

The Reflexive Nature of Reading as Ethnographic Practice: Editorial Note

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Abstract: In this editorial, I suggest that not only is reading published texts a way of doing ethnographic research, but also reading concretely realizes itself in the productions of new texts that reproduce the cultural practices that are analyzed in the published text. Reading as ethnographic method is therefore a reflexive project. I provide a dialectical framework for theorizing the reflexive nature of reading.

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1. Introduction

Less than two years ago, the editors of this journal began the *FQS* column "Debate" entitled [Doing Successful Research in the Social Sciences](#). So far, the different contributors analyzed the evaluation and adjudication of research proposals in funding agencies (ROTH 2002b, 2004), the politics of using literature reviews as a way of enrolling expert witnesses (METCALFE 2003), the gatekeeper role of supervisors of doctoral dissertations and the politics of obtaining a doctoral degree (BIRCK 2003), and, reflexively, the possibility or impossibility of conducting a sociology of sociology (BURKART 2003).¹ All contributions engage with the practices of their culture rather than the culture of the other (e.g., indigenous people, natural scientists). They all do so in critical ways, which, in the world of business, might be called whistle blowing. That is, the authors articulate and reflect on practices that a Martian ethnographer conducting an anthropological study of the social sciences on Earth might find interesting, curious, and noteworthy. The contribution to this debate in the present issue falls in line with the previous contributions in the sense that it contributes an ethnographic study of the field of higher education through the study of its publication practices, concretized in the analysis of one journal issue of *Studies in*

¹ On this point see, however, the argument BOURDIEU and WACQUANT (1992) make in favor of a reflexive sociology, which inherently returns upon itself to wrestle with its own presuppositions and concepts. These authors suggest radical doubt as a strategy for dealing with the unquestioned suppositions that underlie all forms of social analysis, even the social analysis of social analysis.

Higher Education (BADLEY 2004). In this, Graham BADLEY analyses a phenomenon that already had been the topic in the Mike METCALFE and Günter BURKART contributions, academic publications. But rather than analyzing the practices, he argues that reading is a form of doing ethnography. That his, BADLEY not only objectifies the practices of his field (i.e., makes them the object of his inquiry) but also topicalizes his own reading as ethnographic practice. [1]

In this contribution, I intend to prepare readers to do a reflexive reading of the BADLEY contribution. To achieve this, I show that our column "Doing Successful Research in the Social Sciences" not only is concerned with a self-critical evaluation of our culture, but also constitutes itself as a concrete realization of cultural possibilities in the field. That is, not only is each contribution about some aspect of the social sciences (getting grants, writing dissertations, citing references, doing sociology), in a sense objectifying something in our field, but also each contribution constitutes a concrete example of legitimate social scientific practices. To show why and how this is the case, I begin by articulating the dialectical relation between individual and collective, before highlighting the reflexive nature of the FQS column Debates. [2]

2. Individual | Collective Dialectic

The dominant approaches in the social sciences are reductionist in the sense that they describe and theorize social actions in terms of cause-effect relations that emphasize either individual intentions (mainstream psychology) or societal structures (mainstream sociology) as causal antecedents of observable behavior. Social science journals are full of models, statistical or qualitative, that relate one factor or category in causal ways to something else. Thus, even qualitative researchers have sampled the beliefs of people, e.g., teachers, and related them to their actions, for example, in the classroom (e.g., TOBIN, ESPINET, BYRD & ADAMS 1988). They critiqued and criticized practitioners for being inconsistent when there was no match, implicitly acknowledging that beliefs and future actions ought to be in a causal relationship. The problem with such approaches is that they reduce the individual to the collective or the collective to the individual, reproducing thereby the Cartesian split between individual consciousness and the sociomaterial context in which they find themselves. [3]

In the western world, much of everyday common and mundane thinking comes down on one or the other side, depending on the needs of the situation. Thus, persons who "break the law" are locked up and removed from society temporarily, or, as in the US and other nations, are sometimes permanently removed by means of execution. Here, problems in society are psychologized. On the other hand, parents whose children have joined some religious group ("sect") may claim that they have been brainwashed, that is, the group that the child has joined determined his or her behavior. In this situation, the problem has been sociologized. Rarely are the two forms of reasoning considered simultaneously, not as additive but as dialectically related processes. [4]

Dialectical approaches, on the other hand, articulate and theorize individual and collective as two, heuristically articulated and non-identical aspects of the same unit (e.g., HOLZKAMP 1991). On the one hand, each action by an individual is, in this view, a concrete realization of sociocultural and cultural historical possibilities to act. When someone takes an object or money away from another person, he or she is not simply and inherently a thief; the person acts enabled by the existing sociocultural and cultural historical structures. From his or her possibilities, it is reasonable to act in this way, whatever these reasons are in the lifeworld of the person. On the other hand, existing cultural possibilities are constituted in and by the concrete actions of individuals. More so, existing possibilities are expanded with each action. For example, when a qualitative researcher proposes a new theoretical concept, such as "glocalized identity" (e.g., KAYAN 2001), or method, such as autobiography as sociological method (e.g., KONOPÁSEK 2000), new possibilities for doing and writing research are opened up. However, even these acts of innovation are, reflexively, expressions of the existing cultural possibilities: actions are not only concrete realizations of possible actions but, in being concretely enacted, also change the domain of possible actions. These ever-expanding possibilities are expressed in the contingent evolution of language and community (RORTY 1989). It should be self-evident that sum of all concrete actions, however, does not exhaust the domain of sociocultural possibilities. [5]

This summarily articulated theoretical framework of the dialectic of individual actions and collective possibilities now allows us to articulate and theorize BADLEY's contribution in a reflexive way. [6]

3. The Reflexive Nature of Reading

3.1 Text as ethnographic metaphor

Text has become a much-used analogy and paradigm in the social sciences and humanities. Thus, once culture is viewed as a form of text (GEERTZ 1983), the practices developed in the hermeneutics of biblical text, which have a long history, can be employed as part of doing ethnography. The analysis of texts therefore becomes a paradigm for the analysis of social action (RICŒUR 2001). Doing ethnography, viewed from this perspective, is reading—here practical actions within some culture. [7]

In his contribution BADLEY turns this relation around suggesting that reading is (a form of) doing ethnography. To make his case, he analyzes different aspects (referencing, presentations, editorials, articles, book reviews) of one entire issue of a journal in his field, *Studies in Higher Education*. That is, he does not simply use text as a metaphor and reading as a form of action within this metaphor, but his text is a literal text. BADLEY is the ethnographer subject and the text printed in the chosen issue of *Studies in Higher Education* is his research object. The different texts BADLEY analyzes within the issue constitute concrete realizations of the textual practices possible within the community of scholars of higher education. Even though BADLEY has chosen only a small sample of texts, it does reveal cultural possibilities, namely those that are concretely realized. The

analyses are therefore generalizable to the extent that the structural aspects BADLEY describes are also resources available to other authors in the field—it does not matter whether they are concretely realized. [8]

The analyses of social science publication practices presented here constitute an interesting addition to those that other contributors to this column presented (BURKART 2003, METCALFE 2003). I suggest, however, that a dialectical theory and method would go one step further. [9]

3.2 Reading as reflexive project

BADLEY uses reading as one form of doing an ethnography of his culture, viewed in terms of the metaphor of text, by analyzing, in a reflexive way, a text in which this culture had been concretized. The outcome of BADLEY's reading is another text, which itself becomes part of social science literature more broadly and thereby accessible to his peers.² More so, BADLEY's reading is not merely a method but, as concretized in his text, is a concrete realization of the practice of reading in higher education. Furthermore, as published text, BADLEY's contribution is itself a concrete realization of the textual forms (genres) possible in the social sciences. [10]

At this point, I therefore offer readers the advice not only to read BADLEY's contribution for its content, a critical analysis of textual practices in higher education, but also to read it as a concrete realization of the reading practices in higher education, the field he looks at in a critical way. Can one be completely critical of a practice when the practice itself is the object of analysis? BURKART's (2003) answer was no, leading him to make a claim about the impossibility of a sociology of sociology. BADLEY himself did not make this reflexive move in his text. You, the reader, however can enact such a double reading. Your reading then mirrors the practice of enacting a critical review of a critical review, which BADLEY concretely realized in his analysis of a book review. That is, both the book review and BADLEY's book review are concrete realizations of reading practices in higher education. In the next step, you, dear reader, can take your own reading of BADLEY's and this text as a concrete realization of the practice of reading in the social sciences. [11]

2 This return of a text into the culture even though it might be published in a journal not directly associated with its core was evidenced in my own analysis of the politics of funding (ROTH 2002). As reported elsewhere (ROTH 2004), someone in the funding institution analyzed in a critical way got a hand of the publication and distributed it within the agency. There, it initially upset many individuals, including directors, but then it led to a revision and change of policies. That is, although the article was published outside the funding agency-research relation, it returned and brought about change.

4. Reflexive Coda

My reflexive analysis does not stop there, of course, for I have not yet considered my own reading of BADLEY's text as a concrete realization of reading in the social sciences, and my own text as a concrete realization of the authorial and textual practices in our field.³ My name in the by-line, therefore, functions in a reflexive way: it counter-signs my reading of BADLEY's text and our cultural practices, and, simultaneously, signs this text, which you, dear reader, have to countersign in your own reading (e.g., DERRIDA 1988). The sum of all these readings constitutes not only the object nature of texts as product of writing but also reading as its dialectical companion. Both are practical instantiations of culturally enabled ways of doing ethnography. [12]

Some readers might think that this approach leads us into infinite regress. However, the implied contradictions are only a problem to classical thinking. In a dialectical approach, they are not only a central aspect of the thing theoretically (IL'ENKOV 1982), but also are always solved in praxis. This was the case in my reading of BADLEY, and will also be concretely realized in your reading of this new contribution to our column. [13]

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- 3 Readers will find more on the reflexive nature of doing research, subject and object, and ways of reading in ROTH and BREUER (2003) or ROTH (2002a).

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