

# **‘Reflexivity in Theory, Research and Praxis: Situated, relational, emotional and embodied’ seminar**

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On Friday 4 May, an eclectic mix of academics, students, psychotherapists and counsellors attended the seminar ‘Reflexivity in Theory, Research and Praxis: Situated, relational, emotional and embodied’ at London South Bank University (LSBU). The event was hosted by Zoe Boden, a Senior Lecturer at LSBU and trainee Gestalt psychotherapist, as well as the creator of the ‘Qualitative Approaches to Affect, Feelings and Emotions Network’ (QuAFE; see <https://quafeblog.wordpress.com>). As an introduction, Boden reflexively explored her own motivations for the organisation of the event, positioning the invited speakers as part of her own reflexive research journey, in turn setting the ‘reflexive tone’. As a lecturer and PhD researcher, I was attending the event to support my already reflexive practice, offering me a welcoming interdisciplinary space to explore my own ‘bodily self’ within my research and teaching.

Professor Ian Burkitt (University of Bradford) started off discussions with his focus on ‘The Reflexive and Emotional Self’. Burkitt explored the journey of ‘reflexivity’ within the social sciences, how it has changed and emerged. Reflexivity, he argued, is often understood as something that is done through thought processes. Using the work of Archer (2003) and Giddens (1991) to ground his arguments, he argued reflexivity is more complex than a thought process, it is temporal, emergent through time and space, embedded within the world and our emotional connection with other people. A useful distinction I found was his separation of ‘reflection’ and ‘reflexivity’; reflection, he argued is the ‘turning back on itself’ whilst reflexivity is about using this ‘turning back’ to foster this deeper, felt, and critical understanding. Reflexivity then is about making sense of something, exploring the ‘grounds

that we stand', unpacking why we feel the way that we do about a thought, idea, focus, action or the like. This sense of understanding made me reflect on the concept of reflexivity; is it a practice or a stance? Is it something that is held, done or performed? Is it a bodily understanding, and/or a 'tool' for social connectedness? Certainly, within qualitative methodologies we talk about 'doing' reflexivity, and 'using' it within our research and practice. I asked Burkitt further about reflexivity as a practice. How we can foster the 'doing' of our own reflexivity, and explaining this 'doing action' to students, for example? He suggested biographies as a useful starting point, to enable students to reflectively (and reflexively) explore their own positioning and connection with the world around them; a useful offering for those amongst us that teach. Following the conference, we also discussed my own PhD dilemma: do I have a separate reflexivity-based chapter to demonstrate the importance of including the researcher within research? Or will this separation implicitly fuel the suggestion that the researcher's narrative *can* be separated from the interviewing space? Although we did not come to a conclusion, the discussion raised the implication that reflexivity is not a practice or performance that is conclusively 'done' or 'completed', rather it is a methodological and epistemological practice that holds meaning for the researcher and the overall research process.

Dr Linda Finlay (independent) built on Ian Burkitt's discussion around reflexivity, offering a more psychotherapeutic perspective. Finlay focused heavily on the role of the body within research and grounding our bodily selves with the researched space. She explored different concepts which enabled the therapist (and the researcher) to 'bring' their bodies into their research. I found particularly interesting her discussion around 'Bodily Dwelling', this sense of being fully immersed, residing and lingering within the research space. Indeed, Zoe Boden later offered a useful potential example of this 'dwelling', when discussing her research on interviewing someone who had attempted to take their own life. Within this interview, she explored her own 'bodily feeling' and connection with the room around her when she felt threatened and scared (e.g. 'I can feel my heart rate, I hope he can't tell I am feeling frightened? Where is the door so that I can leave if needed?'). Finlay also explored the valuable inter-subjective relationship between the researcher and the researched, and the

importance of exploring 'the between' (see Figure 1). Reflexively exploring my own work and understandings around reflexivity and the researched space, I felt a sense of tension with Finlay's differentiation between the separate (i.e. researcher or participant) and shared (i.e. 'between') space. Finlay often discussed the researcher as 'impacting' this between space, arguably positioning the researcher as someone that was outward, impacting in. Using my own phenomenological perspective (i.e. drawing on Van Maanen, 2014, Merleau-Ponty, 1945: 2013 and Cataldi, 1996), I understand the researcher and the researched as part of this same researched space, gradually unpacking this layered understanding of experience together through and within space. Irrespective of our different methodological positionings, the importance of acknowledging the body within the research process, and the importance of not 'doing' disembodied research, resonated with me.

Dr Joshua Holmes (Great Ormond Street Hospital) explored reflexivity using a psychoanalytic understanding, based on his new book, *A Practical Psychoanalytic Guide to Reflexive Research*, due to be published in the summer of 2018. Holmes discussed the difficulty of doing research, and the limitations of spoken and written language; *'how do we capture an encounter, the feeling it invokes using only words?'*. Drawing on one of his research interviews, he explored the yes/no responses largely given by someone he was interviewing. He reflected on the difficulty 'invoking' or 'bringing out' her talk, but then reflexively explored the one 'yes' he received, and his own imagination regarding what this one 'yes' could mean. Holmes explored the impact of voicing his own imagination/'fantasy' about what this one 'yes' could mean, perhaps reflexively problematising the implicit – and explicit – suggestion within much qualitative research that explores reflexivity as a process that enables the 'bracketing off' of the researcher to access this 'raw' experience (see for an example: Penner & McClement, 2008). Further linking his own presentation with that of Linda Finlay's and her previous discussions around the body, Holmes explored how he 'made up' this research space and how this space was a different kind of space to one that he typically inhabited within his therapeutic practice *'I could just imagine in therapy sessions this "yes" would lead to a more detailed dialogue'*. Later on in his talk, he discussed his use of interview questions that began with *'I have a sense of...'* before drawing on how he felt

the room was feeling. This question made me reconsider the notion of 'leading questions' often discussed within qualitative research/ interview design. The idea of a leading question is not to lead someone down a certain path, trail of thought or direction. Within this moment when I automatically considered how this 'sense of' could lead an interviewee to an answer, I reflected how using our bodies to inspire discussion, drawing the interviewee to place and immerse themselves within the room, the researcher, and their own 'self', could be anything but aiding rather than impeding sense making. Holmes left delegates with this felt sense of needing to be 'caught up, within and sitting' in our research, complementing both Burkitt and Finlay's discussions.

Dr Carly Guest (Middlesex University) offered something completely different within her talk, reflexively unpacking her teaching practice using managing 'troubling talk' within the classroom as examples of this unpacking. Drawing on sociological, pedagogical and feminist theory, she explored the 'kind of classroom I'm trying to create'. Using reflexive, gender-based diaries, she explored student narratives and how they negotiated and transgressed lecturer-student, class and gender 'boundaries'. When exploring her own expectation around encouraging students to bring personal pictures to class to be used within these diaries, she discussed the importance of lecturers similarly bringing 'themselves' to such discussions. Using the work of Hooks (1994), who draws on feminist theories to provide a more collaborative and engaging learning environment, she argued if we expect students to take 'risks' and reflexively unpack their own assumptions, thoughts and ideas, we too, as people and as lecturers, should expect to be involved in this unpacking. As Guest was talking, I was already considering the ways of integrating my own narrative(s) within my teaching practice. Guest explored the transformatory potential of the teaching space, encouraging attendees of the seminar to consider how teaching is beyond just the delivery of the content, but about the way in which lecturer and students collectively and collaboratively engage in change making and idea-forming.

Professor Gayle Letherby (Plymouth University), and Dr Zoe Boden delivered completely different talks that made a real impact on the room. Letherby's discussion around non-

motherhood, and having her views and experiences rejected as 'incongruent' with being a mother, explored the importance of making sense of differences as well as connections between mothers and non-mothers. Boden, reading directly from her paper exploring a particular interview she conducted with an individual who had attempted to take their own life, further added this 'felt' tone to the day. Before Boden and Letherby's presentations, I was tweeting quotes, pictures and extracts based on the speakers' talks (see #reflexivityLSBU). During these talks, however, it seemed appropriate to just 'be'; be fully immersed and present within this shared affective space that all of the delegates in the room seemed to be inhabiting with me. Boden also explored the tension she experienced between being the 'good', 'professional' researcher who contains their feelings, and listening and feeling the terror of which her interviewee was feeling within that moment. She explored the 'edges' of tolerance that researchers are willing to explore in order to understand the interviewee's experience, with this interview making her reflexively engage with her own 'edge'. This talk certainly made me reconsider my own 'edges', having to leave the room momentarily in order to remind myself where I was, and that I was 'OK'.

To summarise, the day was emotionally 'loaded', full of inspiring talks, offering a transformatory space where delegates from various backgrounds could benefit from others' experiences, ideas and understanding. Reflexivity was unpacked and explored, positioned as something that is embedded within the research space and more generally, experience.

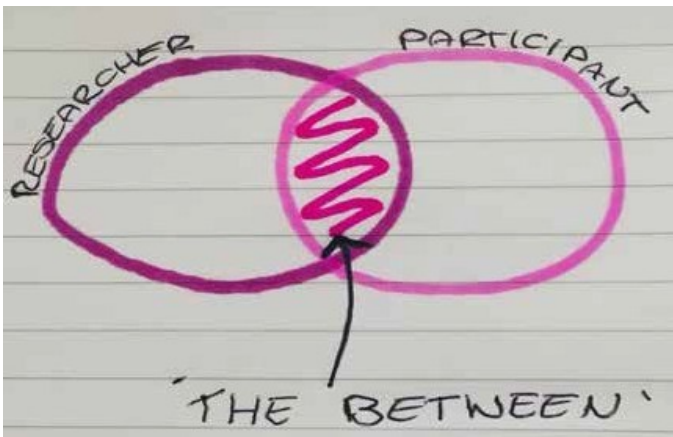
Find out more about my work via my Academia.Edu profile (see correspondence below), or follow me on Twitter @Lauren8McA.

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**Figure 1: The Between**