

Ethic as Method

A Case for Reflexivity

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Where *I'm* coming from:

- Text = Eventual Unit of Analysis
- Qualitative Methods
- Participant observation / Individual interviews
- Critical, Interpretive, Symbolic Interactionist
- Rhetorical Criticism and Argumentation
- Postmodern leanings: Knowledge as Fragmented and non-cumulative.
- Critical interrogation of method, generally, not just online.

Thoughts about qualitative research

Good qualitative research, online or off,
is not difficult to find or assess,
it is difficult to formularize.

Good research, online or off,
is hard work.

Good research comes from the heart.

Some Caveats

- Methods first, ethics follow
- Not a balanced overview of issues or methods
- Fuzzy word choices and overgeneralizations
- Answers are inside you, not in me.

My main claim:

“Fool, Fool, back to the
beginning is the rule.”

Inigo to Fezzik,
The Princess Bride.

or: “Reflexive Ethics” is about turning the gaze
inward to the heart and outward to the research
design.

or: Context is Everything. Be sensitive to it.

...my other main claims:

- “Research” is not the point of departure, problem-solving or world-fixing is.
- All method decisions are ethic decisions.
 - Situated
 - Consequential
 - Privileged
- Examining method can reveal ethic. Examining ethic can guide method.
- ICT/CMC reveals weaknesses in methods of social inquiry and knowing, *generally*

Why is this stuff important to consider?

- Actual research process falls under the radar of most ethics discussions
 - Research design is often considered solely logistical or procedural
 - Traditions of research behavior are mostly only followed, not questioned.
 - Procedures are top-down and a priori, not grounded in context or inductively derived.
- Lack of flexibility and adaptability = weak and possibly damaging research

Why else is this stuff important to consider?

- Most decisions are based on habit.
- Laws and Regulations are (in many ways) habits writ large.
- Scientific Knowledge about the world is derived from our *choices* and *decisions* in research design and analysis.

Habit occurs on all levels

- Individual level
- Organizational level
 - Organizations change technologies, not structures (Fountain)
- Sociology of Knowledge level
 - Belief in knowledge as cumulative and additive

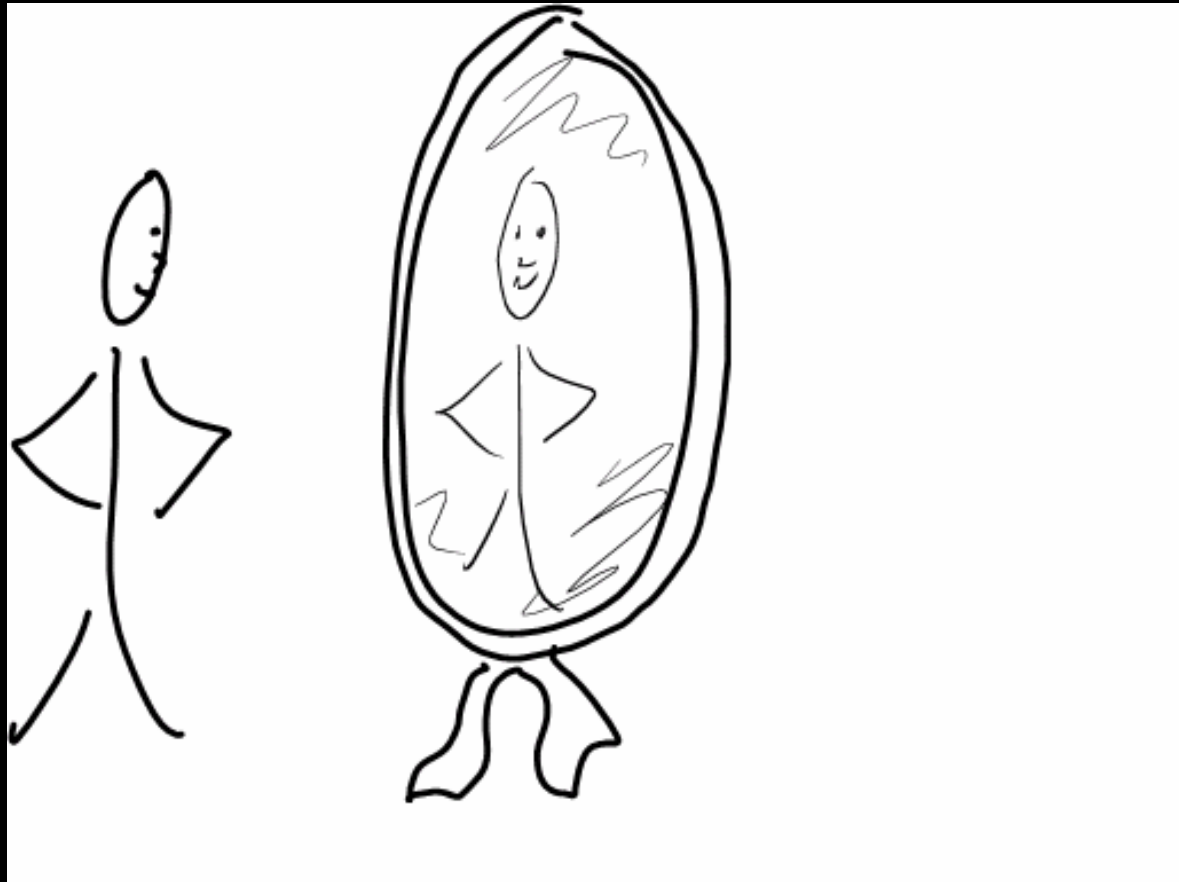
My soapbox (continued):

“The Ethical researcher is a Reflexive Researcher”

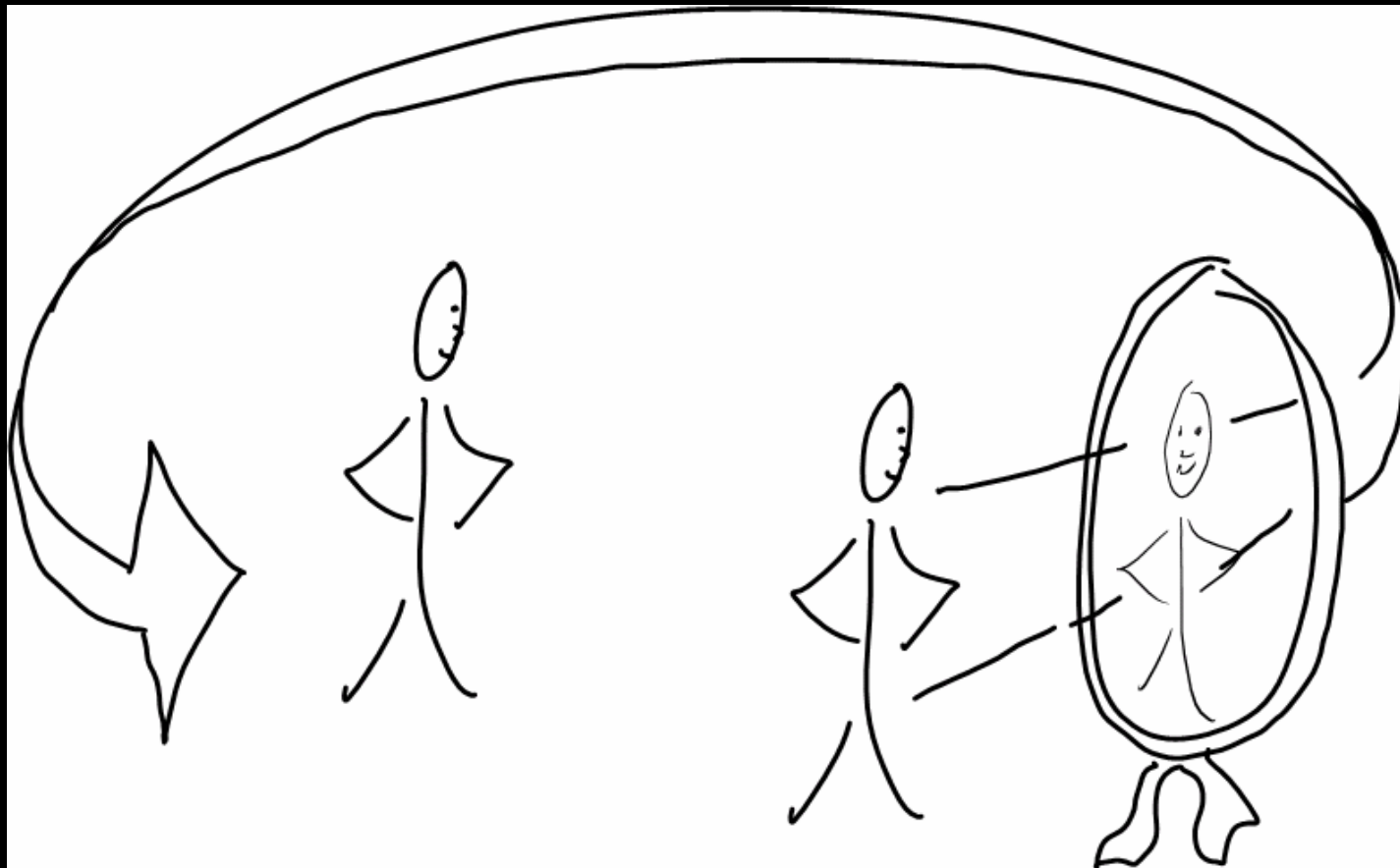
The reflexive researcher is:

- Prepared
- Present / Aware
- Adaptive
- Context Sensitive
- Honest / Mindful

Reflection



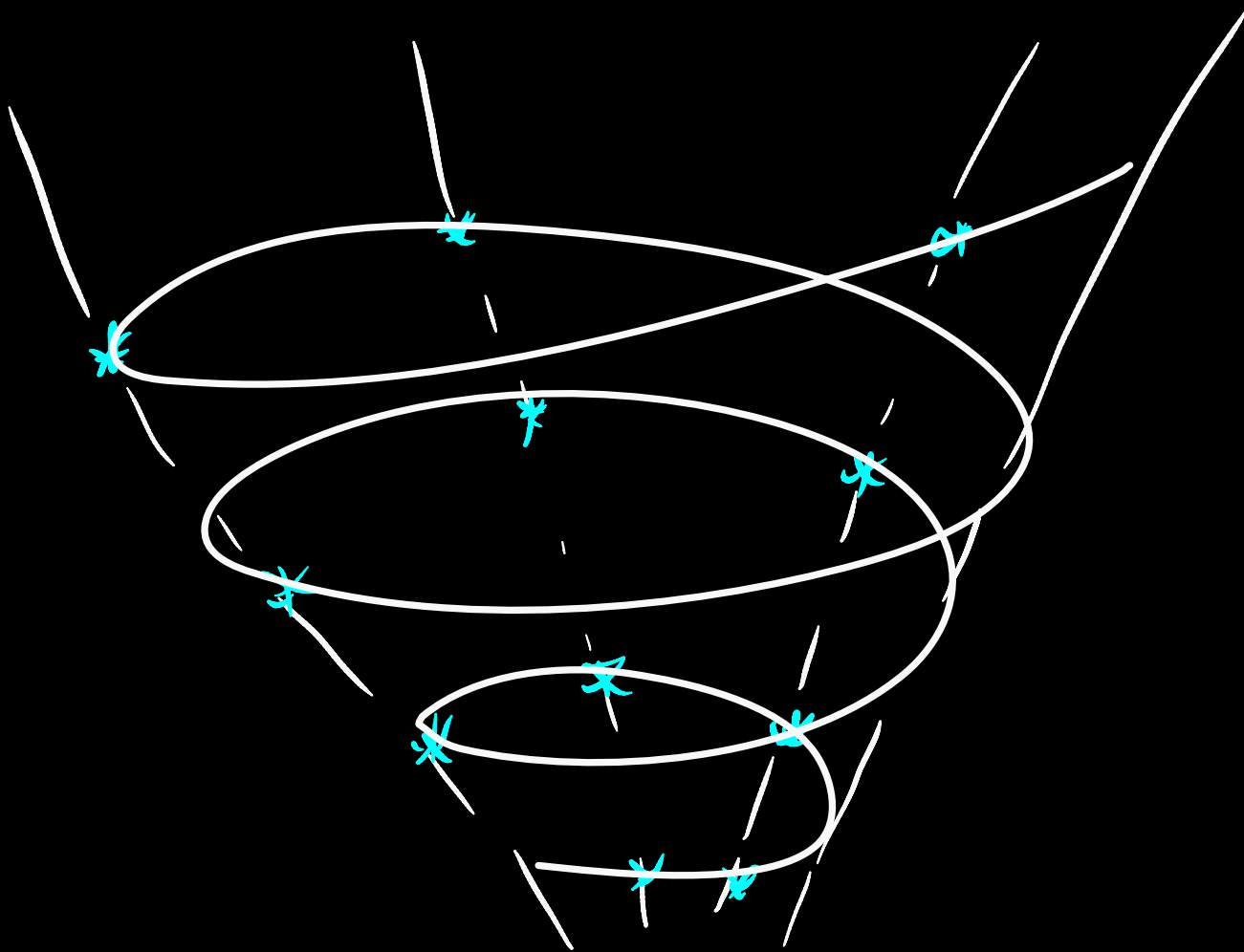
Reflexivity



“Method” = always multiple.

- Method of constructing the question and laying out general design of a study.
- Method of accessing the participants and defining field boundaries.
- Method of collecting information.
- Method of filtering and organizing information.
- Method of analyzing data into general themes.
- Method of interpreting general themes.
- Method of representing self and others in writing.

decision points and research: a spiral process.



Decision Point: Why do it at all?

- What's the purpose of the research?
- What's the outcome and why is research necessary to this outcome?
- What's the point? —to get tenure, to get in the Library of Congress, to add to the overflow of knowledge we already have, to help change society?
- Again, why is academic, published research necessary for the above points?

Decision Point: Data Collection (general, most discussed)

- How do I get the stuff I'm gonna study?
- How do I logistically or ethically manage this stuff?

Decision Point: Data Collection (specific, often ignored)

- Building (not finding) boundaries around the “field”
- *Accomplishing* interaction
- Deciding what counts as meaningful “data”

Decision Point: Interpreting “Other”

- Who is this person (group)?
 - How do I know who they are?
 - How can I trust what they say?
-
- Who are they, *really*?
 - How can I *verify* who they are, to authenticate my findings?
 - How can I trust them without seeing them?

Dialogic sensibilities

- Speaking of Buber:
 - Self exists only in relation with other
- Or Bateson...
 - All we have are differences.
 - Meaning is not in one or another thing. It is in between them, in their relations.
- Or R.D. Laing:
 - I “only exist through those who are nothing apart from the being they have through me.”
- Or Anthony Giddens:
 - Institutional principles only exist in interaction with research practice.

Research from the Inside-out

- Researcher as participant/subject
 - Interpretation from inside the context
 - Interpretation from inside one's being
 - Interpretation as dialogue
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- Researcher as the representative, the editor, the picker and chooser of what gets included in the report, etc.
-
-all about interrogating the self as interpreter.

Notes to end on...

- The research question and purpose for research drive procedures and design.
- The context guides responses to sensitive situations.
- Reflexivity engenders responsibility and accountability.
[“Reflexive Ethics”]
- Broad training aids in adaptation and flexibility.

More broadly, Revolution versus Evolution

- Revolution
 - Online is not like offline at all
- Evolution
 - offline is a lot like online
- Revolution
 - Danger of backlash against invention
 - Call for reconsideration of purpose and goals of inquiry
 - Call for shifting thought from “privacy” to “accountability”
 - Call for expanding our goals for these meetings

Selected useful resources

- About Dialogic notions of self and other
 - R.D. Laing (1969). Self and others
 - G. Bateson (1974). Steps to an ecology of mind
 - K. Gergen (1991). The saturated self
- Good examples of or about reflexivity
 - M. Wolf (1992). Thrice told tale
 - C. Rambo-Ronai. Reflections on child sex abuse (JCE)
 - M. Ashmore. The reflexive thesis
- Writing as Inquiry
 - L. Richardson (2000). Writing as inquiry (in HQR2)
 - M. Fine (1994). Working the hyphens (in HQR1)
 - Van Maanen. Tales of the field.