. At various points in his account Smith alludes to various purposes of keeping a reflexive journal:

- the *creative purpose* of journaling whereby the journal becomes a place for the development and elaboration of preliminary ideas, a place for thinking on paper;
- the *pragmatic-methodological purpose* of the journal as a data record e.g. field observations; interview notes on the setting, paralinguistics, and rapport of an interview etc.;
- the *reflexive-methodological purpose* of journaling as precisely a means for the researcher to become self-aware of his/her own agency and decision in the research and thus of him/herself as the main research tool;
- the *justificatory purpose* of journaling as *recorded evidence* or log book providing an audit trail of the ethical nature of the research e.g. in considerations about ongoing consent, emphatic identification etc.

Smith emphasizes the last point . what I have called the ~~justificatory~~ purposeq. by concluding that %the ability to audit the research process [by virtue of having a reflexive journal] enhances the study's rigour+. On the basis of my foregoing outline of the implicit purposes of journaling in Smith's account as well as the discussion of questions of academic rigour, objectivity and reflexivity, I would like purport that Smith has, sadly, driven rough-shot over many, and perhaps more important, uses of journaling as a means to enhance academic rigour.

For starters, using the journal for pragmatic-methodological purposes as a place to record field observations and interview notes hardly qualifies it as a *reflexive* journal. Nonetheless, the benefits of such use are evident (.e.g. in terms of providing for an additional data base enabling triangulation; etc.). More to the point however; from his

account of usage it rather emerges that there *are* types of truly reflexive journaling which benefit academic rigour. Alone its ability to facilitate creative, purposive reflection may be considered enough good reason for journaling, provided that creative, purposive thinking is acknowledged a necessary condition of the knowledge production process. Returning to my earlier definition of academic rigour as praxis, I am now in a position to argue that keeping a reflexive journal may be considered the single most important method that persists throughout the entire research process . from initial idea, conceptualization, planning and design to the validation and presentation of a final report. The praxis of reflexive journaling provides an indispensable strategy of creative engagement, and verification and falsification.

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