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Abstract

The everyday novelties of contemporary society require emotional reflexivity (Holmes, 2010a), but how can it be researched? Joint interviews can give more insight into the relational and embodied nature of emotional reflexivity than analysis of text-based online sources. Although textual analysis of online sources might be useful for seeing how people relationally negotiate what to feel when feeling rules are unclear, interviews allow observation of emotional reflexivity as done in interaction, especially if there is more than one interviewee. This highlights not only the relational, but the embodied aspects of emotional reflexivity, and shows how it is a useful concept for researching aspects of emotionality not well addressed by other concepts such as 'emotional intelligence' and 'emotion work'.

Keywords: emotional reflexivity, textual analysis, interviews, methodology

Researching emotional reflexivity

Emotional reflexivity refers to the intersubjective interpretation of one's own and others' emotions and how they are enacted. Intersubjective means constituted in interactive relations with others (cf. Mead, 1962). As relations to others become more diverse and less well-defined, and social conditions more complex, emotional reflexivity is increasingly necessary; people drawing on emotions to navigate their path, especially when facing new situations or ways of living where an emotional habitus is little help and feeling rules are unformed or unclear (Holmes, 2010a). Emotional intelligence (see Goleman, 1996) and emotion work (Hochschild, 1983), may seem similar but describe more cognitive skills learned and employed to control feelings in accordance with situated norms. Emotional reflexivity is not skills exercised by individuals, is not purely cognitive nor exercised in isolation; it is embodied and relational, in ways beyond the habitual; infusing people's interactions with others in the world (Burkitt, 2012; Holmes, 2010a). It is difficult to research like much emotional experience (Fineman, 2004). Textual analysis can provide useful data on emotional labour or emotional norms, but it lacks the embodied and real-time interactional nuances necessary to understand active emotional reflexivity. Similarly, interviews with a single participant provide only some of the kind of rich data required to analyse emotional reflexivity. Interviews with two people who know and interact with each other (joint interviews) are most fruitful for such analysis.

Analysis of emotional reflexivity is aided by a Symbolic Interactionist framework. This framework builds on definitions of reflexivity as the capacity via which individuals think and act to create their lives within a social world supposedly no longer governed by tradition (Giddens's 1992), but challenges the overly cognitive basis of reflexivity theories. Emotional reflexivity has been ignored and Symbolic Interactionism can remedy this via its focus on how social worlds are formed by the meanings we give to selves and to the actions of others. Mead (1962), for example, highlights the relational production of social selves and his concept of the generalized other can help in

understanding emotional reflexivity in terms of how people reflect and act via contemplation of what others say, think, do and feel (Holmes, 2010a: 147; Holdsworth & Morgan, 2007). Emotional reflexivity is further understood as the practices of altering one's life as a response to feelings, and to interpretations of one's own and others' feelings, about one's circumstances. It is a capacity exercised in interaction with others.

Textual analysis offers insights into how emotional reflexivity is done relationally, but interviews, especially joint interviews, provide opportunities to examine both the embodied and relational aspects of emotional reflexivity. The first section briefly surveys the literature on researching emotional reflexivity. The remainder of the paper seeks to develop methods for its research. Firstly I explore textual analysis of online advice about manners on social networking sites like Facebook (Holmes, 2011). Secondly, joint interviews, in this case couples interviewed together, are examined as a better way to expand a relational view of emotional reflexivity and highlight some of its embodied aspects.

Emotional reflexivity and reflexive research

How to research emotional reflexivity has received little attention. Methodological guidance is lacking on using analysis of existing texts, or interview transcripts, to sociologically investigate emotions or emotional reflexivity. Yet some of the most respected sociological investigations of emotional life use textual analysis. Norbert Elias's (2000/1939, p. 72) *The Civilizing Process* analyses etiquette books in order to reveal social processes about which we have 'very little direct information'. Neither he nor others using similar texts to research emotions (for example Hochschild, 2003; 1983; Scheff, 1990; Wouters, 2007) discuss, what is presumably some kind of

thematic analysis in any detail. Elias presents quotations from succeeding centuries under headings referring to different social activities such as dining, sleeping and blowing one's nose. They are used to demonstrate a gradual change in emotional and bodily norms. A brief explanation is given to make sense of these changes in light of the argument, which asserts that socialisation, rationalisation, individualisation and pacification combine into a civilizing process which sees more and more regulation of individuals' bodies and emotions as their interdependence increases and power relations between groups alter within wider processes of social change. These authors may provide effective discussion of topics such as emotional cooling, feeling rules and the importance of shame, but it is difficult to assess the limitations without more information about how the analysis proceeded. For example, these scholars may have used the method in ways likely to create distance between subjects and their lived emotional experience (Ellis & Flaherty, 1992, p.2). It may be that interviewing can overcome some of these difficulties.

However, discussion about emotional reflexivity through interviewing (King, 2006; Reay, 2005) is almost non-existent (Brownlie, 2011; although see Skeggs, Thumim & Wood, 2008), and reflexivity is usually dealt with methodologically in terms of researchers' reflections on their relations with research participants. Ethnographic research is more often considered than textual analysis or interviewing (but see Hubbard, Backett-Milburn & Kemme, 2010; Tipton, 2008; Walby, 2010), but almost always the emotional reflexivity of participants is ignored, thus missing how they 'reflect in distinctive ways upon their experiences … with others, as well as their sense of self' (Mason, 2004, p. 167). It should be remembered that Chicago School sociologists undertook reflexivity not only as a way to question the discourses and practices on which their work was based, but also to consider how 'the discourse, reasoning, and interaction of participants' constituted their social world (Pollner, 1991, p. 370-1; see also Denzin, 2006). Bourdieu's reflexive sociology similarly advocates 'the sociology of sociology … as the necessary prerequisite of any rigorous sociological practice', but also suggests that everyone should strive to see the object of study from a variety of viewpoints

(Bourdieu cited in Waquant, 1989, p. 33). This is thought necessary to overcome the strength of habitus in guiding how different kinds of people engage in reflexive struggle and its likely outcomes.

However, researching emotional reflexivity requires acknowledging that participants may often not be able to rely on habitus. To the degree that detraditionalization has occurred, reflexivity is arguably undermined by the complexity and rapidity of change (Archer, 2003; Gross, 2005). Habit may now be less crucial than reflexivity in guiding action (Archer, 2003), but at least Bourdieu speaks about reflexivity as a capacity of the general population and not just as something researchers do when considering their relationship to those they research (see Denzin, 1994; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003; van Enk, 2009, p. 1266).

Despite strong connections between interpretive sociological methodology and the sociology of emotions (Denzin, 1990; Hochschild, 1990), there is little methodological discussion on how research participants might exercise an emotional reflexivity that draws on wider social norms and institutionalised sets of social relations. Some studies investigate the emotion management or reflexivity involved in how research participants relate to other people and cultural products in their social world (for example, Cahill & Eggleston, 1994; Skeggs, et al., 2008). Where methods literature does deal with the emotions of interview participants it is usually as something that the researcher wants to avoid evoking, that are risky for participants, or must be managed by researchers in order to get the information they want (Corbin & Morse, 2003; Frisoli, 2010; Hubbard et al., 2010; Thuesen, 2011). The emotionality of participants outside of their relationship to the interviewer are very seldom considered and the part that emotions play in other parts of the research process are neglected.

In trying to research emotional reflexivity problems of analysis emerge because interview and other self-report data do not offer a transparent window onto behaviour, especially emotionality (Fineman, 2004; Frith, & Kitzinger, 1998). The difficulties of interpreting words as expressions of emotional reflexivity are typically ignored (cf. Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). It is difficult to decide from people's interview accounts when and how emotions are involved within thinking and acting to alter their life. Many emotions are not easily articulated or may be deliberately withheld from accounts of actions. It is not always possible to know what people are feeling, especially when they themselves may be unsure and may have considerable emotional ambivalence; experiencing contradictory emotions at the same time (Gould, 2009, p. 12 n12), or feeling the unpredictable effects of emotions on interactions (Holmes, 2011). This ambivalence is sometimes apparent when participants share their experiences in interviews with researchers, but problems with researching emotions can be particularly acute at the point of analysis when a written transcript, bereft of body language and tone of voice, is searched for indicators of participants' emotions. The researcher has to rely on t interviewees' words, supplemented by any notes about, or memories of body language during the interview and by occasional returns to the original recording to hear the tone. Imperfect as words are for conveying the embodied and relational aspects of emotions, they must be taken as telling us something. If participants say they were scared or joyful, then this has to be taken seriously, while remembering that a presentation of self is involved (cf. Frith & Kitzinger, 1998; Goffman, 1959). As Symbolic Interactionists seek to understand truths rather than *the* truth (Plummer, 1991, p. xiv), this is not necessarily problematic. Even if people are uncertain of, unable to articulate, or may lie about their emotional state and experiences, there is an interpretation to be made. At the very least, we can surmise how they want to present themselves, what they think they *should* say and what they *can* say about how they feel. However I begin by discussing how well emotional reflexivity can be researched via analysis of what people 'say' in existing texts.

Using textual analysis to research emotional reflexivity

Textual, or documentary, analysis of advice books can reveal that changing norms require more reflexivity, but advice books prescribe how people *should* behave, rather than describing how they *do* behave (cf. Seidman, 1991, p. 6). Nevertheless, prescriptions can reveal that forbidden feelings have previously been commonplace and emotional norms are changing (Elias 200/1939). Rather than just doing emotion work or emotional labor to fit with static 'feeling rules' (Hochschild, 1984), reflexivity is often needed to determine what to feel.

Some evidence of how emotional reflexivity might be required and employed can be gleaned by researching the 'netiquette' for using social media sites. I conducted a small exploratory study by searching for online advice about Facebook manners using the Google search engine. The same search terms were entered 18 times between 7 December 2008 and 20 March 2009: 'Facebook etiquette privacy feelings'. This may not have found all suitable pages, and the rapidly changing internet makes it impossible to calculate search reliability (Oppenheim, Morris, McKnight & Lowley, 2000). The results are not representative, even though the pool was extensive. Each time the search was performed hundreds of thousands of webpages were listed. Thus the first, fifth and tenth result on each page of the results was selected. For each of the 18 repeats of the search the selection restarted on the page of results following the last selection, so if I finished with the tenth result on page 15 I restarted with the first result on page 16. After the twenty-eighth page of results saturation point was reached and no new or relevant web sites were appearing. A final sample of 45 sites was obtained after removing 34 irrelevant selections and 4 that were repeats. Most of the texts analysed were blogs or blog threads[1], or articles in online magazines and newspapers. The ethics of using online material were carefully considered (Baker, & Whitty, 2008; Beer & Burrows, 2007;

Hookway, 2008), but these selections are almost all intended for a 'public' audience, especially by blog authors. Blog commenters were given extra anonymity by changing their nicknames. The sample is heavily biased to the USA, with some pages from the UK, Canada, and Australasia, but provides a small addendum to Elias's analysis of Europe, which can be adapted to America (Mennell, 2007) and potentially other former European colonies. The online advice provides evidence of new forms of norm creation because they are more participatory than the expert forms Elias analysed. The high volume of advice and comments suggests they are key in disseminating these emotional norms.

This analysis of online advice about Facebook etiquette looked for words and phrases that conveyed emotional reflexivity or directly named emotions. For example, advice exhorts users to exercise what I am calling emotional reflexivity in terms of having care for people's feelings. American social media consultant Chris Brogan gives a typical example in his blog:

> [T]here should be fundamentally little difference between what you would do online or offline…. Remember, you are talking to real people with real feelings, and being kind and considerate of others is always better than being rude, or nasty or simply callous (Wilmena cited on Brogan, 2007: July 9; see also Bryant cited on Majendie, 2008).[2]

This can be read as a reflection oriented to action on the emotional problem of online social networks as 'an unholy collection of people who, in everyday life, you'd probably go to great lengths to keep apart' (Marsden, 2008) and the need to remember that the network includes 'real people with real feelings'. This giving of advice can be read as a guide to how to be emotionally reflexive: rather than being rude and nasty, be kind and considerate.

Emotional reflexivity is interpreted as appearing in the comparative and relational sharing of how to feel through these etiquette advice texts. Unlike conventional manners manuals, they do not just prescribe actions but contain examples from users' own and others' experience. For example, rs (cited on Zorn, 2008) said he 'didn't accept a friend request from a high school pal who [he] had a major falling out with a few years ago. But some people [he] know[s] have mended their feuds by becoming friends on Facebook'. He mentions his action in not friending someone with whom he had argued, but notes that others may respond differently to their anger and by friending conciliate. Emotional reflexivity here appears as different to individual emotion work or labor exercised in relation to feeling rules; it is something done in more participatory, interactive ways in relation to a range of others, from specific high school friends to more general 'people I know' (cf. Holmes, 2011).

In giving advice about and sharing experiences of what I am calling emotional reflexivity it is possible to see how people might reflect and act when uncertain about 'feeling rules' (Hochschild, 1983). Facebook operates broadly in relationship to friendship, in the context of which feelings are usually supposed to be good or 'positive'.[3] Much advice seems to centre around how to avoid 'hard feelings', for instance you can 'accept all friend requests, but then quietly remove those you don't want (Dunfield, 2008; see also Lisa cited on Zorn, 2008). Many others advise that users 'delete everyone whom you do not have good memories of/ cannot recall' (Arthur cited on Yelp, 2008). However, it is unclear whether deceiving others by friending and then deleting them is intended to protect the feelings of the requester or the one receiving the Friend request. The orientation of online advice towards the action end of the reflection-action process does not always tell us very much about how emotions are being felt and thought about before being acted upon.

Textual analysis allows interpretation of how people are emotionally reflexive in relational ways in dealing with these new mediated forms of social networks. Emotional reflexivity can be glimpsed in the words used to give advice and in reports of actions, although of course we do not know – anymore than in interviews - how faithful an account of actions this might be. In particular, words give limited information about emotional reflexivity because they fail to convey the emotionally important bodily clues available in face-to-face interaction. Also, while there may be a conversational format to some of the texts, the discussions are often about emotions rather than revealing how people feel.

Interviewing to research emotional reflexivity

Interviews may offer more insights into emotional reflexivity than existing texts, but solo interviews may not inevitably encourage participants to reveal more of their emotions (Holmes 2010b). This argument draws on joint interviews with twelve couples and solo interviews with two women in distance relationships[4] in the UK (Author reference, 2014). Where interviewees do make confidences they can give considerable insight into how interviewees are emotionally reflexive in their everyday lives (Brownlie, 2011). Donna, one of the women I interviewed alone, disclosed emotions, saying that a major reason for her distance relationship was 'so that if anything did go wrong [she] wouldn't be left in quite so a bereft state emotionally as [she] was when [she] left [her] husband'. Wendy however, spoke little about emotions in the other solo interview, focusing on practical 'benefits' to being apart, such as 'more independence' for her. Emotions might be more visible where there are more participants interacting.

Joint interviews have advantages for researching emotional reflexivity because researchers can observe participants taking account of each other's feelings in embodied, not just verbal ways. For example, the desire of partners interviewed together to present themselves as a caring couple (Seymour, Dix & Eardley, 1995), may be helped or hindered by bodily gestures and interactional detail (Goffman, 1959). Couples may still be critical of each other when interviewed together but are more likely to show how they care for their partner's feelings than when interviewed alone. For example, Joanne says that when she talks with Mark on the telephone it is usually her

> prattling on about work and it's terrible it's not an equal situation because when Mark starts going into a similar detail about work I tend to lose interest [laughs]. I tend to glaze over or forget what he is talking about but you've [Mark] got a lot of stamina for listening to me.

Joanne, like the women I interviewed alone, reveals that she is not always keen to listen to her partner's woes, but reveals this in a way that praises him for listening to her. Joanne and Mark voice how much they care for each other, but this is also rendered more credible by physical affection, like a discreet touch on the elbow or a more visible pat on the knee. Even if the researcher does not record these bodily cues in any detail, at the time they help her or him to make sense of the relationship and the participants' emotions.

Joint interviews with people in distance relationships are a good way to research emotional reflexivity because the unconventional aspects of their relationship mean that they rely less on tradition or habit and in joint interviews we see them exercising forms of 'communicative reflexivity' (Archer 2003). In interacting in the interview they externalise 'internal' conversations about how to feel. For example, James claims that 'it wouldn't work if one of us, … was kind of jealous or obsessive' and Gwen says:

GWEN: No definitely, it wouldn't work at all but I think again living apart it gives it makes you do different things as well because I joined a gym the first year you were away, which I used to go to quite a lot surprisingly, which was good because there was nothing else to do …

Gwen suggests that distance relating makes you do different things, but that feeling jealous or obsessive is unnecessary if these different things are just going to the gym. Partners are unlikely to confess infidelity during a joint interview, but Gwen and James seem to indicate that they have reflected on usual 'feeling rules' about being jealous of partners who are away and found that they have to feel differently if they are to make distancing relating work. Gwen implies that she was faithful by saying that with him away there was 'nothing else to do' apart from go to the gym. Similar reassurances were offered in the other joint interviews, suggesting that these couples had strong enough relationships to allow them to detail the emotional ups and downs of being together (Kirchler, Rodler, Hölzl & Meier, 2001, p. 112). Emotional reflexivity appears key to navigating distance relating because it is a departure from conventional relating that produces uncertainty about how to feel.

Joint interviews may be more revealing for researching emotional reflexivity because both the relational and embodied aspects of reflexivity can be seen in the interaction between the participants, especially where those participants are in an intimate relationship.

Conclusion

Emotional reflexivity is about reflecting and acting in response to one's own and other people's feelings, and yet its increasing importance (Author reference, 2010a) has yet to result in a proper

assessment of the problems of researching it. In methodological accounts reflexivity usually refers to the relationship between researcher and participants, but this is not enough. Emotional reflexivity is a capacity not just of researchers, but of participants. Textual analysis can provide insights into how people exercise this emotional reflexivity in relational ways. This is especially clear in the new ways of relating discussed where feeling rules are unclear. However, analysing texts gives little account of the embodied cues which can greatly assist our understanding of how emotional reflexivity is done in interaction. Interviews and joint interviews in particular, thus have an advantage in providing an interactive situation through which emotional reflexivity can be examined. In joint interviews the researcher can observe how interviewees exercise care for the feelings of others in interaction, often in embodied ways. Joint interviews allow the interviewer to see how couples offer each other verbal and tactile reassurance as they communicate their emotional reflexivity with each other as well as the interviewer. Mostly researchers are forced to rely on the words of participants to describe how they feel. It is important not to see these words as a direct connection to emotional experience, but as part of an account told also through body language. Words can tell us things about how people want to present themselves and about what they think and feel they can say about feelings. Participants' accounts sometimes explain how they try to translate interpretations of their own and other's feelings into actions, and this indicates that there is more to emotional experience than emotional intelligence or emotion work. Textual analysis indicates that considering how to feel may be relational but joint interviews make it possible to observe the embodied aspects of emotional reflexivity as relationally exercised in interaction.

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Endnotes

[1]   A blog is a 'personal website, based on posted entries that are displayed in a chronological order' (Hardey 2008: 56). A blog thread is one post together with the comments received from readers.

[2]   The reference for the quotation appears first and then references for similar examples from the texts analyzed. Links can be found in the reference list if readers wish to explore further.

[3]   I would contest whether any emotion can be definitively labelled as either positive or negative. The individual and social 'benefits' of any emotion depend on the particular social situation in which they arise and are expressed intersubjectively.

I identified couples as in a distant relationship if they typically spend two or more nights apart in a working week. This adapts Gerstel and Gross's (1984, p. 1-2) definition of a commuter marriage as one between 'employed spouses who spend at least three nights per week in separate residences and yet are still married and intend to remain so'.