



Book Review

Reflective Lifeworld Research

Dahlberg, K., Dahlberg, H., & Nyström, M. (2008). *Reflective Lifeworld Research* (2nd ed.). Lund, Sweden: Studentlitteratur.

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by **Dr Prevan Moodley**

Reflective Lifeworld Research is a suitable title for a text that argues for, and gives convincing philosophical credence to, a qualitative sensibility in the human sciences. The key concept is 'reflective'. This is a rightful scientific attitude, the implications of which become the main theme of an academic publication that finally articulates messages that have been superficially addressed in newer texts in qualitative research. In other introductory human science research texts (such as Murray, 2004; Terre Blanche, Durrheim, & Painter, 2006; Willig, 2008), adopting a reflective attitude or its more political variation, reflexivity, is recommended. However, other introductory texts appear to avoid a philosophically rigorous grappling with the reflective and/or reflexive attitude in research. *Reflective Lifeworld Research* takes on this challenge and succeeds in a manner that avoids activist or apologetic discourses, instead adhering to an empirical discourse. This becomes the main strength of *Reflective Lifeworld Research*, a well-grounded and sensible contribution to methodology in the human sciences.

Whereas other texts on research method encourage reflexivity and the reflective attitude in a more cursory manner, this text traces the epistemological roots of this attitude. It therefore offers a much needed philosophical justification for the scientific value of a reflective approach. It goes even further by integrating this particular attitude with the data-gathering and data analysis processes of research. The first chapter accurately documents the philosophy that

shapes the reflective lifeworld approach; chapter 2 introduces the secondary theme, 'openness'; chapter 3 links this paradigm of openness in research to the practice of 'bridling'; chapters 4 and 5 apply the epistemological tenets to data gathering and data analysis respectively; and chapter 6, within the enterprise of science, reconciles the reflective lifeworld philosophy with the canonical requirements of objectivity, validity and generalization. This achievement is not minor, since the writers draw the reader seemingly effortlessly into their paradigm of science (although neophytes to qualitative research, particularly undergraduate psychology students, could deem the crucial chapter 1 to be too philosophical or abstract).

Nevertheless, those readers who find chapter 1 beyond immediate grasp will appreciate its value in subsequent chapters. They must thus persevere, for the arguments for and paradigmatic tenets of the reflective lifeworld approach are illuminated, and become illuminating, thereafter. It is this chapter that provides justification for reflection in qualitative research. The authors explain that the design for reflective lifeworld work is open. Drawing from the hermeneutic philosophies of Gadamer and Ricoeur, the reflective lifeworld researcher is a sensitive human scientist who approaches the objects of study with both curiosity and a sense of tradition, and who seeks to be surprised through the knowledge generation activity. To find the Gadamerian "otherness" in research and/or to reach both the Gadamerian and Ricoeurian point of allowing readers

to continue beyond a researcher's interpretations and messages, is the purpose of the lifeworld perspective. And only a scientific approach of openness and bridling facilitates such action.

Chapter 2 therefore explains the value of openness in preventing what is known in mainstream research as 'confirmation bias'. In reflective lifeworld research it means "to have the patience to wait for the phenomenon to reveal its own complexity rather than imposing an external structure on it, such as the dogmatic use of theories or models" (p. 112). To practise openness, a researcher should reflect on his/her participation and be acutely aware of his/her contributions both in creating the object of study and to relating with the informants or interviewees. Openness brings together the strands of hermeneutics, phenomenology and lifeworld precepts, and these get practised as bridling.

Bridling, which receives focus in chapter 3, is a variation, as the authors explain, of Husserl's "bracketing" and Gadamer's "questioning". Bridling allows the management of the everyday attitude so that a researcher adopts a scientific one. The attitude in lifeworld research (which, in my opinion, becomes more of a sensibility, a highly cynical and critical way of approaching the world) should "problematize the natural attitude" (p. 128). The advantage of this is that understanding is disciplined so that it does not occur "too quickly, too carelessly or slovenly" (p. 130). Due to bridling, assumptions and pre-understandings get interrogated, and the "otherness" may present itself. This is part of the authors' positing of the reflective lifeworld approach, which is often partially included in other research texts as reflexivity. But the reflective attitude has a larger value.

The scientific implications of the lifeworld approach, and specifically of openness and bridling, are profound. The traditions that shape research and knowledge and which get conceptualized ultimately as paradigms impact, as the authors argue, on meta-theoretical and practical levels. Through the reflective sensibility, paradigms can change. Reflective research allows for dialogue between researchers. It allows researchers to talk about research conducted within a particular disciplinary or subdisciplinary knowledge area. Drawing from the Kuhnian notion of paradigms, the authors explain that a paradigm, through such scientific processes as dialogue, review and evaluation, changes through the very processes of "increased self-reflection and self-awareness" (p. 158). In other words, a research practitioner adopting a reflective lifeworld approach contributes a critical perspective that leads to increased objectivity and validity. This concern for validity contributes to the

enterprise of science; and, with illustration through detailed examples of research studies, the application of validity in the phases of data gathering and data interpretation receives in-depth focus in chapters 4 and 5. Maximizing openness towards a phenomenon, reflecting on pre-understandings and traditions, and even considering counterarguments of peers, are ways of ensuring validity in research. *Reflective Lifeworld Research* thus challenges the myth that qualitative research is highly subjective and unscientific. The lifeworld researcher is characteristically highly conscious of practising validity, which, along with objectivity and generalization, is discussed in the final chapter.

The validity of knowledge that is generated through reflective lifeworld research must be ensured. If the knowledge is not valid, then science, and specifically science generated through the reflective lifeworld approach, is of limited use. The authors argue that illuminating experiences and phenomena is most valuable in those professions that cater for care, welfare, well-being and education. This application implies that the approach dealt with in this text would be most beneficial to practitioners, clinicians, caregivers and researchers in the health sciences and social sciences. This includes the disciplines and subdisciplines of therapeutic psychology, health psychology, social work, nursing and allied medical sciences. Patients, clients and health-consumers should furthermore be able to use the end-products of the research work in these fields, because such research, as the authors explain, aims to "verbalize the more or less silent and hidden parts of human existence, which are difficult to describe in other kinds of research" (p. 116). The authors also argue specifically for the relevance of their research approach in addressing medical and bodily-oriented phenomena. In so doing, improved systems of care, education and welfare in its many practices could benefit from lifeworld research.

Despite both the immense value of a reflective lifeworld approach to research and the pedagogical contributions of Dahlberg, Dahlberg, and Nyström's *Reflective Lifeworld Research*, a weakness of the text is purely textual. This refers to multiple instances of editing errors that would seem to have required greater diligence on the part of the publishing role-players. That flaw aside, the text could be valuable to students as a core reading, particularly in entry-level postgraduate courses, or as adjunctive reading in advanced undergraduate courses. The text should be required reading for all researchers, academics and students who work with, or are familiar with, qualitative research methods, particularly those who claim an affinity towards hermeneutic, phenomeno-

logical and traditional qualitative approaches. Those researchers using case-study designs (such as the hermeneutic case-study or phenomenological case-study) could also benefit from familiarity with the philosophical background that gets simplified in a readable and accessible manner in this text. Such researchers would benefit from the reminder that the research process is not merely a combination of phases or steps, but one in which a particular sensibility should be cultivated. This idea is not new: Willig (2008), for example, approaches qualitative research as a process not of following “recipes” but of

moving towards new frontiers with a sense of “adventure”. But Dahlberg, Dahlberg, and Nyström mine the idea with strong philosophical arguments about interpretation that may frame qualitative research practices. This sensibility is based on the attitude that scientific work in the social sciences requires consciousness about how empirical activities differ from those activities that stem from the more unquestioned everyday attitude of relating to the world. The project of qualitative research then achieves both voice and value.

About the Author

Dr Prevan Moodley is a lecturer in the Department of Psychology at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa. After completing two Masters degrees, an MA from Rhodes University and an MA(Psych) from the Rand Afrikaans University (RAU), he obtained a D.Litt et Phil from the University of Johannesburg in 2006, with his thesis focusing on *The Therapeutic Use of Movies with Gay Men in a Group Context*. As a registered counselling psychologist, Dr Moodley specialises in the areas of depression, trauma, stress, vocational counselling, and HIV/Aids.

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