

THE REFLEXIVE NARRATIVE BRICOLAGE

REFLEXIVE NARRATIVE

Reflexive narrative is the abbreviated term for *reflexive narrative as a journey of self-inquiry toward self-realization*. By *reflexive* I mean “looking back at something in order to see oneself emerging.” Steier (1991) describes reflexivity as “bending back on itself” (p. 2). Steier was influenced by Mead (1962), who described reflexivity as a turning back of one’s experience upon oneself. Dewey (1933) likened reflexivity to a chain whereby each link is influenced by the previous one and influences the subsequent one.

Self-realization is the human potential within each of us that we strive toward. Such realization, as is possible, is marked by a pattern of insights gained through reflection on a sequence of experiences alongside a critical understanding of why self-realization had not been possible.

Reflexive narrative is the process of weighing and sorting insights evidenced by particular experiences and sequencing them to mark the journey of self-realization. The journey is essentially unpredictable. The researcher sorts their experiences and assembles them into a narrative that marks the journey. The unfolding narrative connects the researcher to their world (McCarthy, 1998).

Insights are moments of transition that mark the journey most often located in the struggle to overcome barriers to self-realization. Insights are life changing. As a consequence, the researcher comes to view and respond to the world differently. Knowledge derived from reflexive narrative is the personal knowing used by the researcher in pursuit of realizing a vision within their everyday practice. It is a particular and contextual knowing yet informed and synthesized with a relevant extant knowledge. The reflexive

claim strengthens the power of such personal knowing because it is continuously tested for its relevance toward realizing self-realization.

THE RESEARCH SPECTRUM

In the context of a spectrum of research, reflexive narrative is subjective, particular, contextual, critical, and constructivist whereby practitioners find meaning in experience and construct personal knowing in a continuous learning spiral. This approach can be contrasted and perhaps synthesized with a social constructionist approach described as a theory of knowledge in sociology and communication studies that examines the development of jointly constructed understandings of the world that form the basis for shared assumptions about reality. Gergen and Gergen (1991) write, “Regarding the problem of reflexivity in research, a constructivist approach tends to lead inward. In contrast, a social constructionist view *invites* the investigator outwards into the fuller realm of shared languages. The implication is that a constructivist approach leads the investigator into a black hole” (p. 79).

Tends might suggest that the researcher is unaware of the “black hole” risk. All future experience is a black hole so to speak because everything is unique, never having been experienced before. As we shall see, there is no intention to create a generalized theory as a consequence of reflexive self-inquiry, although a theory may be alluded to as a possibility that finds resonance with its audience.

Research labels are tricky because they imply a set of injunctions about their applications that are potentially constraining and wrap themselves in a confusing intellectual language that detracts from the idea of reflexivity itself. Hence, the reflexive researcher mindful of labels regards them from a practical perspective as if a handy person searching for the most appropriate tools.

BRICOLAGE

Exploring ideas that resonated with reflexive narrative research led me to construct a bricolage (Table 2.1).

Kincheloe, McLaren, and Steinberg (2011) note, “Bricolage, in a contemporary sense, is understood to involve the process of employing these methodological processes as they are needed in the unfolding context of the research situation” enabling the researcher “to move beyond the

Table 2.1 Reflexive Narrative Bricolage

Narrative and Literary Theory	Reflective Theory	Non-Western Thought
Critical social science	Reflexive narrative as a journey of self-inquiry toward self-realization	Hermeneutics
Feminist slant	Auto-ethnography & performance	Chaos theory

blinders of particular disciplines and peer through a conceptual window to a new world of research and knowledge production” (p. 168).

While these influencing ideas are interesting in themselves, they are significant only because of their application in doing reflexive narrative. In adopting bricolage, the researcher responds to the complexity of self-inquiry and the lived world. It acknowledges there can be no passive application of research methodologies as a preformed response. This enables the researcher to move beyond the demands of any particular methodology to conform to its rules. Naturally, this demands that the researcher is ever mindful of coherence—the way the bricolage is pieced together as a coherent whole as reflexive narrative.

Bricolage enables me to communicate the complexity and synchronicity of diverse methodological ideas to inform the nature and application of reflexive narrative research. It is important for the researcher to appreciate that this is my own formulation. In no sense have I undertaken a comprehensive or intellectual study of these ideas. Researchers are encouraged to explore these influences to the depth they feel appropriate or indeed pursue other influences. The researcher will inevitably give greater emphasis to a particular methodological idea than others, for example, “the feminist slant,” where a woman may find patriarchal norms a barrier to self-realization. *Yet I must emphasize that these ideas are in no way prescriptive.*

REFLECTIVE THEORY

At the core of reflexive narrative research are the stories of our everyday lived experiences. We pay attention to these stories that shape our identity and make us who we are and who we hope to become (McAdams, 1993).

The *Compact Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford Press, 2005, p. 86) defines *reflect* as follows:

- throw back heat, light, sound without absorbing it
- (of a mirror or shiny surface) show an image of
- represent in a realistic or appropriate way
- bring about a good or bad impression of someone or something (on)
- think deeply or carefully about

Paraphrasing, I look in the mirror and see a realistic impression of my experience, something I can judge in terms of what I desire to achieve, something I think deeply and carefully about. The idea of a realistic impression suggests that the reflective practitioner seeks to reflect on experience as close to reality as possible—what is termed *mimesis*. Yet reflection is always partial. The practitioner's reflection is their version of events and may differ from others. The accuracy of recall does not matter. Partiality itself becomes a focus for reflection. Reflection will always be influenced by feelings and emotions, especially when such feelings and emotions are the trigger for reflection in the first place. Writing is itself reflexive. As Richardson writes, "I would argue very strongly that the self that is writing the story is changed by the process of writing it" (Flemons & Green, 2002, p. 91).

Much has been written about reflection (a whole raft of references could be sandbagged to support this statement across a spectrum of disciplines). Schön (1983, 1987) viewed reflection as being of two fundamental types. Reflection-on-experience takes place after the event, a way of looking back on experience. Reflection-in-action involves the researcher reframing a situation while experiencing it so action can proceed. This happens when faced with a breakdown, where something happens beyond the ability of the researcher to continue within normal ways of thinking and responding.

Other theorists focus on reflection-on-experience (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Boyd & Fales, 1983; Gibbs, 1988). Mezirow (1981), influenced by the work of Paulo Freire, viewed reflection as leading to perspective transformation concerned with appreciating and changing assumptions and attitudes we hold. As Street (1992) writes,

The confrontation with experience through reflection and of the meanings and assumptions which surround it, can form a foundation upon which to make choices about future actions based on chosen value systems and new ways of thinking about and understanding nursing practice. (p. 16)

As such, unearthing, understanding, and shifting the researcher's assumptions are pivotal within reflexive narrative research. This resonates with critical social science.

I currently view reflection as

being mindful of self, either within or after an experience, as if a mirror in which the researcher can view and focus self within the context of a particular experience, in order to confront, understand and become empowered to act toward resolving any contradiction between the reality of one's experience and one's vision of self-realization to gain insight in a reflexive spiral toward self-realization. (Johns, 2016)

Vision

The researcher requires a vision, however tentative, of self-realization. One needs answers to questions such as these: "What is a valid vision? What does one's vision really mean? Is one's vision achievable? What forces constrain its realization?" The answers can be expressed in numerous ways—for example, becoming a leader or easing suffering (to take the two narratives offered in this book as exemplars, see "Contempt: A Barrier to Realizing Leadership" [Chapter 1] and "Weaving the Reflexive Narrative: The Fifth Dialogical Movement" [Chapter 8]). Or the vision may be broader—for example, becoming a human rights lawyer.

Constructing a vision of self-realization is a shifting focus of inquiry; the researcher continually seeks to clarify their vision and find the language to best express it.

Contradiction

The contradiction between one's vision of practice and the way one practices as known through everyday experiences is a creative tension. Senge (1990, pp. 142, 150–155) terms this contradiction *creative tension*. It

is the dynamic that infuses the reflexive narrative. Exploring creative tension is the core of doing reflexive research.

Contradiction creates anxiety. The reflexive researcher acknowledges this anxiety through understanding its nature rather than defending against it. Recognizing this, the researcher converts negative energy (anxiety) into positive energy for taking action. In this way reflection is therapeutic. Indeed, becoming mindful and learning to understand and cope with anxiety are desirable outcomes for all reflexive researchers.

CRITICAL SOCIAL SCIENCE

Exploring creative tension reveals the social fabric that constrains researchers from realizing self-realization. To address this constraint, the researcher becomes an active critical researcher. If not they will merely scratch at the surface of experience and bring about self-realization at a superficial level. However, this may be enough. One risk of exploring too deeply and critically is to crash against brick walls of reality that are disturbing.

Fay (1987) notes that “the goal of critical social science is to effect the autonomy of the members of its audience so that their lives can become the direct, conscious expression of their own will” (p. 75). He adds, “The goal of critical social science is not only to facilitate methodical self-reflection necessary to produce rational clarity, but to dissolve those barriers which prevent people from living in accordance with their genuine will.”

As an individual I can take action. My genuine will is interpreted as my vision of self. Fay (1987) recognizes that this is profoundly difficult for the individual. As such, he advocates collective autonomy whereby its members have autonomy (power) to be “masters of their own affairs” and hence “are not subject to forces which can cause them to be other than they desire” (p. 78).

Most professions exist within a complex web of relationships governed by power that exert a strong influence on its actions. This influence can be understood and political action taken if people have the will. Yet at what cost? Perhaps it is better to live in ignorance and accept the status quo.

Fay writes about a genuine narrative and false stories that people tell themselves that reflect the hegemonic nature of a dominant world whereby people come to believe and act to maintain the conditions that produce their misery. It begs the questions: “What should be the true nature of social care or political practice?” “And what is the role (and autonomy) of differing professions toward achieving this?”

The idea of holding a creative tension between one's vision of practice and actual practice begs questions such as "Do I have the autonomy to construct my own?" "What assumptions govern my practice?" "What constrains me from realizing my vision?" In response to the last question, Fay notes three barriers that limit rational change: force, tradition, and embodiment.

Power exists for good or bad. It is simply a neutral energy. Force is the negative aspect of power abused in organizations largely through status and insecurity. It has a coercive nature threatening sanction if not obeyed. It is the wiles of a bully. Hence, people tend to submit to coercive demand rather than follow their vision.

Tradition reflects the norms that govern the way organizations, professions, and society as a whole functions—"The way we do things round here." People are motivated to fit in and be accepted and subsequently comply with established norms even though they may not be conducive to best practice. The idea of the status quo becomes paramount.

Embodiment reflects how people have learned to think and act the way they do without necessarily having to pay attention to patterns of thinking or acting. The body has learned. It leads to habitual patterns even though these patterns are not necessarily most effective. Power and tradition both impact embodiment. Hence, to realize one's vision, the person will necessarily need to unlearn previous behavior which, by their embodied and reinforced nature, may be very resistant to change despite vision's pledge.

These forces created a structure for understanding the difficulty with achieving self-realization. Practitioners work in organizations and professions in which norms govern everyday practice and which constrain autonomy. Through exploring creative tension, the reflexive narrative researcher analyzes these constraining forces and seeks to act in ways to overcome them. These barriers ultimately become the core of the reflexive narrative. They create frisson and drama. They are points of transition that move the researcher toward self-realization. They are leaping boulders. Theory can be considered as a fourth force, especially within an organizational culture predicated on scientific knowledge with its ensuing predictive authority.

Because of the difficulty with rational change to achieve self-realization, experience can be viewed as moving three phases of understanding or enlightenment (Fay, 1997) as to why things are as they are, empowerment to act to change how things are as they are toward a more conducive state of affairs, and transformation of self and practice so that a vision is actually realized. Fay describes transformation as emancipation, suggesting a release from tyranny and incipient suffering. As I previously noted,

my understanding on bricolage follows Kincheloe and McClaren (2005), who approach it from a critical theory position. They note that “bricoleurs understand that social structures do not *determine* individual subjectivity but *constrain* it in remarkably intricate ways” (p. 320, italics their emphasis). Hence, reflexive narratives seek to unearth, understand, and shift such constraints toward realizing self-realization.

Being an Active Person

Fay (1987) argues that “humans are active creatures who broadly create themselves on the basis of their own self-interpretations” (p. 47). Being an *active* person involves four fundamental dispositions: intelligence, curiosity, reflectiveness, and willfulness.

Intelligence

Intelligence suggests the rational person. Clearly, if the evidence points this way, you would go that way. However, evidence or information needs to be weighed up for its relevance and application to the particular moment. As Fay (1987) highlights, there are barriers to rational change that require deep understanding that the person must imagine before he or she can act differently despite the information. He notes that intelligence is the disposition to “alter one’s beliefs and ensuing behavior on the basis of new information about the world” (p. 48).

Curiosity

Curiosity is like turning over pebbles on the shore to see what is on the other side. Nothing is taken for granted. Everything is a mystery to be solved. Curiosity is a gateway to the imagination: “What might the other side of the pebble look like?” Through curiosity, the researcher imagines how things might be different, more satisfactory, more fulfilling. Fay (1987) notes that curiosity is the disposition to “seek out information about one’s environment in order to provide a fuller basis for one’s assessments” (p. 49).

Reflectiveness

Fay (1987) notes that reflectiveness is the disposition to

evaluate one’s own desires and beliefs on the basis of some such criterion as whether they are justified by the evidence, whether

they are mutually consistent, whether they are in accord with some ideal, or whether they provide for the greatest possible satisfaction, all in aid of answering the questions: what is the proper end of my life and thus what sort of person ought I to be. (p. 49)

It takes the professional to the core of what it means to be that professional, asking questions such as these:

- What desires and beliefs should I hold as a professional?
- Are the beliefs of the profession as a whole (as reflected in a code of ethics) adequate?
- Is the profession itself a victim of a hegemony that subordinates me to more powerful interests and therefore holding beliefs that are not in my (and the profession's) best interests of which I am unaware?

Willfulness

Willfulness is a similar concept to empowerment. It is rising above one's fear in order to act on one's beliefs and insights. It is one thing to make a statement about something; it is quite another thing to act on it and make new statements (develop new insights). While these dispositions can be viewed as pertaining to an individual, it is significant that the person is shaped by their cultural community and interactions with others through which the person "begins to appreciate both its potentialities and inadequacies, and comes to have the desire [willfulness] to actualise the former and alter the latter" (Fay, 1987, p. 51). I term these four dispositions necessary precursors to doing reflexive narrative research. If the researcher lacks these qualities, they become a focus for development through guidance.

While the goals and language of critical social science may seem daunting, remember it is only an influence, yet a significant one, to jolt the practitioner researcher into critical reflection as uncomfortable as that might be. But the researcher has a choice: Do they swim in the shallow end and ignore the cultural background of their practice, or do they dive into the deep end where sharks might bite?

HERMENEUTICS

Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) outline the varied scope of criticality. They draw on the hermeneutic philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer to explore “the concept of immanence” to see beyond the horizon of “what is” to “what ought to be” in terms of self-realization. This suggests that the researcher’s journey is a moral journey in terms of “what ought to be” from a social perspective rather than just an individual perspective. Kincheloe and McLaren state, “Critical researchers are profoundly concerned with who we are, how we got this way, and where we might go from here” (citing Weil & Kincheloe, 2003, p. 309). Their reference to Gadamer draws links between a critical social science and hermeneutics.

Clearing

The reflexive narrative researcher writes reflections on experience. To gain insight, the researcher then stands back from the text far enough to gain a sense of objectivity in order to dialogue with the text to find meaning. It is like moving into a clearing where things can be seen clearly. This requires the researcher to be aware of and suspend their subjectivity, something that must be learned.

Projection

Understanding is partial. The researcher may think they know what the text is about considering they wrote it! As such, the person must be aware of this projection of meaning into the text so they are more open to what the text might have to say. No easy task. It is difficult to see beyond one’s own reality. One reason guidance is significant is to help see beyond one’s known horizons.

Horizon

“Horizon” reflects the researcher’s scope of understanding. Weinsheimer (1985) notes (drawing on the hermeneutics of Gadamer) that

this situation of understanding can be called our horizon. It marks the limit of everything that can be seen from a particular point of view, but the idea of horizon also implies that we can also see beyond our immediate standpoint. To acquire a horizon means that we acquire a far-sightedness which, though limited, is not merely myopic. (p. 182)

Because all understanding is partial, others can offer perspectives that challenge the practitioner's own and through dialogue can lead to a fusion of horizons and cocreation of insights. Hence, insights become cocreated.

The researcher enters a dialogue between understanding from a particular experience (reflection) and a background of their accumulated understanding. This is the hermeneutic spiral. It is a movement back and forth whereby previous understanding informs the reflection and is changed by it. As Gadamer (1975) writes, "Every experience has implicit horizons before and after, and fuses finally with the continuum of experiences that are present before and after into the unity of the flow of experience" (cited in Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 157).

The idea of horizon is that our understanding is limited and yet through interpretation of reflected-on experience and gaining insight horizons become transcended. The researcher learns to configure a future that leads to anticipating experience and pursuing certain types of experiences based on insights.

Fore-Structure

Heidegger (1962) noted that the researcher's background will inevitably influence understanding simply because they exist in the world. Hence, by setting out a relevant background, the researcher enables the audience to appreciate where the researcher is coming from given the narrative's highly subjective and contextual nature.

Fore-structure comprises Fore-having, Fore-sight, and Fore-conception.

- Fore-having is concerned with the researcher's background—where are they coming from as they approach self-inquiry? This may stem back into childhood, schooling, and professional studies.
- Fore-sight is concerned with the issues relating to the researcher as they plan their self-inquiry—issues such as organizational role, structure and culture, vision of practice.
- Fore-conception is concerned with the researcher's aspirations and expectations. It offers early purpose and direction to self-inquiry, although this may be very unclear as the researcher takes their first tentative steps along self-inquiry.

Note elements of fore-structure that permeate through “Contempt: A Barrier to Realizing Leadership.”

Auto-Ethnography and Performance

Auto-ethnography is the telling of a narrative in ways that reveal its social and cultural significance. These narratives use an evocative language to engage and disturb the reader. They tend to be written by the researcher looking back at their life as if disadvantaged, abused, or discriminated against in some way and fueled by an outrage sublimated into social action (Holman Jones, 2005).¹ The narrative seeks to find and communicate social structures that underlie the researcher’s experience with a view toward changing those conditions through social action.

What differentiates reflexive narrative from auto-ethnography is reflexivity and its developmental focus on self-realization. The auto-ethnographer looks back on their life retrospectively to construct a narrative, while the reflexive narrative researcher constructs a narrative through experiences as they unfold. In this sense, they are profoundly different approaches to narrative construction.

Performance

Auto-ethnography is often told dramatically through performance. It is this aspect that most influenced my idea that reflexive narrative may be best expressed through performance, with the intent to invoke dialogue with its audience toward audience reflection and social action to create better worlds. This reflexive narrative has a social and political mandate beyond the researcher simply constructing a narrative of their journey. It develops the idea of performance as a mode of scholarly representation (Jackson, 1993). Many published auto-ethnography texts are useful for the reflexive researcher to explore. Most useful is *Ethnographically Speaking* (Bochner & Ellis, 2002), in which every chapter offers insight, critique, and possibility. Denzin’s (2003) *Performance Ethnography* offers a broad appreciation of the shift toward performance. Other useful titles, to list just a few: Spry (2008, 2011), Park-Fuller (2003), Madison (1999), Jackson (1998), Langellier (1999), and Hamera (2011). *Performance Studies* (Schechner, 2006) offers insight into a range of performance theories and approaches.

Chaos Theory

The world is naturally chaotic despite peoples' efforts to predict and control it. The world is not stable despite the effort of organizations to maintain stability. Chaos theory is concerned with letting go of control because systems are inherently self-organizing around strange attractors such as values. Life is always changing. No two events are the same. The key is being open and positive about change. The balance between stability and instability is the learning curve the reflexive researcher treads. Being mindful, the practitioner is alert all the time. Information is viewed as "nourishment rather than power" (Wheatley, 1999, p. 101). It is paying attention to processes and relationships rather than outcomes. Wheatley (1999) adds that "all life lives off-balance in a world that is open to change. And all life is self-organising. We do not have to fear disequilibrium, nor do we have to approach change so fearfully. Instead we can realise that, like all life, we know how to grow and evolve in the midst of constant flux. There is a path through change that leads to greater independence and resilience. We dance along the path by maintaining a coherent identity and by honouring everybody's need for self-determination" (p. 89).

The path is the knowledge that nothing is certain, that everything is shifting including self. The reflexive narrative researcher focuses on the whole of their practice in relation to their vision and the relationship between things—as per the hermeneutic spiral. This is in contrast to viewing practice as parts as if it were a machine. Relationship is the key determiner of everything (Wheatley, 1999). Note that Akinbode's reflexive narrative (Appendix A) is strongly influenced by chaos theory. See also the footnotes to "Contempt: A Barrier to Realizing Leadership" (Chapter 1) that indicate how chaos theory is inherently reflexive. As Wheatley (1999) writes, "The shape of chaos materializes from information feeding back on itself and changing in the process" (120).

NARRATIVE THEORY

Chase (2011), writing broadly across the narrative inquiry spectrum, notes,

Narrative theorists define narrative as a distinct form of discourse: as meaning making through the shaping or ordering of experience, a way of understanding one's own or other's actions,

of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time. (p. 421)

While reflexive narrative encompasses these ideas, its significant focus is to plot the reflexive journey. It is what makes reflexive narrative unique.

Bruner (1986) notes that all stories contrast two landscapes. First is the action landscape that reveals the events that take place within the story. Second is the consciousness landscape that reveals the thoughts and feelings of those involved in the story and the meanings of what takes place in their lives. Reflexive narrative weaves these landscapes within a continuous reflexive unfolding of meaning

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note the influence of John Dewey on their approach to narrative, notably the idea of continuity. They “think of [an event] not as a thing happening at that moment but as an expression of something happening over time. Any event, or thing, has a past, a present as it appears to us, and an implied future” (p. 29).

Narratives are grounded in a plot. The plot is played out in the creative tension between one’s vision and the reality of one’s practice. The plot is simply realizing self-realization, although this will be focused on particular aspects of self-realization, for example, becoming a leader. These become subthemes within the vastness of self-realization as a background. The researcher lives the narrative as a way of traversing an uncertain world, that through writing a narrative one comes to live it, become mindful of it. Hence, there is convergence between practice and narrative. They become one.

Narrative researchers work with people to construct narratives about social phenomena drawing tentative insights into the nature of something. For example, Frank (2002) used narrative to explore the social and psychological background of illness. Many autobiographical texts of accounts of illness have been published as narratives, but these are relatively straightforward, looking back on events rather than a reflexive living with the illness although the authors may have kept diaries. Examples I have found particularly useful include *At the Will of the Body* by Frank (2002), *Cancer in Two Voices* by Butler and Rosenblum (1994), *The Cancer Journals* by Audre Lorde (1980), and *Bald in the Land of Big Hair* by Rogers (2002). All these examples have been used in dialogue with my own narratives.

FEMINIST SLANT

It is significant that the world continues to be governed by a patriarchal attitude despite the rise of feminist movements and public outrage at male privilege and exploitation to draw equality. Yet shifting a deeply embedded patriarchy is more than surface exposure.

A patriarchal attitude is reflected in the type of research that is considered significant and which gets funded. Such research is usually subjected to rules of objectivity and rationality to claim reliability, validity, and generalizability. It is grounded in left brain thinking usually equated with the masculine mind. Professional curriculum is also grounded in such principles at the detriment of the right brain, which is usually equated with the feminine mind where lie such qualities as intuition, creativity, imagination, and the emotions. This side of the brain is the “dark side” in that it is difficult to observe compared with the bright left side based on what is observable. Being the stuff of women, it is largely ignored. Woolf (1928/1945) writes, “This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing room” (p. 74). Woolf’s words reflect the way the masculine mind is concerned with big issues and links emotions with women relegated to the drawing room rather than the war office. Yet it is the mundane everyday practices that engage the reflexive narrative researcher and which lifts such practices into significance.

Woolf (1928/1945) considered that when the masculine and feminine minds work harmoniously together, it creates a fusion whereby “the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties” (pp. 96, 99).

WOMEN’S WAYS OF KNOWING

Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) identified a fusion between the connected and separate ways of knowing necessary to cultivate the constructed voice in their scheme of understanding women’s ways of knowing that differentiated the ways women know from men. They identified five levels of knowing reflected in the woman’s voice: silence, received knowing, subjective knowing, procedural knowing, and constructed knowing.

Silence

The most deprived voice is silence. It is not that women do not know; they are not able to express what they know for whatever reason. In my experience working within the health service, I note how people, not just women, are silenced for fear of sanction, a situation endemic within transactional organizations (Johns, 2016). As a nurse, I experienced a strong yet subtle influence to be subordinate to doctors and managers. This reflects the patriarchal nature of such organizations where the workforce is predominantly women. The maxim “seen but not heard” seems appropriate.

Received Knowing

In my nurse training, I experienced a received level of voice whereby students were fed facts without encouragement to have an opinion. The maxim “you’re not paid to think” seems appropriate. Or if you do have an opinion, it must be suitably deferential.

Subjective Knowing

It is at the subjective voice level that reflective practice actively seeks to encourage practitioners to speak out even if the voice is not well informed. As bell hooks (2003) writes, “Focusing on experience allows students to claim a knowledge base from which they can speak” (p. 148). The subjective voice is a freeing of self from oppression even as oppressive forces are at work to put the voice in its subjugated place.

Procedural Knowing

At the next level, the separate voice is the ability to speak with a reasoned voice gleaned from a critique of relevant theory. It is this voice most valued by the masculine mind. It gives power through knowledge. In stark contrast, the connected voice is developed through relationships with others. It is the voice of knowing through experience. From a patriarchal perspective, the separate voice views the connected voice as having no real substance, relegated in the hierarchy of knowing as being simply anecdotal.

Constructed Knowing

The dialogue and synthesis between the separate and connected voices develops the constructed voice, the fusion of minds (this is the

basis of the third dialogical movement—see “Drawing Tentative Insights” [Chapter 6]). Both the separate and connected voices are significant, and yet from the reflexive narrative perspective, it is the connected voice that takes dominance. The separate voice is merely an informing voice in the matrix of experience. Yet, the constructed voice must be heard, especially if a woman is speaking a different language to men. Power is a language game! Needless to say, it inevitably becomes a focus for reflection in one’s self-realization.

Reflexive narrative consciously gives dominance to the right brain for three reasons. First, to balance the dominance of left brain influence and the idea that women must develop the masculine mind to succeed. Second, that theory and research can only be assimilated into personal knowing through a subjective critique linked to experience. Third, the expression of reflexive narrative cannot be constrained by rational thinking. The expression of narrative is an imaginative, creative, and intuitive process. The drawing of insights is largely intuitive. As Einstein noted, “Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution”.²

Cixous (1996) urges women to write from the body, and yet it is a body that has become stranger, confiscated, and censored by men to the extent that women’s body has become alienated from women. The reflexive narrative researcher, especially if she is a woman, becomes aware of this fact and can break through this sense of confiscation to reclaim her body in her actions and writing. Cixous writes, “A feminine text cannot not be more than subversive” (p. 97). Reflexive narratives are always texts of subversion toward a more satisfactory state of affairs (Okri, 1997).

Woolf (1928/1945) writes in a similar vein:

So long as you write what you wish to write is all that matters; and whether it matters for ages or only for hours, nobody can say. But to sacrifice a hair on your head of your vision, a shade of its colour, in deference to some professor with a measuring rod up his sleeve is the most abject treachery. (p. 105)

Fine words, yet professors are gatekeepers of knowledge, censors, and self-servers determining what counts as knowledge and what gets published. Perhaps it is also the same for men socialized into a *naturally* superior sense of self over women.

NON-WESTERN INFLUENCE

Ojibwe

In a paper titled “Balancing the Winds” (Johns, 2005), I challenged the dominance of a Western science perspective of reflection by exploring how my notion of reflection has been profoundly influenced by reading Blackwolf and Gina Jones’s *Earth Dance Drum* (1996). Blackwolf (Robert Jones) is an Ojibwe tribal elder. Such was the impact of reading this book, I invited him to England as primary keynote speaker to the 1999 International Reflective Practice conference held at Cambridge University.

The idea of *Bimadisiwin as a conscious decision to become* is particularly compelling. To become requires thinking about one’s vision. Blackwolf likens it to a dance that needs practice, discipline, patience, and effort. The reward is meaning in life that brings deep satisfaction and liberation. It lifts the spirit. The mantra is *Believe in the vision, practice the vision, become the vision* (Jones & Jones, 1996, p. 47). It is another expression of self-inquiry toward self-realization.

Blackwolf’s words add a poetic perspective that counters the more prosaic perspective of Western language that generally dominates the research literature. It is *freeing* from the overt technical rational Western approach. It reinforces the ontological sense that reflection is deeply about the self along a spiritual pathway to self-realization, although ideas such as lifting the spirit may be difficult to digest for Western rationality.

Buddhism

The Buddhist influence is multifaceted. However, it is the idea of mindfulness that is most significant as a particularly active ingredient in the research process and naturally cultivated through reflection. Goldstein (2002) writes, “Mindfulness is the quality of mind that notices what is present, without judgement, without interference. It is like a mirror that clearly reflects what comes before it” (p. 88).

The idea of the mirror is a useful metaphor: a mirror smudged with distortion prevents practitioners from seeing or understanding clearly their reality, notably a reality they have come to accept, although not in their best interests. In Marxist theory, this is termed “false consciousness.”

Bringing the mind home is a particular type of awareness. Greenleaf (1977/2002) writes, “We are awake! We are more aware. Cultivation of awareness gives one the basis for detachment, the ability to stand aside and

see oneself in perspective in the context of one's own experience, amid the ever present dangers, threats, and alarms" (p. 41).

Bringing the mind home is clearing the mind of distraction so as to focus mind and energy for the task ahead and to sharpen the reflective faculty. As Rinpoche (1992) notes, "So many contradictory voices, dictates, and feelings fight for control over our inner lives that we find ourselves scattered everywhere, in all directions, leaving nobody at home" (p. 59).

Bringing the mind home is a precursor for developing mindfulness—an essential attribute of being a reflexive narrative researcher and an immediate focus for development early in the research process. Mindfulness enables the researcher to be aware of smudges and wipe them clean so as to see self more clearly, often with the help of a guide. Bringing the mind home is developed by paying attention to one's breath: to follow one's breath in and follow one's breath out³ and letting go of thoughts. Cultivating mindfulness is a natural impact of the research process and an integral aspect of self-realization no matter the underlying discipline. There is much in common between Buddhism and critical social science with its intent to understand and alleviate one's suffering.

LITERARY THEORY

Bertens's *Literary Theory* (2008) offers an informative trip through contemporary literary approaches that are useful for the reflexive researcher to be cognizant of. Literary movements such as Marxist critique, post-structuralism (see Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982), and New Historicism (see Greenblatt, 1981) all offer helpful perspectives on reflexive narrative that resonate with a critical social science. Hence, narratives are always infused by the impact of force. They are inevitable struggles against the odds where self-realization may be viewed as subversive and even actively resisted by those who sense the status quo is threatened. Indeed, becoming a leader is a power struggle against authoritative forces that constrained me alongside my embodied subordination.

SUMMARY

Reflexive narrative as a practical concern is straightforward. It is paying attention to and learning reflexively through experience toward self-realization

configured as a narrative. I have explored potential influences on reflexive narrative to construct the bricolage, influences as I have shown that inform and give nuance to it. In doing so I place reflexive narrative within the spectrum of research which has proved necessary when considering examination at the doctoral level for those who engage in reflexive narrative for that purpose. From a reflexive perspective the dialogue with an informing literature continues as indeed with all knowledge. Perhaps it is better to say that reflexive narrative methodology evolves like a mountain stream finding its own way to the sea without being forced.

True mastery can be gained
By letting things go their own way
It can't be gained by interfering
(Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Ch. 48)

As I explore the six dialogical movements through subsequent chapters, the reader will gain a deeper appreciation of these influences when applied to constructing reflexive narrative.

ACTIVITY

Draw a nine-sided bricolage grid. Write in the middle box “Reflexive narrative as self-inquiry toward self-realization.” Leave the other boxes empty. As you read the book, return and begin to pencil in the spaces using ideas from this chapter or other influences that seem appropriate.

NOTES

1. I cite Holman Jones as a gateway into a deeper theoretical exposition of auto-ethnography.
2. Retrieved June 5, 2017, from www.brainyquote.com/quotes/albert_einstein_129815.
3. There are numerous Buddhist texts to guide using the breath. Useful texts include the following: Paramananda (1996), Rosenberg and Guy (1998), and Thich Nhat Hanh (1993).