The Reflexive Relay: Using Reflexive Journals to Promote Student Agency and Staff-Student Syllabus Co-Creation

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PART I: Geoff

First year Psychology students arrive at university expecting to be able to share their stories. As one student wrote on the course blog: 'Everyone who studies psychology does it because they want to understand themselves…or the people around them' (Fellows, 2018). Except for participating in a few 'ice-breaker' classroom activities, perhaps, or maybe by engaging in a therapeutic exercise on a counselling and psychotherapy course, students are rarely given the opportunity to share their biographical histories with each other. Why are novice Psychology students almost immediately disappointed by their discipline's denigration of their experiences? Why are Psychology students socialised into believing that their stories are not important? These are the questions that inspired the assessment that this case study describes.

Psychology welcomes its students by immediately stigmatising their identities. This is strange because Psychology is devoted to studying the very entities, qualities, and phenomena that psychologists themselves experience as a function of being human. 'People are knowledge-making subjects who make themselves as they make knowledge', Roger Smith has written. *Reflexivity*, then, is a fundamental characteristic of psychological knowledge production and conceptualisation: 'This word characterises the nature and consequences of people being both subject and object of knowledge' (Smith, 2007, p.8). Natural scientists can remain untroubled by reflection precisely because they study externally existing objects such as particles, chemicals, cells, and planets. Astronomers study lunar cycles, psychologists study

lunacy; biologists examine neurons, psychologists explore neurosis. If the natural sciences look down microscopes and peer through telescopes, then Psychology gazes into a mirror.

The social sciences and the natural sciences study very different kinds of things. Historically, it has been entirely appropriate for the natural sciences to privilege reductionism, quantification, the experimental method, and observer neutrality – the set of philosophical assumptions known as 'positivism' - precisely because these stipulations have been so successful in terms of generating knowledge of the natural world. Unfortunately, from about 1875, Psychology followed suit, embraced positivist principles, and attempted to imitate the natural sciences' pursuit of objectivity. As historian of Psychology Jill Morawski (2005) has explained, one of the most remarkable consequences of this 'triumph of positivism' within Psychology – operationalised through the laboratory experiment's production of quantitative data – 'is the discipline's disregard for the problems of reflexivity'. This oversight enabled experimental psychology to escape 'reflexive regard' (p.78).

Nevertheless, since at least the 1980s and accelerating in the 2000s, Psychology's historic reliance on positivism has been increasingly challenged by the momentous growth of a variety of qualitative methodologies. As a result, Psychology students are now usually (and minimally) exposed to reflexivity in the context of learning how to do qualitative research. As Lisa Lazard and Jean McEvoy explain, whereas the notion of objectivity 'is underpinned by the principle of neutrality and distance', subjectivity is 'the principle of inescapable situated embeddedness. A reflexive stance to research recognizes that perspectival distance is not, in any straightforward sense, possible' (2020, p.164). Defining reflexivity as 'a form of critical thinking which aims to articulate the contexts that shape the processes of doing research and subsequently the knowledge produced' (p.160), Lazard and McEvoy argue that researchers must acknowledge their own contextual positioning by reflecting on 'personal characteristics, such as gender, race, affiliation, age, sexual orientation, immigration status, personal experiences, linguistic tradition, beliefs, biases, preferences, theoretical, political and ideological stances, and emotional responses to participants' (p.166). Here, the emphasis is on proper acknowledgement and management of the researcher's subjectivity. Qualitative research, in other words, requires the appropriate conceptualisation and articulation of identity.

Psychology students are frequently confused about the aims and scope of reflexivity, often misunderstanding it as an inducement to confess to 'bias', which implies a return to objectivity and neutrality. But as Lazard and McEvoy explain, reflexivity is about positioning, not bias. Psychology students rarely get the opportunity to critically reflect on their own relationship to psychological knowledge in this sense, in terms of analysing how (and whether) psychological knowledge applies to them, and them to it. The Reflexive Journal assignment reported on in the present paper was an opportunity to encourage students to transcend the methodological imperatives of both quantitative and qualitative research and to simply tell their personal stories without having to manage their subjectivity or to account for their identities.

The Reflexive Journal Assignment[1]

Representing 50% of the final assessment mark of the 'Conceptual and Historical Issues in Psychology' unit (a critical psychology course), the Reflexive Journal asked students to critically reflect on either: i) how the intellectual content of the course had impacted their own sense of self, or ii) how psychological knowledge in general had informed their own personal experiences in a wider sense. Students were invited to write three 1000-word Reflexive Journal pieces on any aspect of the unit or, indeed, on any aspect of their entire Psychology degree. The Reflexive Journal provided students with several workshop-based classroom discussion opportunities. By devoting workshop time to encouraging students to share their personal, experiential, and affective experiences, the classroom became a space of collective insight and mutual respect.

The Reflexive Journal was a meaningful opportunity for students to specifically tell their own stories if they wanted to, or to critically examine their relationship to psychological knowledge more generally, without having to undertake identity work if they so preferred. Although it was a mandatory part of the unit's assessment, students could decline the disclosure of personal information if they so wished by undertaking a more traditional

[1] Many thanks to Rhian Fawcett for setting up the Reflexive Relay blog: 'Passing on the Critical Baton to Generation Y'. For examples of entries from students on the course in previous years, see: **https://thereflexiverelay.wordpress.com/**

discipline-focussed, critical-scholarly reflection instead. Remaining private throughout the process was acceptable and did not negatively impact a student's engagement with the course. Indeed, reflecting on the *intellectual* content of their Psychology degree was the unit's original assessment prior to the creation of the Reflexive Relay blog.

The aim of the assessment, as presented to students at the start of the unit, was:

> to inspire you to reflect on the implications and applications of some of the ideas we have discussed throughout the course. Personal reflections and stories are great places to begin, as long as you seek out further support for your ideas in the scholarly literature.

Student engagement was assessed in accordance with two Learning Outcomes:

1. Integrate and synthesize knowledge from across topic domains, in order to appreciate the interaction between psychology, society and the self.

2. Critically reflect on the origins and consequences of psychological concepts and practices.

Students were expected to produce three 1000-word entries, mini-arguments or position statements, properly referenced - but not full essays as such - which evidenced engagement with some of the unit's topics. It was acceptable to submit two entries, or even one, as long as several concepts on the course were discussed and the assignment totalled 3000 words.

After overcoming their initial anxieties about the process, students described the sharing of personal stories as inspiring, enlightening, and empowering. Students responded with great enthusiasm to the assessment, often reporting that they had rarely had an opportunity to tell their stories throughout their degree. Rhian Fawcett created a blog ('The Reflexive Relay') to publish student journal entries. The blog allowed the sharing of reflexive narratives between different year cohorts, an unusual opportunity that produced unanticipated benefits. Indicative titles of Reflexive Journal entries that were published with

the students' permission, included: 'The influence of Neoliberalism on Sexuality in a changing Modernity' (Eric Andrew Mcnamara), 'Biopower and Pre-Marital Genetic Screening' (Eli Kasmir), 'When Place Becomes Territory: Understanding Shared Meaning of Space and Football Hooliganism' (George Franklin), and 'Cerebral and Rhizomatic Selves' (Oscar Fitzpatrick). Popular Reflexive Journal topics included feminism, vegetarianism, 'race' and racism, and sexism in advertising. Fiona Knight discussed her previous career as a detective police sergeant in terms of the demands of emotional labour. Fred Diamond analysed the unethical exertion of power through surveillance in his experience of an unskilled retail job. Nina Fellows reflected on the impact of psychological discourse using Althusser's concept of interpellation. Hana Bassett analysed her experience of disability by simultaneously using and critiquing Debord's notion of the situationist *dérive*. Inspired by such stories, I gradually shifted the emphasis of the Reflexive Journal away from the original formal-intellectual assignment towards the more personal-critical assignment of recent years.

Part II: Paige

The State of Affairs

Before approaching the reflexive assignment, I had been required to write reflexively only a few times, usually as a component in a larger qualitative research report. My experience of higher education aligned with Paolo Freire's description of the banking model of teaching (Freire, 1970), where I was treated as an empty receptacle into which my educators would be obliged to deposit information. Throughout my academic career, the importance of reflexivity had been emphasised, yet in my experience it had not been prioritised. Consequently, I was not used to having agency or control over my education. Bracher (2006) describes those students whose identities derive from an authoritarian pedagogy as likely to identify with, and conform to, authority and masters. My experience of education aligns with this description of the master's dominant pedagogical position, with myself taking the role of the subservient student. Not only were my teachers exerting this authoritarian power in asserting themselves as the experts and myself as the unknowledgeable student, but I was also complicit in perpetuating this dynamic.

Because this style of teaching did not require me to engage critically with the academic content (Freire, 1970), it required little effort on my part and for me to accept it without question. What I would later come to understand is that without critical engagement and reflection, I was unable to apply or understand what I was learning in relation to my own experiences. I was able to regurgitate what I had been told, but I was lacking the ability to appreciate the power behind what I was being taught, and how that power may apply to myself and to others. The Reflexive Journal assignment subverted this standard that I had grown used to: it was impossible to approach this from the position of the unknowledgeable. We were therefore obliged to reject this passive identity, something that had never been required of us.

A Crisis of Discomfort

To reject the roles of master and slave, authority and amateur, knowledgeable and unknowledgeable, was deeply uncomfortable. I had fully embraced the role of the subservient, unknowledgeable student 'slave' to the lecturer's 'master', and I craved authority to conform to. I did not know how to determine my own position without assimilating the views of those I saw as experts. This position was fundamentally opposed by the Reflexive Journal assignment. It would not be possible for me to write about my own experiences, reflect on my own life and perspective, while conforming to authority, as the slave does to the master. I would have to be vulnerable - both in that I had to reflect on my own experiences and also that I had to step outside of the roles that I had found comfortable, easy and safe. What I would soon discover is that discomfort can be a powerful catalyst for personal, professional and academic development. This is a lesson that I have been able to take forward beyond the Reflexive Journal assignment, and that has contributed to my resilience in all areas of my life.

The Results of Reflexivity

It was exactly this vulnerability, discomfort and lack of perceived safety that was beneficial, not only for my academic development but for my development as a critical and reflective human. Boler (1999) describes in her 'pedagogy of discomfort' that uncomfortable feelings

are crucial in the pursuit of challenging social inequality. I indeed found that the Reflexive Journal assignment allowed me to assume the position of the knowledgeable expert of my own experience and learning, in contrast to previous assignments. It gave me the freedom to take control of my learning and my own academic development. It was transformative. However, this was not the greatest positive lesson that I learned by engaging in reflexive writing. I found that while I was writing the assignment, my position changed. My thinking evolved, and with it my construction and understanding of my own experiences evolved too. As a person who engages with the social world as well as the academic world, I developed, and this was a process I had never experienced before.

The Reflexive Journal assignment also allowed me to develop an appreciation of others' perspectives and experiences as well as my own. Allowing myself to value and treat my own perspective as having authority enabled me to appreciate others as authorities of their learning and experiences. When trapped in the roles of lecturer/master and student/slave, I saw my fellow students as slaves also. To break free from these roles meant seeing those around me as both experts of their own worldview and learners - whether they be my fellow students or my teachers. This created a nuanced, complex but communal relationship with my educators and my fellow students where we all had knowledge to share and all could learn from each other, rather than seeing my cohort in the same way that I saw myself: unknowledgeable vessels for knowledge to be 'banked' into. Ultimately, this experience humanised myself and my peers, and once I had gained this perspective, it became far easier to both recognise and resist future efforts to dehumanise through use of the master/slave positions.

Conclusion: Paige

Before the reflexive assignment, my exposure to reflexive writing had been limited. I was not aware of its power to discomfort, transform and develop me as both an academic and as a person. It was uncomfortable to break out of the roles that had been pushed onto me and that I had embraced. But through this experience, I learned the power of rejecting authority and engaging critically with information that is presented to me. I learned confidence in my own position and interpretation of the world and gained respect for

others' perspectives. By increasing my confidence in myself as an authority, not a slave, I was also able to appreciate the subjectivity of my own experiences. Rather than seeing myself as an authority with the power to dominate others, I came to see myself as an authority only on myself, and therefore to see others as authorities on themselves also.

Conclusion: Geoff

I was considerably moved by Paige's account of her experiences on the unit. Her reflections on the Reflexive Journal, now several years after she graduated, represent a unique 'double reflexivity'. The original assignment required students to reflect on their relationship to Psychology but not to reflect on the reflection. One unintended benefit of the assignment, as Paige's story demonstrated, was how it nurtured agency through the telling of personal stories. Conceptualising the Reflexive Journal as a catalyst for nudging Psychology students to move out of what Jacques Lacan (2008) called the 'Discourse of the Hysteric' and into the more critically astute 'Discourse of the Analyst', I have come to understand reflexivity as a disruptive and vital element of the student experience. I did not anticipate that, by changing the focus from an intellectual to a personal one, the Reflexive Relay blog would impact the unit's assessment so profoundly. Sadly, a change in university regulations recently forced the unit to retain only a single assessment, a traditional essay. Although the reflexive journal unfortunately had to go, its brief presence made me realise how important it is to mobilise and listen to student voices.

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