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# Reflexivity and Its Limits in the Study of Social Inequalities

Jon Dean\*

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**Abstract:** »Reflexivität und seine Grenzen bei der Untersuchung sozialer Ungleichheit«. This article argues that while great strides have been made in understanding the socially constructed nature of much empirical (qualitative) data, the challenge this presents to notions of “objective” social science, and therefore the requirement for all researchers to undertake reflexive work, there are limits to such undertakings. Against a vital social requirement for individuals to act reflexively in analysing their own positioning and privilege, I want to caution against placing too much emphasis on the emancipatory possibilities for researchers of being reflexive in data collection and analysis in the study of social inequalities. Using reflections from Matthew Desmond’s work on evictions in the US, the article argues that while personally and socially imperative, reflexivity’s central role must remain as a methodological guard against errors emerging from positioning and difference.

**Keywords:** Reflexivity, positionality, methodology, social inequalities, insider/outsider, Matthew Desmond.

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## 1. Introduction

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To do social science research properly, one must be reflexive – no serious methodologist would honestly argue otherwise today. This is especially true in studies focused on social inequalities when the researcher is not part of the disadvantaged or discriminated against group. Such outsider research requires a keen reflexive eye for unequal power relations that may arise in data collection, the differing interpretations of perceived injustices witnessed, and the very process of objectification itself (Bourdieu 1990). But being reflexive, while a core research skill, should not come to dominate research findings. Taking as its inspiration Matthew Desmond’s (2017) concern that the reception of his vital research into evictions in the US concentrated on the reflexive and emotional skills required of him as a researcher to explore the topic rather than the study’s findings and their implications for social policy

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and the moral economy of access to housing, this contribution will follow Desmond's lead in cautioning against the over-promotion of reflexivity. Reflexive methodological work is the servant of research findings that aim to highlight inequalities and tackle social injustices, rather than its equal partner – a tool rather than an end in itself.

Firstly, this essay outlines key elements of reflexive social research, including its definition, rationale, and differing elements and processes, based in Bourdieu's reflexive sociology. Secondly, I move on to outline Desmond's concern; and thirdly, I offer some views on what this means for reflexivity's role in social research, particularly coming at the current political and cultural moment of movements such as Black Lives Matter and wider articulations about "checking your privilege," and where boundaries between research and personal development should be drawn.

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## 2. Reflexivity's Place

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### 2.1 The Rationale for Reflexivity

Reflexivity is the social research process by which a researcher accounts for their positionality. Generally, we take this to mean asking questions such as "How does my social class affect how I am gathering this data?" "Would another researcher in the same context have different findings or interpretations?" or "Does the very process of approaching a situation *as a researcher* reveal different cultural logics?" To ask such questions – that are theoretical, disciplinary, methodological, personal, or practical in nature – is to be aware that we must subject objectification to objectification itself (Bourdieu 1990, 14), or conduct a sociology of sociology. Disciplines are increasingly aware of such a need, and a growing literature exists advising researchers and students of a myriad number of ways of doing reflexivity (for example, Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Dean 2017; Lumsden 2019).

The rationale for why such a process should take place are myriad: Bourdieu (1999, 608) writes of the fallacy of the "positivist dream of an epistemological state of perfect innocence," where we have no influence over our data and experiments. We know that everything about a researcher, such as "your race and gender, where and how they were raised, your temperament and disposition – can influence whom you meet, what is confided to you, what you are shown, and how you interpret what you see" (Desmond 2017, 325; Dean et al. 2018), and reflexivity provides a methodological tool for dealing with such influences. In wider terms, recent research documenting the rise and return of "race science" (Saini 2019) has shown that the supposedly "neutral" disciplines of the natural sciences are far from it, with little

understanding of their historical and cultural contexts, that science cannot enlighten if it itself still needs enlightenment. Fundamentally, the study of human beings is an embedded one – even when the research is statistical in nature – and to pretend otherwise “obscures more than it illuminates” (Khan 2011, 202). Doing work that recognises this embeddedness and brings the humanness of the research relationship to the fore is better than pretending neither exist.

All of these views come back to one central concern, one clear reason for embedding reflexivity in research practice: it produces more insightful, more accurate data. There is always “the subjectiveness and one-sidedness of social perception” (Brunt 2001, 84), and it is much more “scientific” to bring this to the fore and try and show one’s method and reasoning for dealing with it than hide it (Blackman 2007). The reason for this is not “to discourage scientific ambition, but to help make it more realistic. By helping the progress of science and thus the growth of knowledge about the social world, reflexivity makes possible a more responsible politics, both inside and outside of academia” (Bourdieu, in Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 194). “Reflexivity sections” in methodologies in journal articles, social science doctoral theses, or monograph appendices have rightly become much more expected as a result. However, I want to caution against seeing reflexivity as *more* than this, and to illustrate this I want to operationalise Desmond’s (2017) work on evictions.

## 2.2 All Research Is Personal? A Concern from Desmond

In *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, Matthew Desmond’s (2017) eighteen-month ethnography of the housing crisis engulfing poor people in the city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, we see how the private rental market is stacked against those who need it the most, with the majority spending over half of their income on it, and the staggering fact that after the financial crisis over 1 in 8 renting Milwaukeeans were evicted. There have been few recent sociological studies that have articulated better than Desmond’s the obvious and hidden social inequalities that drive Western neoliberal societies, especially in terms of generating media attention and crossover into non-academic audiences. Being an ethnography, Desmond was deeply embedded in the lives of his participants, poor people and landlords across the city, who welcomed him and his audio recorder as he documented the horrific vicissitudes of this soul-crushing crisis, which saw White families’ wealth reduce 11 percent from 2007–2010, Black families by 31 percent, and Hispanic families by 44 percent (ibid., 125). This race inequality was apparent in eviction rates too – Black women in Milwaukee were twice as likely as Hispanic women to report being evicted at some point in their lives, and three times as many as White women (ibid., 299). Desmond’s book is filled with such revelations, and

these statistics, some of which social researchers have become inured to over the last decade as austerity has run rampant, are made real through the deep data of his fieldwork, which was gathered while living in a trailer park and the inner city. Feeling that too often writing about poverty either takes the agential approach of blame, or the structural approach of unfair fate, he argues that poverty is a relationship, because it stems from the mutual dependence and struggle between rich and poor.

Desmond is certainly methodologically reflexive in his study. In a detailed afterword and copious endnotes (similar to the epistemically reflexive conclusion “Understanding” in Bourdieu’s *The Weight of the World* [1999, 607-26]), he directly addresses places where he feels his presence had an impact on the data. He muses on and assesses the ways in which his whiteness afforded him “special privileges in the ghetto [...] my interactions with the police were non-intrusive and quick” (Desmond 2017, 322), as he found himself treated as superior or senior, and called “sir,” by people he had never met. And his position as an outsider researcher had to be worked out of him:

It takes time too, to be taught how to notice things by people like Keisha, who have learned when to listen and what to look for. The people I met in Milwaukee trained my vision by modeling how to see and showing me how to make sense of what I saw. (ibid., 324)

Why I am writing about Desmond though, is revealed in a small section, right at the end of *Evicted*. Desmond seems to become quite negative and agitated by the academic milieu’s response to his work, first recounting:

I am frequently asked how I “handled” this research, by which people mean: How did seeing this level of poverty and suffering affect you, personally? I don’t think people realise how raw and intimate a question this is. [...] The honest answer is that the work was heartbreaking and left me depressed for years. (ibid. 328)

And then, more pertinently for our analysis, arguing:

And after almost every academic talk I have given on the material in this book, I have been asked questions like: “How did you feel when you saw that?” “How did you gain this sort of access?” These are fine questions, but there is a bigger game afoot. There is an enormous amount of pain and poverty in this rich land. At a time of rampant inequality and widespread hardship, when hunger and homelessness are found throughout America, I am interested in a different, more urgent, conversation. “I” don’t matter. I hope that when you talk about this book, you talk first about Sherrana and Tobin, Arleen and Jori, Lorraine and Scott and Pam, Crystal and Vanetta – and the fact that somewhere in your city, a family has just been evicted from their home, their things piled high on the sidewalk. (ibid., 335)

Any social science researcher, especially those interested in qualitative studies of hardship and inequality, will have been in those seminar rooms and talks and heard those questions. Personally, I am sure I have asked variants

of them myself, many times, to speakers studying all sorts of contexts. These questions are the easy way out. At one level, they are questions that are generous to the author, giving them an opportunity to expound on their methodological strategies, or tell more interesting stories that occurred in their research. But I also feel they are stories that help us avoid the issues – eviction is too hard, too complex, too miserable for us to want to investigate, so we ask soft-ball questions about the researcher, their emotions, their processes, their positioning. These are all important methodological questions, but when compared to the fact that fewer and fewer families can afford a roof over their head, they seem like academic trivialities.

### 2.3 Reflexivity as a Methodological Tool

This small moment from Desmond's work speaks, I believe, to a wider concern. A white researcher conducting a study of race inequalities, in which they rightly choose to undertake some reflexive work analysing and accounting for their privilege and outsider status, may emerge from the research a more engaged person, more aware of their (un)hidden advantages. Doing the research may, in fact, help them be a better person. These are potential positive implications of truly reflexive research into inequalities, across different demographic and status differences. But such development should not be the primary aim of the research. For it to be so would be continuing the privilege, using up participants' valuable time just so you can practice self-development; a similar phenomenon to the one witnessed where black authors and activists are forced to respond negatively to being asked to explain things that have already been explained many times (Eddo-Lodge 2018). The focus of the research – revealing a social inequality and identifying its (structural) causes – should not be relegated below the researcher going on some "journey." As May (2015, 402) puts it, "Reflexivity is not about producing a relativism that celebrates context over content, but enables a more rigorous social science."

Such a debate is akin to the popular idiom "check your privilege" – whether that is related to class, race, gender, able-bodiedness, sexuality, or other identity or demographic marker, or an intersectional combination of these identities and others. While sociology as a discipline has long-established the notion of privilege and how it may help you in life – in active ways (such as access to elite education or financial or emotional security) or in the absence of attack (such as a lack of negative experiences with the police, or sexualised catcalling in the street) – the notion of privilege, and that members of dominant identity categories should start to accept their position and account for it somewhat in their lives, has also rightly (but slowly and inconsistently) crossed over into mainstream, everyday culture. Notions of checking your privilege are incredibly important in causes like the continuing Black Lives

Matter movement because white people are being asked to actively recognise and act on their own role in (sub)consciously reinforcing structural racism, rather than merely engage in passive allyship. Checking your privilege is a core moral component of being, for example, a white activist and ally in a black-led movement, and many blogs and articles have been written documenting how white people can do this work (for example, see Great Big Story 2020). The same is true in other fields like disability rights activism, feminism, and arenas that focus on intersectional disadvantage. And as documented above, a reflexive consideration of one's positionality can or will (and it certainly does for me) entail checking one's privilege, and is especially important in researching social inequalities and injustices to which one does not suffer or within groups to which one does not belong.

However, in the context of research, reflexively checking your privilege is not an end in itself, but a key methodological tool in understanding how one's gaze may affect the data one gathers and the interpretations one makes. Fundamentally, it is a tool to *gather more accurate and insightful research data* and effect social change as a result of those findings better and quicker. While it may be a personal achievement in and of itself, or an important developmental stage for an individual, it should not come to smother research data. What I caution against is the primacy of reflexive and emotional concerns above solid, reliable, useful findings that help us make a better world.

Reflexive work has long suffered from the accusation of narcissism (Bourdieu 2007; Delamont 2009; Dean 2017, 141-3). That to take oneself as an object of study, even if only for a brief moment as part of an expected reflexive piece within a wider study, is to let scientific vanity take over. This remains nonsense in the abstract, an accusation often levelled at autoethnographic or biographical work that uses the researcher's story or experience to illustrate a wider social or cultural point. But in the specific, when a piece of work is trying to reveal or assess an inequality and its causes and consequences, and especially when the researcher is an outsider and not of the community studied, keeping one's eyes on the prize – bringing attention to the injustice and hopefully help do something about it – should not get buried under personal accounts that are easier to talk about. Sociology should not be a contact sport (Duneier 2002), so I am not going to cite work that I feel does fall into this misapplication of reflexivity. Instead, I offer this critique as a pre-emptive caution to students and researchers who centre reflexivity, rather than conceptualising it as one of many vital methodological tools.

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### 3. Conclusions

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Reflexive social science encompasses how researchers submit to critique their ways of thinking about the world not as some act of psychological reductionism, but how presuppositions are built into concepts and practices in order to inform a “sociology of sociology.” (May 2015, 402)

After reading about reflexivity for a decade, teaching about it at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, doing it as a researcher, and writing a book about it, it may seem counter-intuitive for me to write an article that seems to argue it is not that important. That certainly is not my intention – reflexivity is vitally important, in our personal lives, in our roles as social and moral beings, and as researchers. What I am arguing for, however, is a certain separation of its purposes and functions between these spheres. The reasons I endeavour to be reflexive in my personal life are different to the reasons behind methodological reflexivity in my research work. Some of the skills crossover certainly, and the hard work should crossover because the boundaries between me the social being and me the researcher are far from clearly drawn, but I think it is useful to just occasionally reassert what it is research into social inequalities *is for*. Researchers should constantly ask themselves what purpose their reflexivity is serving. Sociology students and doctoral candidates are well aware of the need for reflexivity, but generalised statements of positionality are not the same as epistemic reflexivity. How did “you being you” affect the data collected and the analyses and conclusions drawn? How the process made you feel is interesting, but maybe only as a methodological learning or advice for others in similar situations entering similar fields (how to deal with difficult encounters for example), *not necessarily* for revealing something about the nature of the inequality itself and what needs doing about it. This mirrors the well-meaning but misplaced contemporary rush to decolonise Western curriculums through critiquing those famous scholars from the Global North rather than *just reading and engaging with scholars from the Global South*. The easiest thing to do is turn the attention inward rather than use reflexivity for what it ultimately needs to be used for in scholarship into social inequalities – as a means to a research end, rather than a research end in itself.

Reflexive thinking obliges me to accept that I may be wrong of course. That no one is doing this, that everyone privileges the findings of their studies in reflexive work, or that no one instrumentalises their research into inequality as a way to highlight their emotional response as opposed to what they found out. In Mills’s (1959) famous dictum, the sociological imagination concerns seeing where individuals’ subjective lived experiences (biography) meet structural forces and wider society (history). I caution we have to be wary of



letting sociology slip too much toward the biography side of this imagination, and the biography of the sociologist at that, a caution to which my own teaching, supervising, and research are certainly subject.

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