Reflexivity in Management and Business Research: What Do We Mean?

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ABSTRACT

Reflexivity is the concept used in the social sciences to explore and deal with the relationship between the researcher and the object of research. Being reflexive seems to be the favourite word with which to conjure in contemporary research. However, the concept of reflexivity is vague. Reflexivity is used to explore and deal with the relationship between the researcher and the object of research. Reflection means thinking about the conditions for what one is doing, and investigating the way in which the theoretical, cultural and political context of individual and intellectual involvement affects interaction with whatever is being researched. This article explores current discussions of what reflexivity means and how different epistemological and ontological approaches encourage different kinds of reflexivity.

INTRODUCTION

Reflexivity is the concept used in the social sciences to explore and deal with the relationship between the researcher and the object of research. According to the sociologist Goldthrope (2000), at the

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moment 'reflexive' seems to be the favourite word to conjure with. Pink (2004) agrees that it is something of a buzzword in recent qualitative literature. Goldthorpe goes on to argue that all attempts to delineate the term 'reflexive' remain obscure and vague. Holland (1999) holds a similar view when he says that various authors in the human sciences address different levels and types of reflexive processes and point to different consequences. However he pursues a line of argument that sees reflexivity as an essential human process, attribute or condition.

Many sociological ethnographers have sought a 'third way' which allows them to avoid the equally unacceptable extremes of 'positivism' or the abandonment of science in favour of art. This 'third way', as outlined by Goldthorpe, is characterised as 'critical', 'humanistic' or 'reflexive'. He goes on to pose the question of what differentiates a non-reflexive from a reflexive approach when both approaches accept that the 'orientation of researchers will be shaped by their socio-historical locations or that behaviour and attitudes are often not stable across contexts and the researcher may influence the context' (Goldthorpe, 2000: 68–69). Hertz (1997) also draws attention to the epistemological tension between non-reflexive positivism on the one hand, and on the other hand reflexivity referred to as naval gazing. Hertz poses the question: does reflexivity constitute an unwarranted narcissistic display?

This paper explores Goldthorpe's contention that the concept of reflexivity is vague and is not a distinguishing characteristic. How the concept is understood in different research traditions is also presented. This exploration looks in detail at how pragmatic realists and action researchers treat the 'action in learning concept' and whether this concept is a definite concrete form of reflexivity.

THE SCOPE AND MEANING OF REFLEXIVITY

Even though reflexivity is not a new concept to the social sciences its importance has only come to the fore in recent times (Bourdieu, 1990). Reflexivity is used to explore and deal with the relationship between the researcher and the object of research. Dupuis (1999) refers to a reflexive methodology as one that demands the conscious and deliberate inclusion of the full self throughout the research process; this involves continuous, intentional and systematic self-introspection.

A reflexive methodology means making personal experiences, belief systems, motivations and tensions, as well as political agendas, explicit and continually assessing the impact these factors may be having on the research endeavours. According to Hertz (1997) to be reflexive is to have an ongoing conversation about experience while simultaneously living in the moment. The reflexive researcher does not simply report 'facts' or 'truths' but actively constructs interpretations of field experiences and then questions how these interpretations came about. Reflexivity becomes a continuing mode of self-analysis and political awareness. Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) argue that meta-theory is about a comprehensive frame of reference for inspiring and structuring reflection; 'reflexive interpretation' is such a frame of reference. Reflexive interpretation is a way of indicating the open play of reflection across the four (or so) levels of interpretation. Reflexivity then is ubiquitous. It permeates every aspect of the research, challenging us to be more fully conscious of the ideology, culture and politics of those we study and those we select as our audience. The process of engaging in a reflexive methodology as implied by most authors, with the exception of Alvesson and Skoldberg, appears in essence to be very similar to our conventional understanding of the process of reflection. Reflection means thinking about the conditions for what one is doing and investigating the way in which the theoretical, cultural and political context of individual and intellectual involvement affects interaction with whatever is being researched, often in ways difficult to become conscious of (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000).

Knowledge is produced through a 'qualitative' research encounter that should be understood as the product of a specific interaction between researcher and informants. According to Pink (2004) informants tell and show us, because they are in a research situation, that his encounter and the knowledge produced by it can never be objective. Therefore it is essential that we attempt to understand the subjectivities through which our research materials are produced. When doing research this means being aware of how our experiences, knowledge and standpoints inform our behaviour with and interpretation of our informants. Central to ethnography is the constant and tiring process of reflecting. Reflexivity is the way that qualitative researchers strive for reliability and validity and the

development and training of one's reflexive skills and empathies is the keystone of what Coffey calls the 'Ethnographic Self' (Delamont, 2004). In Goldthorpe's view (2000) the ethnographer aims not to represent some independently existing lifeworld or culture but rather to give a fictive account of a self-exploratory 'experience of the other', and one to which the critical standards of art rather than science must apply.

Reflexivity is often condemned as apolitical. However Hertz (1997) suggests that on the contrary it can be seen as opening the way to a more radical consciousness of self in facing the political dimensions of fieldwork and constructing knowledge. In a similar vein Reason and Bradbury (2001) see that engagement in a good quality action research project energises and empowers those involved, through which they may develop newly useful reflexive insights as a result of growing critical consciousness. Back (2004) also highlights the radical potential of reflexivity and he proposes an orientation called 'reflective engagement', which involves political interventions that realise the limits of writing and the complexities of dialogue and listening. The urgency and speed of politics mean that the window of opportunity for making an intervention will not wait for a well-crafted monograph three years after the fact. According to Back (2004) the notion of 'engaged detachment' is not only a literal contradiction but also confused and obfuscating. Similarly Lynch (1999) argues that ongoing subjective reflexivity does not alter structural conditions and an ethically disinterested reflexivity would not suggest any change in research practice. If reflexivity is to facilitate change it needs to be guided by principles of democratic engagement and a commitment to change.

REFLEXIVITY AND THEORY DEVELOPMENT

According to Weick (1999) theorizing in organisational studies has taken on a life of its own in the last ten years. Its concerns seem to be more inward than outward. This inward turn is not surprising, since an earlier *Academy of Management Review* special issue on theory development (1989) essentially made it legitimate to make the tacit craft of theorizing more explicit. Hence, we find people more preoccupied with intellectual fashions, reflexivity and paradigm proliferation than with anomalous data, compelling exemplars

or enhancements of methodology. What is surprising is the destabi-lization that followed. When people took a closer look at theorizing, they discovered: 1) diverse styles, 2) pretensions to theory, 3) poten-tially incommensurable paradigms, 4) irrelevance to practice or sin-gular relevance to small elites, 5) people searching for power rather than understanding, and 6) value-laden inquiries. These discoveries occurred in the larger context of an ascendant postmodernism and a deeper understanding of the limits of positivism. Holland (1999) agrees with Weick (1999) when he argues that in recent times the human sciences have been infused with a new sense of flexibility and uncertainty concerning theory, knowledge and learning. A key term in this change is 'reflexivity' and yet the word is used in so many different senses that it may lead to confusion rather than clarifying any underlying issues.

Holland (1999) argues that human reflexivity defines personal exis-tence and is the basis on which people form social units. It is therefore the process which needs to be kept at the centre of any method of investigating human existence, including accounts provided explicitly by theorists or meta-theorists. Reflexive movement or realisation depends on breaking out of an existential disciplinary, professional, paradigmatic or specialty 'thought style' (basic assumption, mindset) which limits awareness and thereby movement. Reflexive movement does not need to be argued for since it is the human capacity that defines our existence. However, such movement is a struggle, remind-ing us that the journey to a sociopsychological metaposition is an attempt to reconceive our human existence.

Holland (1999) suggests that a study of paradigm arguments pro-vides one 'pathway to reflexivity'. In other words, the reflexive process of using a paradigm framework descriptively to make oth-ers and ourselves aware of the theories they are using (or may be pulled into in practice) is a reflexive realisation. It requires a 'disre-spectful' interpretation of authors' motives and the attribution of unconscious thought styles to account for their positions.

According to Weick (1999) theory construction in 1989 was partly an exercise in disciplined imagination but theory construction in 1999 is partly an exercise in disciplined reflexivity. In response to paradigm wars and postmodernism, imagination is now treated as a dialogical activity with a voice, values, vocabulary and a self. This

move towards reflexivity puts a growing pressure on theorists to prolong and deepen those benign moments of introspection so that they will then see just how situated and constructed their universals are and how few voices their situated assertions incorporate. While it is hard to fault a plea for deeper awareness, it is easy to fault the consequences that can follow if people are unable or unwilling to bound or voluntarily terminate their reflecting. Those darker consequences include things like narcissism, self-indulgence, an inability to stop the regress of doubting the doubting and the doubts, an inability to act because self-consciousness is paralysing, and heightened concern about making mistakes. Weick (1999) argues for reflexiveness to become disciplined and this comes about when theorists selectively modify some of these components of imagination to see what changes that makes in theoretical understanding. Closer attention to self-as-theorist makes for better theory if that attention is instrumental in spotting excluded voices and if it serves as a data platform for thinking more deeply about topics. If, however, reflexivity is not instrumental, then it is more open-ended and harder to shut down. These difficulties may be more pronounced for those who work with the abstract, general, contemplative, exegetical world of theory than for those who work more closely with the empirical, particular, practical and heuristic.

It is conceivable that failures to manage reflexivity can serve as a drag on theory development. Theorists may reflect on their reflectiveness and write autobiographies rather than theory. Or they may abandon the traditional in favour of the fad of the moment. To overcome this problem Weick (1999) suggests that Kant was probably right: perception without conception is blind; conception without perception is empty. Theorists who find it difficult to move back and forth between perception and conception may find themselves stuck in reflexive acts and be unable to help us see anything other than doubt as the core of the human condition. To some theorists that may be a move in the right direction because it loosens the tight coupling between power and knowledge.

Reflective conversation about organisational theory is possible; one way of doing this is to 'drop our heavy tools' in the interest of refashioning our identities as theorists. By this Weick (1999) means that we should drop things like paradigms and monologues, writing

styles, definitions of what constitutes research, and pretensions to expertise and still retain our intuitions, feelings, stories, experience, awe, vocabulary and empathy. Most of all, we still have our capacity for attentive listening. Those are dramatic shifts, but shifts happen.

REFLEXIVITY AND RESEARCH TRADITIONS

Systematic reflexivity is the constant analysis of one's own theoretical and methodological presuppositions and this helps one to retain an awareness of the importance of other people's definitions and understandings of theirs (Lynch, 1999). A reflexive research methodology explicitly incorporates the researcher and her experiences into the analysis and theory-building endeavours and it demands the conscious and deliberate inclusion of self-disclosures and personal experiences in the written account. Dupuis (1999) suggests that a reflexive methodology requires researchers to do four things. Firstly, they need to conduct a pre- and post-data collection self-assessment. Secondly, they need to embrace the direct incorporation of their own feelings into the analysis, using emotions and experiences documented in personal journals to support or refute their initial assumptions. Thirdly, a reflexive methodology recognises the active, collaborative role that both the participants and researchers play in the meaning-making process. Finally, reflexive researchers must detail explicitly in their written accounts how the research process developed over time, how research design decisions were made throughout the process and what factors affected those decisions.

Johnson and Duberley (2000) subdivide systematic reflexivity into two forms: epistemic and methodological. Epistemic reflexivity focuses on the researcher's belief system and is the process for analysing and challenging our meta-theoretical assumptions. Methodological reflexivity is concerned with the monitoring of our behavioural impact upon the research setting as a result of carrying out the research. This requires us to follow the research procedures and protocols identified and demanded by the different research traditions. Johnson and Duberley (2003: 1292) go on to argue that, 'different understandings of reflexivity and associated research practices arise according to particular combinations of constitutive assumptions about ontology and epistemology'.

Table 9.1 Overview of Research Paradigms

Research Paradigms			
Philosophical Foundations	**Positivism**	**Hermeneutic and Postmodernism**	**Critical Realism and Action Research**
Ontology	Objectivist	Subjectivist	Objectivist
Epistemology	Objectivist	Subjectivist	Subjectivist
Theory	Generalisable	Particular	Particular
Reflexivity	Methodological	Hyper	Epistemic
Role of Researcher	Distanced from Data	Close to Data	Close to Data
Task Technology Model	Craft	Bricolage	Professional

Different epistemological and ontological approaches encourage different kinds of reflexivity (see Table 9.1). Pragmatic–critical realism demands a reflexive political praxis. In other words, knowledge claims do not relate to some quest for foundational knowledge, as is the case for positivists and postmodernists, but instead looks to practical and political consequences.

Hammersley (2004) also acknowledges that there is much disagreement about the proper scope of reflexivity and this has very significant implications for teaching research methodology. In an attempt to clarify this situation he proposes three alternatives to the procedural task technology model, organised around the notions of craft, profession and bricolage. He suggests that the concept of reflexivity is important in differentiating these three task technology types. For the craft model there is considerable flexibility in relation to means; the notion of a craft assumes that what is the intended product of inquiry is fixed and unproblematic, that there is little need for reflection on this. The craft model involves minimal reflexivity and this is where it differs from the bricolage and professional models.

The dominant approach or paradigm in management and organisational studies has been positivism and its successors (explanation,

hypothetico-deductive model, multi-method eclecticism). These approaches are defined primarily by their view that an external reality exists and that an independent value-free researcher can examine this reality. In other words they adhere to an objectivist (realist) ontology and an objectivist epistemology. Positivists adopt a methodological approach towards reflexivity and concentrate on improving methods and their application (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). Hence they adhere to the craft model where there is considerable flexibility in relation to means; the notion of a craft assumes that what is the intended product of inquiry is fixed and unproblematic and that there is little need for reflection on this. The craft model involves minimal epistemic reflexivity and this is where it differs from the bricolage and professional models. The aim of positivist science is the creation of generalizable knowledge or covering laws. In positivist science findings are validated by logic, measurement and the consistency achieved by the consistency of prediction and control. The positivist scientist's relationship to the setting is one of neutrality and detachment.

The hermeneutic tradition, the other main approach (sometimes referred to as phenomenology, constructivism, interpretivism or the postmodern-interpretivism-relativist approach), argues that there is no objective or single knowable external reality, and that the researcher is an integral part of the research process, not separate from it. This distinction is based on the subject–object dichotomy. This ontological 'subjective vs. objective' dimension concerns the assumptions social theories make about the nature of the social world. This approach follows a subjectivist (relativist) ontology and epistemology. Inquiry is inherently value-laden. Postmodernism tends to adopt a hyper-reflexivity which focuses on reflexive deconstruction of own practice. Hammersley (2004) aligns postmodernism with bricolage, which views research as a form of art, but there is ambiguity as to the meaning of 'art'. Generally speaking bricolage is personal expression focusing on imaginative freedom and audience impact. It seems almost by definition that bricoleurs are born, not made, and are self-taught. According to Hammersley (2004), reflexivity becomes all embracing but essentially negative. Hermeneutic inquiry is directed toward the development of particular or idiographic knowledge. Nothing can be measured without

changing it and this closeness to the data perspective provides valid rich and deep data.

The third approach identified by Johnson and Duberley (2000) is critical realism incorporating pragmatic critical realism, which aligns with our concept and understanding of action research. This approach follows a subjectivist epistemology similar to the hermeneutic tradition but an objectivist ontology like the positivists. This approach concentrates on epistemic reflexivity, which looks at exposing interests and enabling emancipation through self-reflexivity. Reflexivity is not a neutral process and is in itself socially and historically conditioned. If reflexivity is to facilitate change it needs to be guided by principles of democratic engagement and a commitment to change. Reflective knowledge has to do with normative states in social, economic and political realms. It concerns a vision of what ought to be, what is right and what is wrong and arises through the process of consciousness raising and conscientisation (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). The critical realists and action researchers adhere to the professional model which involves the exercise of considerable reflexivity on the part of researchers, both individually and collectively, about how they pursue their work. This requires the cognitive resources necessary to engage in such reflection; they need to be introduced to literature on methodology, social theory and philosophy that will facilitate this. Furthermore they must learn to participate in communal discussion about these matters (Hammersley, 2004).

LEARNING IN ACTION AS REFLEXIVITY

To better understand reflexivity we can turn to the action research literature, which provides specific examples of how reflexivity can be seen in action. Action research focuses on knowledge in action. Accordingly, the knowledge created through action research is particular, situational and out of praxis. Action research approaches are radical to the extent that they advocate replacement of existing forms of social organisation. Action research challenges normal science in several action-oriented ways. Sharing the power of knowledge production with the researched subverts the normal practice of knowledge and policy development as being the primary domain of researchers and policymakers. Action researchers work on the

epistemological assumption that the purpose of academic research and discourse is not just to describe, understand and explain the world but also to change it (Reason and Torbert, 2001). The issue is not so much the form of knowledge produced or the methodology employed to gather data/evidence but who decides the research agenda in the first place and who benefits directly from it.

In action research the researcher is immersed in the research setting and is not a 'neutral' outsider but an active intervener making and helping things happen. The data generated is contextually embedded and interpreted. The basis for validation is the conscious and deliberate enactment of the action research cycle. Accordingly, a critical feature of action research is the action researcher's self-awareness and learning in action. This is presented as a first person inquiry which has its 'upstream' and 'downstream' expressions (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). The former refers to how the researcher inquires into his/her own values and assumptions and the latter how these are expressed in action. Accordingly, reflexivity can be understood in terms of upstream and downstream reflection.

The realness of learning in action is in effect a concrete example of reflexivity. The process of reflexivity is an exercise in learning. Learning is in itself a neutral activity; however the outcome can be viewed as progressive, empowering and positive, or negative and regressive, depending upon ideology. Within the other research traditions reflexivity, sometimes referred to systemic reflexivity, appears to be a passive subjective introspective process rather than potentially acting as a change agent.

In action research projects that are aimed at an academic award there are two action research cycles operating in parallel. One cycle is the cycle of diagnosing, planning, taking action and evaluating in relation to the project. Zuber-Skerritt and Perry (2002) call this the 'core' action research cycle. The second cycle is a reflection cycle which is an action research cycle about the action research cycle. Zuber-Skerritt and Perry (2002) call this the 'thesis' action research cycle. In other words, at the same time as action researchers are engaging in the project or core action research cycles, they need to be diagnosing, planning, taking action about and evaluating how the action research project itself is going and what they are learning. They need to be continually inquiring into each of the four main

steps, asking how these steps are being conducted and how they are consistent with each other, and so shaping how the subsequent steps are conducted. As Chris Argyris (2003) argues, this inquiry into the steps of the cycles themselves is central to the development of actionable knowledge. It is the dynamic of this *reflection on reflection* that incorporates the learning process of the action research cycle and enables action research to be more than everyday problem-solving. Hence it is learning about learning; in other words, meta-learning.

Learning in action is grounded in the inquiry–reflection process. Schon's (1983, 1987) notion of the 'reflective practitioner' captures the essentials of knowing-in-action and reflection-in-action. Knowing-in-action is tacit and opens up outcomes that fall into the boundaries of what one has learned to treat as normal. Reflection-in-action occurs when one is in the middle of an action and asks questions about what one is doing. The outcome is immediate as it leads to an on-the-spot adjustment of one's action.

Coghlan and Brannick (2005) suggest that an individual experiential learning cycle, epistemic reflexivity, can be utilised in parallel with an action research cycle. They distinguish the two by using different terms in order to emphasise the two parallel cycles and to avoid confusion. The experiential learning cycles comprises four activities: experiencing, reflecting, interpreting and taking action. They are located and placed alongside the action research activities of diagnosing, planning action, taking action and evaluating, where the researcher is engaging in an experiential learning cycle on the action research cycle. So the researcher is experiencing what it is like to engage in diagnosing, planning action, taking action and evaluating, and continuously reflecting and interpreting and taking action within those activities. In our view this is the essence of epistemic reflexivity.

REFLECTION AND REFLEXIVITY

Reflection, while it is individual, is not private. Reflection is the process of stepping back from experience to process what the experience means, with a view to planning further action (Seibert and Daudelin, 1999; Raelin, 2000). It is the critical link between the concrete experience, the interpretation and taking new action. As

Raelin (2000) discusses, it is the key to learning as it enables researchers to develop an ability to uncover and make explicit to themselves what they have planned, discovered and achieved in practice. He also argues that reflection must be brought into the open so that it goes beyond privately held, taken-for-granted assumptions and helps researchers to see how their knowledge is constructed. In action research reflection is the activity which integrates action and research. Mezirow (1991) identifies three forms of reflection: content, process and premise. These are useful categories. *Content* reflection is where one thinks about the issues and what is happening. *Process* reflection is where one thinks about strategies, procedures and how things are being done. *Premise* reflection is where one critiques underlying assumptions and perspectives. All three forms of reflection are critical. Reflection on content, process and premise is critical to reflexivity.

Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) articulate a view different to our argument that sees reflection in an experiential learning cycle to be the essence of reflexivity. They see reflection as a way of responding to insights regarding the socially and textually constructed and constructing nature of research. Reflection means investigating the ways in which the theoretical, cultural and political context of individual and intellectual involvement affects interaction with whatever is being researched, often in ways difficult to become conscious of. When we reflect we try to ponder the premise for our thoughts, our behaviour and our language. Reflection occurs when one mode of thought is confronted by another. Meta-theory is about a comprehensive frame of reference for inspiring and structuring reflection; 'reflexive interpretation' is such a frame of reference.

Reflexive interpretation is a way of indicating the open play of reflection across the four (or so) levels of interpretation. According to Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) the four levels of interpretation are: 1) interaction with empirical material, 2) interpretation, 3) critical interpretation and 4) reflection on text production and language use. Methodologies strongly emphasising one particular aspect are reflective in a specific way but are not reflexive. Reflective is reserved for that aspect which consists of the focused reflections upon a specific method or level of interpretation. The focused and specialised nature of reflection contrasts with the multidimensional

and interactive nature of reflexivity. Reflexivity only arises when the different levels are played off against each other.

DEVELOPING REFLECTIVE SKILLS THROUGH JOURNALING

In this final section we outline how reflexivity can be enacted by means of techniques such as journaling. Lincoln and Guba (1985) discussed 'a reflexive diary' as a way of establishing credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, in other words trustworthiness in naturalistic inquiry. Underpinning this concept of trustworthiness is an ability to be aware of how the inquirers' (researchers') biases influence the research outcome. They suggest that the reflexive journal should consists of three separate elements: 1) daily schedule and logistics of study, 2) methodological log outlining methodological decisions and accompanying rationale and 3) a personal dairy recording reflections upon what is happening in terms of one's own values and interests. Lincoln and Guba's approach (1985) parallels the reflexive enabling techniques outlined by Dupuis (1999). He is however the only author who outlined four concrete activities: 1) conduct a pre- and post-data-collection self-assessment, 2) use emotions and experiences documented in personal journals to support or refute one's initial assumptions, 3) both researched and researchers collaborate in the meaning-making process and 4) write a detailed and explicit account of how research design decisions were made throughout the research process and what factors affected those decisions.

The technique of journaling within an action research approach would parallel the reflexive-enabling techniques outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Dupuis (1999). However within the action research tradition journal-keeping is a significant practical mechanism for developing reflective skills rather than recording daily research activities or methodological decisions. In an action research journal one notes one's observations and experiences, and over time learns to differentiate between different experiences and ways of dealing with them. It enables integration of information and experiences which, when understood, helps researchers understand their reasoning processes and consequent behaviour and so anticipate experiences before embarking on them. These reflective skills

are central to the whole data or research evidence generation process. This key distinction is a consequence of the distinct nature of research in action rather than on action. Naturalism, like positivism, is research on action (usually other people's action) whereas action research is research in action. Keeping a journal regularly imposes a discipline and captures experience of key events close to when they happen and before the passage of time changes perceptions of them.

CONCLUSIONS

Reflexivity is an ambiguous concept: sometimes it is presented as a passive introspective activity, other times it is seen as opening the way to a more radical consciousness of self, on other occasions it is looked at in relation to theory development and authors argue that it means different things depending on research tradition. Theorists like Weick (1999) argue that theory construction is partly an exercise in disciplined reflexivity. Closer attention to self-as-theorist makes for better theory if that attention is instrumental in spotting excluded voices and in knowing when to voluntarily terminate reflecting. If, however, reflexivity is not instrumental the consequences may include narcissism and self-indulgence. Reflective conversations about organisational theory is possible if we drop things like paradigms and monologues, writing styles, definitions of what constitutes research, and pretensions to expertise and still retain intuitions, feelings, stories, experience, awe, vocabulary and empathy.

Different understandings of reflexivity and associated research practices arise, 'according to particular combinations of constitutive assumptions about ontology and epistemology' (Johnson and Duberley, 2003). To a certain extent we are in agreement with Goldthorpe (2000) that reflexivity is the current buzzword, but contrary to Goldthorpe's position, attempts to delineate the term 'reflexive' have been partially successful.

In this paper our particular focus is on epistemic reflexivity, which aligns with the 'third way'. This 'third way', as outlined by Goldthorpe (2000), is characterised as 'critical', 'humanistic' or 'reflexive'. The 'third way', including pragmatic realists and action research, has a key concept – 'action in learning' – as part of its

methodology and, in our view, this concept is a definite concrete form of reflexivity. It is the dynamic of reflection on reflection that incorporates the learning process of the action research cycle and enables action research to be about learning about learning; in other words, meta-learning. Accordingly, a critical feature of action research is the action researcher's self-awareness and learning in action. This is presented as a first person inquiry which has its 'upstream' – how the researcher inquires into his/her own values and assumptions – and 'downstream' – how these are expressed in action – expressions (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). In our view reflexivity can be understood in terms of upstream and downstream reflection. We have drawn on action research to provide an illustration of how reflexivity can be enacted by means of techniques such as journaling.

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