Geo-epistemology: (Critical) Reflexivity and Positionality

“Observation has been taken for granted as something that occurs ‘naturally’ […] With critical reflection, however, observation can be transformed into a self-conscious, effective, and ethically sound practice” (Kearns 2005, 192).

The act of observation is a central activity in much social science research and methodology. As researchers make observations, collect information for analysis, interpret that information, and eventually draw conclusions about the world based on those initial observations.

More than a method or set of methodologies per say, critical reflexivity and positionality are epistemological approaches for conducting research, producing knowledge about the world, and interacting with people and place. Critical reflexivity is based on acknowledging:

1) that research is about representation and thus inherently political (Clifford 1986, Wolford 2012);
2) that knowledge is partial (Clifford 1986, Haraway 1988) and emerges from our respective subject positions;
3) that we continually co-construct reality and meaning in our fieldsites and daily lives (Gertz 1973);
4) that research is “a kind of performance” (Lantham 2003, 2002) and finally;
5) that we always occupy multiple subject positions—either as an observer, participant, or something in between these categories (Nast 1994, Kearns 2005).

What is (critical) reflexivity?

The Dictionary of Human Geography (2009, 627) defines reflexivity as:

Reflexivity entails consideration of a variety of factors: personal biography, social situation, political values, situation within the academic labour [sic] structure, personal relationship to research respondents, relations of authority within the research process and so on. Reflexivity is thus a complex field, concerning EPISTEMOLOGY, politics and METHODOLOGY (original emphasis).
Critical reflexivity charges that we interrogate our roles (i.e. observer, participant, etc.) while conducting research. It prompts us to continually ask, ’In what way is the research process a performance of subject positions?’.

What is positionality?

Positionality is defined as (Gregory et al. 2009, 556):

> The fact that a researcher’s social, cultural and subject positions (and other psychological processes) affect: the questions they ask; how they frame them…their relations with those they research in the field or through interviews; interpretations they place on empirical evidence; access to data, institutions and outlets for research dissemination; and the likelihood that they will be listened to and heard.

Nevertheless, positionality is dynamic. Our lives are in flux and as a result so are our subject positions. In that regard like we are always in a state of “betweeness” (Nast 1994).

Where do critical reflexivity and positionality come from?

The nascence of critical reflexivity in geography (and perhaps all of the social sciences) is primarily influenced by feminist scholarship. Feminist scholarship should not be sine qua non associated with gender (though gender is a key component and focus of this research). Feminist research asserts a focus on the marginal members of society, the subaltern, and the feminized (but not necessarily feminine). Many scholars in this field promote a focus on power dynamics and specifically how our actions and subject positions influence research. Donna Haraway (1988), Judith Butler (1990), and (to a lesser degree) Heidi Nast (1994) have contributed important theoretical insights for developing (critically) reflexive research agendas, methodological toolkits, and epistemologies in geographic research.

Reflexivity challenges the notion that there exists a fundamental divide between subject and object. Feminist scholars such as Donna Haraway (1988) critique this idea and the concept of an absolute scientific objectivity that emerges from this logic. Haraway argues that the scientific “gaze” that the notion of objectivity promotes is essentially a “God-trick.” The God-trick it assumes that one can be completely removed from the subject(s) of research and make completely unbiased observations about the world, interpret those observations, and report the “truth” about those observations. Haraway contends that this notion is problematic and reifies oppressive, masculine epistemologies. Moreover, this view of objectivity presupposes that there is
an objective truth that one can find and observe. Much of the feminist scholarship, including that of Haraway, refutes this claim. Rather she (1988, 581) posits a notion of “embodied objectivity” or an embodied vision of “situated knowledges” that is necessary for ethical, emancipatory, and engaged research. “Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object” (Haraway 1988, 583). This perspective charges that our knowledge is always partial and that we each interpret the world we observe from the distinct context (or situated knowledge) that shapes our lives.

Heidi Nast (1992, 57) offers the notion of “betweeness” to assess and acknowledge one’s subject position. Similar to Haraway, Nast (1994, 57) challenges the subject-object divide and contends “we are never ‘outsiders’ or ‘insiders’ in any absolute sense.” We are always simultaneously the observer and the observed, the subject and the object. Therefore our subject positions are always partial, and we continually cross the borders between participant and observer. Nast asserts that the unique perspective and knowledge of the researcher (in her case women in particular) influences how research is conducted. She moves to operationalize Haraway’s situated knowledges approach by asserting that as researchers we are always between worlds and never bound to one particular subject position. Hence the subject-object divide is further challenged with this approach.

Judy Butler (1990) posits that fixed categories of sex, gender, and sexuality based on nature or biology are a fiction. Using a feminist genealogy she develops the notion of gender as performance versus gender as nature/natural. Butler contends that gender is discursively created through the congealed multiplicity of acts, performances, and language. “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler 1990, 45). Butler’s construction of gender as a series of performed acts is useful for interrogating the fixity of categories beyond sex, gender, and sexuality. It is arguable that the notion of performativity is applicable to all aspects of social interaction and categories of identity. Hence, the notion of performativity is useful for developing critically reflexive research methodologies. Seen is this light, an analytic based on the deconstruction of performance can be used to interrogate the seemingly stable position of the social actors whom we work with in our own respective research projects to disrupt hegemonic understandings and generate new avenues of inquiry.

I hazard the assertion that post-structuralism and science and technology studies have also influenced critical reflexivity in the field of geography. From post-structuralism comes a focus on power and the operation of discourse. In this regard, Michel
Foucault’s many works have been instrumental in developing key analytical tools that are useful from the perspective of critical reflexivity. Particularly important is his understanding of discourse. Discourse is more than language. It is material practice with profound consequences on society and nature. Lawson, drawing from Foucault, (2007, 41-42) defines discourse as “dominant knowledge systems comprised of meanings, institutional contexts, and individual and collective practices that exercised authority and power over subjects and other knowledge systems.” Understanding the operation and dissemination of discourse is central to critical reflexivity.

**Critical reflexivity and positionality as an iterative, interrelated process**

Critical reflexivity and positionality are interrelated. It is impossible to speak of one without a consideration of the other. The notion of positionality is central to critically reflexive research methodologies. Indeed, critical reflexivity is not possible without consideration of the positionality of the researcher and researched. These notions have emerged largely from the influence of feminist theory. Arguably Donna Haraway’s (1998) notion of “situated knowledge” was the catalyst for the greater reflexive turn in geography. Haraway contends that all knowledge is partial, situated within particular contexts, and inherently political. Hence, situated knowledge and critically reflexive approaches attend to the production, flow, and distribution of power in social relations.

**Critical reflexivity in geography/Critical reflexivity as methodology**

Critical reflexivity has strong roots in geography and many examples of how to employ this approach in research abound. The following list contains some key sources (not including those already cited) that illustrate how to employ critical reflexivity and considerations of positionality in geo-methodologies.

Discussion

Critical reflexivity encourages us to maintain focus on our roles as performers of research who operate with partial perspective and situated knowledge while constantly negotiating multiple subject positions and co-constructing the “realities” that we seek to understand. Hence, we must continually turn the lens of inquiry back on ourselves to interrogate our rationale, methods, questions, motivations, and actions in the research process. What are the consequences of this epistemological approach to research on the positionality of the researcher?

The consequence is that traditional positivist notions on a divide between subject and object are not only challenged, but also dissolved. The assertion is that there is no external or universal truth that can be discovered, but rather multiple partial and situated knowledges. Geertz (1973) was instrumental in paving the way for this approach within geography. He argues that as active participants in the world we co-produce and co-construct reality through our interpretations (1973, 8). Along a similar vein Kearns (2005, 195) argues that observers “co-create meaning” through their subjectivities.

Works Cited


Appendix: Images from PowerPoint for consideration

(Escher 1935)

Critical Reflexivity (adapted from Escher 1935)
Triple loop learning (adapted from Pahl-Wostl 2009)