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Ethical Reflexivity as Research Practice

Hella von Unger*

Abstract: »*Ethische Reflexivität in der Forschungspraxis*«. In debates on methodology, reflexivity describes an analytical practice whereby researchers take the context of the research situation into account, including the influence researchers have on the study and its results. Following constructivist epistemological principles, reflexivity is a required component of qualitative methodologies. There are various approaches as to what aspects of the researcher and the situation to consider – and how to go about them. In this paper, I propose that researcher reflexivity not only serves analytical, but also ethical purposes. Using an example from a qualitative organizational study, I show that field experiences can be both an insightful datum for analysis as well as grounds for “ethics in practice.” Ethical reflexivity involves considering the social and political implications of research, avoiding harm, and ensuring participants’ rights while striving for accountability in pursuing scientific goals. These multiple tasks create tension and contradictory demands on researchers, which are not easily resolved. Yet the way forward lies in addressing the challenges and seeking solutions not only with scientific peers, but also in dialogue with actors in the field.

Keywords: Anonymization, ethics, organization, reflexivity, risk, qualitative research, ethical reflexivity, research practice.

1. Introduction

In the social sciences, reflexivity means many things (Lynch 2000); it is a “polyvalent term” (Atkinson 1999, 192). It describes an essential human capacity in some theories and an organizing principle of late modernity in others (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994). In debates on methodology, which are of particular interest here, the term refers to a concept and analytical practice whereby researchers take the context of the research situation into account, including the influence researchers have on the investigation and its results (Cohen and Crabtree 2006). Most methodological approaches conceptualize

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reflexivity as a required component that – if practiced correctly – enhances the quality of research, especially qualitative research (Breuer, Mruck, and Roth 2002; Maxwell 2013).

In this paper, I propose that researcher reflexivity may not only serve analytical, but also ethical purposes. In fact, ethical and methodological reflexivity are interrelated, and the widespread practices of reflexivity for analytical purposes are a nourishing foundation and relevant component of ethical reflexivity. However, the types of questions asked in ethical reflexivity, the guiding principles considered, and the conclusions derived altogether differ as the scientific quest for generating valid and trustworthy knowledge is combined, expanded, balanced, and juxtaposed with considerations of the social and political impact of the research. Thus, methodological reflexivity asks what needs to be done according to the respective theoretical and methodological assumptions of a given study in an effort to generate valid results. In turn, ethical reflexivity asks the researcher to consider possible implications for the participants of the study and the larger social and political context in which the research is embedded. Ethical reflexivity is about managing research relationships and striving for accountability in research (Clarke, Friese, and Washburn 2018, 35). It is a genuine component of an engaged and critical research practice that acknowledges the fact that research is not separate from and outside of, but rather entangled with the social phenomena under study. On a more general level, ethical reflexivity is an appropriate response to societal questions and criticism surrounding the role and value of social science research in contemporary, globalized, and postcolonial times. Ethical reflexivity should not, however, be confused with “procedural ethics” (Guillemin and Gillam 2004) as exemplified by institutionalized ethics reviews, which can produce quite the opposite of ethical conduct in research (Canella and Lincoln 2011; Dingwall 2008; Hammersley 2009; Iphofen 2011).

2. Reflexivity in Qualitative Research

All types of empirical research require researcher reflexivity (Cohen and Crabtree 2006). However, in practice, the discourse has been largely developed by qualitative scholars subscribing to an interpretive paradigm. This does not come as a surprise as this paradigm is based on constructivist epistemologies that require reflexivity as a methodological consequence. As an epistemological position, constructivism assumes that knowledge processes do not merely depict reality as in a mirror, but actively generate it through their own organization (Hirschauer 2011). All knowledge is, as Donna Haraway (1988) aptly coined it, “situated knowledge.” Methodologically, constructivism thus implies reflexivity: the observers are part of what can and ought

to be observed. This perspective is deeply engrained in the field of qualitative research, as Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (2011, 3) stated in the introduction to their well-received handbook on qualitative research: “Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world.” As the researcher is part of the research situation, her/his actions and influence must be submitted to the same analytical scrutiny as those of the participants and other data.

Reflexivity thus constitutes a core methodological principle and practice whereby researchers take the context of the research situation into account, including their own social positions and subjectivities: They reflect on their roles and interactions in the field, managing their (unavoidable) involvement as co-constructors of observations, interview data, ethnographic material, or video data. While the influence of researchers’ standpoints on the construction of knowledge has been discussed early on by scholars in the sociology of knowledge (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Mannheim 1928/1952), debates on reflexivity as an analytical practice have gained particular momentum in recent decades. Angela Kühner, Andrea Ploder, and Phil Langer linked this development to intersecting academic discourses, including (a) “a wider reflexive turn” in the social sciences following the crisis of representation (in ethnography), the postmodern deconstruction of grand narratives, and an acknowledgment of research as an inevitably situated social practice; (b) the debate about “quality criteria in, and for, qualitative social research” (as opposed to quality criteria in quantitative research); (c) critical theories of gender, queer, postcolonial, and indigenous studies which “require power-sensitive approaches” and emphasize the social and political implications of research; and (d) the rise of methodologies, such as autoethnography, participatory and peer research, which “blur the boundaries between subject-matter and researcher-subject” and raise questions about the “subjectivity of the researcher as a privileged ‘tool’ for collecting and interpreting data and presenting research findings” (Kühner, Ploder, and Langer 2016, 699). These interrelated developments create a situation in which researcher reflexivity has been established as a core component of research practice – albeit with a plurality of shapes, definitions, and procedures.

The approaches differ in their understanding of what aspects of the researcher and the situation to consider – and how to go about it. Some approaches focus on the lived experience and subjectivity of the researcher, for example, following psychoanalytic traditions including the works of George Devereux (see, for example, Breuer, Muckel, and Dieris 2018; Gemignani 2011), which call for self-reflexivity as “introspection” (Bereswill 2003). Practices of methodological self-reflexivity ask about the relationship of the researcher with the topic and field of study, showing that insider and/or outsider positionalities have relevant consequences in terms of access to the

field, empathy as well as blind spots and limitations in the investigation (Berger 2015). Approaches to reflexivity informed by interactionist theories often analyze documented field interactions in retrospect to reveal implicit frames and interaction orders (see, for example, Bereswill 2003; Jensen and Welzer 2003; Welzer 1995). Researchers scrutinize how participants read and address their bodies and sexualities and how this shapes the meaning produced in the research encounters (Walby 2010). Yet others warn not to engage in person-centered “navel gazing” or “narcissist reflexivity” but instead to pay attention to the implications of the researchers’ professional training and social habitus (Bourdieu 1993). For Pierre Bourdieu, reflexivity is about questioning the class bias and academic lens of the researcher, not the “lived experience’ of the knowing subject but the social conditions of possibility – and therefore the effects and limits – of that experience and, more precisely, of the act of objectivation itself” (Bourdieu 2003, 282). Despite these differences, a commonality prevails: a shared notion that researcher reflexivity, practiced in one form or another, is a necessary component of research practice – throughout the process, and particularly in the phases of data analysis, in which it acts as a productive “epistemic window” (Breuer, Mruck, and Roth 2002, para. 4).

My argument here is that reflexivity serves multiple functions. In methodological terms, it increases the quality and validity of the study findings. It may serve an important second purpose, though: to increase researcher accountability in ethical terms. This aspect will now be explored in more depth.

3. Ethical Reflexivity

Ethical reflexivity not only asks whether research qualifies as good research in scientific terms, generating reliable, “trustworthy” results (Maxwell 2013), it also addresses the research study as a *social* process with potential consequences for all parties involved (von Unger 2014, 2016). Historically, the key concerns of research ethics addressed participants’ rights and wellbeing and the possible risks and harm involved. However, what actually constitutes ethical conduct is heavily disputed. The controversies mainly revolve around institutionalized review procedures which are obligatory in many countries – including Australia, Canada, the UK, and the US (Israel 2015). A substantial critique has developed, especially articulated by qualitative researchers, pointing to the shortcomings and dangers of regulatory procedures and of codified ethical standards and principles more generally (Dingwall 2008; Hammersley 2009; Israel 2015; van den Hoonaard 2011). The codes and regulations are ill-fitting for the social sciences, it is argued, as they were historically developed in other disciplines, particularly in medicine, and then

expanded without adequate interrogation and adaptation to fundamentally different research contexts. The discrepancy is particularly stark for qualitative research that works on very different theoretical assumptions and methodological premises and also entails fundamentally different research situations, procedures, and relationships. It is a widely accepted fact that “the emergent, dynamic and interactional nature of most qualitative research” involves complex ethical responsibilities (Iphofen and Tolich 2018, 1). The question is, however, how to fulfill these responsibilities.

Let me take you on a brief excursion into the history of review procedures: Ethical codes and regulations for medical research were developed after World War II. The examination of the crimes of national socialism, especially the reappraisal of medical research during the Nazi era with its cruel human experiments, killings, and sterilizations, is considered to be the central cornerstone of the debate (Israel and Hay 2006, 27-8). As a reaction to the Nuremberg medical trial, the *Nuremberg Code* was drafted in 1947 (by an American military tribunal). In this code, research-related principles and guidelines were formulated for the first time, such as the requirement that participation in medical research must be voluntary and based on informed consent. In the following years, these principles were taken up and further developed by the World Medical Association. They were incorporated into the *Declaration of Helsinki*, which was first published in 1964 and has since been expanded and revised several times. However, it was quickly discovered that codes alone did not suffice.

In the early 1960s, the Jewish Chronic Disease Hospital in Brooklyn was denounced for conducting cancer experiments on old and chronically ill patients (McNeill 1993, 57). Focusing on authority and the propensity to violence, psychologist Stanley Milgram’s experiments caused a stir and were controversially discussed (Baumrind 1964; Milgram 1963, 1964). In addition, a critical article by physician Henry Beecher (1966) pointed out ethical problems in a large number of experimental medical studies in the US, which was widely received as the *Beecher Report* (Israel and Hay 2006, 32). Above all, however, it was the scandal of the so-called *Tuskegee Syphilis Study* (Jones 1993), in which African American farm workers were denied (life-saving) medical treatment for research purposes, that triggered a broad wave of protests in 1972 (especially from the civil rights movement) and led to US policymakers taking measures for structural changes to regulate science. In 1974, a *National Research Act* was passed, on the basis of which the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects in Biomedical and Behavioral Research drafted the *Belmont Report* (United States 1978). The Commission was responsible for institutionalizing the ethical review of biomedical and behavioral research projects by institutional review boards. The “Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research”

identified three central principles that should guide the ethical review of studies involving human subjects: Respect for people (including the promotion of self-determination), care (including “do no harm”), and justice. Since then, further guidelines and structures have been developed, but the decisive course was set at that time in the 1970s, when these structures were anchored in the scientific system and the principles and review procedures of biomedical research were extended to behavioral and social science research. Since then, any research involving individuals or their data must be reviewed and approved before it can be implemented. This system of reviews was first implemented in the US and later in many other countries (Israel 2015), albeit not in Germany (von Unger, Dilger, and Schönhuth 2016; von Unger and Simon 2015).

So, why this excursion into history? Because it shows there is good reason for some kind of regulation to protect participants from abuses of power through scientists. However, a problem emerged when these regulations were extended beyond the field of medicine without proper regard for the specific methods and research conventions that inform other disciplines (van den Hoonaard 2011). The ensuing incompatibilities in the social sciences are particularly hard felt in qualitative research. Through mandatory review processes, conditions are imposed that are contrary to the nature, principles, and processes of qualitative inquiry (for example, review boards require early decisions on study designs, including details about informed consent processes). In most qualitative research, however, including ethnographic fieldwork, the formulation of research questions must be situationally adapted, and relevant actors of the research field are often not at all known in advance (Plankey-Videla 2012). Many scholars thus believe the existence, freedom, and quality of qualitative research, especially ethnographic fieldwork, to be in jeopardy (Bell 2014; Dingwall 2008; Hammersley 2009; van den Hoonaard 2011).

The dangers of overregulation and bureaucratization are obvious and the paradoxical effects of good intentions – in the form of negative and unwanted consequences of ethics reviews – are well documented (Santinele Martino and Fudge Schormans 2018; Perry 2011). Still, not all qualitative researchers oppose the idea of guiding principles and ethics reviews altogether. For example, much can be gained when guidelines are developed and adapted by social scientists in their respective fields and when ethics reviews remain a voluntary option, as is currently the case in the German social sciences (von Unger, Dilger, and Schönhuth 2016). Some argue that ethics committees and researchers could work together in productive ways (Gillam and Guillemin 2018). However, there seems to be a consensus among qualitative researchers that procedural ethics alone do not suffice (Guillemin and Gillam 2004). First, the codified principles and regulatory standards do not always fit the specific

research situation (for example, informed consent on the part of all individuals in participant observation; Bell 2014). Second, applying for an ethics review prior to starting a project is always a bit of a speculative exercise limited by our knowledge of the fields of study, our understanding of what risks can be expected, and our imagination of how the study might progress (von Unger 2016, 2014). Qualitative researchers are committed to openness as a methodological principle. So, while it is important to anticipate ethical issues in advance, this is not enough. Most issues arise over the course of a project. We thus need to attend to “ethics in practice,” implying that we identify and reflect on the day-to-day ethical issues in the research process (Guillemin and Gillam 2004, 263-4). Yet at the same time, I would argue that we should not lose sight of the larger questions underpinning scientific work. To this end, Canella and Lincoln (2011) proposed that ethical conduct should be conceptualized as an ongoing, critical, and dialogical engagement with the moral and political questions of conducting research.

The term ethical reflexivity as proposed here thus encompasses three dimensions: 1) to anticipate potential ethical issues in advance, 2) to engage in “ethics in practice” as put forth by Guillemin and Gillam (2004) by addressing “ethically important moments” as they evolve over the course of the research process, and 3) to reflect on more fundamental issues concerning the larger role of social science research in society and vis-à-vis global problems and current inequalities. Ideally, anticipations are supported (not hindered) by ethics codes and review procedures with scientific communities creating ample space for ethics in practice while also stimulating connections between the smaller day-to-day decisions and larger questions of what it is all about. Practiced in this way, ethical reflexivity can render research more meaningful, valid, and legitimate – not only for the individual researchers and their scientific communities, but also for actors in the fields they study.

However, while ethical and methodological reflexivity go hand in hand with ethical reflexivity building on methodological reflexivity in research practice, they also involve tensions and conflict. Meeting the demands of scientific, methodological standards is a prerequisite for conducting research in the first place. Every study should strive to meet the respective state of the art in the relevant academic field. This is a very basic ethical principle of conducting research. However, if we acknowledge that research processes are social processes with implications for the people involved, further ethical principles are needed to guide research actions. These principles may yield tensions and dilemmas for the researcher. In order to illustrate this point, an example is provided to show the complexity of ethical reflexivity as research practice.

4. An Example of “Ethics in Practice”

In a recent qualitative study on diversity in organizations, I was involved in preparing a room for a group discussion as part of our fieldwork. When placing fruit and cookies on the table, one of the participants (let us call her/him A.)¹ joined in early to help us. I greeted A. warmly and introduced her/him to a new member of the research team (let us call the new researcher B.). It turned out that they had previously met on a private occasion. They instantly got along with one another and started a conversation while we resumed preparations. I overheard and later also read in B.’s field notes that A. had filled her/him in on a recent dispute in the organization – an unresolved conflict surrounding racism. A. was speaking to B. in a low voice and as the door of the room was wide open, it seemed that A. wanted to prevent colleagues outside the room from overhearing the conversation. During the subsequent group discussion, no reference to the aforementioned dispute was made. When analyzing the field notes and transcript later on, we discussed how to interpret this interaction.

We were given a relevant piece of information – informally, before other participants joined the room and before the tape recorder was turned on, as background information. This was both an indication of trust and it was trust-building. Yet it confronted us with a dilemma: What to do with such information? Can we use it in the analysis? Obviously, once told, we cannot *not* know. But can we quote it? Can we follow-up on it, and if so, how?

This research interaction turned out to be both a datum for the analysis (it told us something about the field and the subject of inquiry) and an ethically important moment (it raised questions about what to do). In analytical terms, we interpreted the datum as an indicator of an evolving and conflict-laden discourse about racism in the organization. The specific form of communication as well as the content raised questions about *voice* and *silence* in organizations with theoretical, methodological, and ethical implications.

When studying social reality, researchers are fundamentally confronted with silent aspects of the social (Hirschauer 2001). These include the nonverbal, such as tacit forms of knowledge, and the nonverbalized. In their typology of silence in organizations, Deborah Blackman and Eugene Sadler Smith (2009) distinguish two forms: the *silent* and the *silenced*. “Silent” is what *cannot* be said because it is located on a nonverbal level (for example, habitualized or intuitive knowledge). “Silenced,” on the other hand, refers to what could

¹ I choose a gender-neutral description and a letter (A.) instead of a pseudonym in order to protect the participant’s identity. Being aware of the politics of naming (Guenther 2009), I abstain from using a pseudonym, hoping the reader will be able to imagine that A. is in fact a real person.

be said in principle but *is not said* because voice is suppressed or held back (Blackman and Sadler Smith 2009). The latter is studied using concepts such as “organizational silence” (Morrison and Milliken 2000) and “employee silence” (van Dyne, Ang, and Botero 2003). These types of silence constitute a problem: Information is withheld, for example, from management, which hinders learning and development processes (Morrison and Milliken 2000) and prevents reports of unethical or illegal practices (Milliken and Morrison 2003). Such silences occur when members of the organization anticipate that voicing criticism, reporting problems, and proposing changes would have negative consequences for them. When thinking about these more fundamental issues, one may ask: Does A.’s whispering indicate silence in the organization surrounding racism? Does it represent a suppressed voice? Certainly, it also constituted an example of organizational dynamics which keep certain information (including sensitive information about conflicts in the team) from outsiders (including us as researchers).

Thus, in analytical terms, we started asking ourselves: What are we *not* seeing? In the context of situational analysis (Clarke, Friese, and Washburn 2018), a methodological approach that informed our fieldwork and analysis, researchers are invited to actively interrogate silences in the data:

In seeking to be ethically accountable researchers, I believe we need to attempt to articulate what we see as the *sites of silence* in our data. What seems present but unarticulated? What thousand-pound gorillas do we think are sitting around in our situations of concern that nobody has bothered to mention yet? Why not? How might we pursue these sites of silence and ask about the gorillas without putting words in the mouths of our participants? (Clarke 2005, 85; emphasis in the original)

As *ethically accountable researchers* we are called upon to question the practices in the field and the blind spots in our data. We are asked to be critical as researchers – yet ethical guidelines, including the ethics code of German sociology (DGS and BDS 2017), request from us not to harm participants in our studies. What do we do when these responsibilities create tensions that cannot be easily resolved?

If we break a silence of the field in our publications, how can we avoid harming those who broke the silence in the first place by speaking to us? It would be naïve to assume that every silence should be broken. Given that silence can be a strategy of survival and resistance, as, among others, ethnographic research on forced migration shows, researchers have to ask themselves critically whether in fact “all must be told?” (Mazzocchetti 2016). Using the example of data on migratory routes through the Mediterranean, which are also studied by border protection agencies such as Frontex in order to keep migrants from reaching Europe, care must be taken:

In this violent and asymmetrical context, the act of describing is in itself a political act affecting the people we meet during fieldwork. Before publishing anything, it is essential to think about its potential repercussions and reflect on what exactly we choose to disclose and in what ways, for what purposes, and how it may affect the political and social landscape for migrants. (Mazzocchetti 2016, para. 27)

If breaking a silence would cause further harm to those already harmed (for example, by power inequalities related to migration regimes), researchers might decide against it – not for analytical, but for ethical reasons. However, it depends on what kind of silence we are dealing with. In the case of our example, racism in an organization may be the phenomenon hidden by the silence at stake. Breaking this silence may also involve risks, but these risks may not be quite as severe, and researchers and participants may agree that these risks are worth taking in order to tell a story, reveal a hidden aspect, and disclose a power dynamic responsible for a situation of inequality and injustice. In those cases, as fundamentally in all research, researchers are still obliged to minimize the risks for the participants in their studies.

5. Considering Risks: The Limits of Anonymization in the Pitfalls of Representation

In the social sciences, a central strategy of avoiding harm and minimizing risks to study participants involves anonymizing the data (which in the German context is also regulated in data protection legislation). However, the intricacies of anonymizing qualitative data are well known (Saunders, Kitzinger, and Kitzinger 2015; von Unger 2018; Waldford 2018). Qualitative data (that is, ethnographic field notes, transcripts of interviews and group discussions, visual data, and so on) usually include detailed descriptions and ample references to specific contexts. This means that these data are structured in such a way that they can be recognized by insiders, including the participants themselves, despite the use of pseudonyms and other anonymization efforts (Saunders, Kitzinger, and Kitzinger 2015; von Unger 2018; Waldford 2018). These challenges are further exacerbated when doing research on organizations. Even if the names and other identifying information about participants (for example, specific job descriptions, professional training, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, and so on) are erased from the data, members of an organization can easily recognize other members who are quoted in reports based on their insider knowledge of, for example, who has access to what kind of information and their familiarity with one another's roles, positions, and opinions. Yet in qualitative research, we need to be able to quote from the data (to show that our findings are empirically grounded) and we cannot

change or leave out too much information without severely limiting the heuristic value of the data. So, we are caught in a dilemma that can never be fully resolved.

If anonymization and pseudonymization can be deciphered, these strategies do not suffice to protect participants who, for example, voice criticism regarding their organization. However, one may also wonder: Does the organization also require protection? Does the “do no harm” principle not include organizations which participate in research and which may be harmed (regarding their public standing and reputation in their organizational field, chances to receive funding, and so on) if unflattering results are made public? Thus, we must consider, weigh, and balance risks to the participants, obligations to the organization, and scientific standards related to theoretical and methodological requisites of what constitutes good and critical research. These efforts may be considered within a larger context of contributing to discourses (that are beyond our control), with chances of being misunderstood and misquoted by actors engaged in struggles over power, and thus contributing to the reproduction of inequalities.

These challenges are anything but new. Qualitative researchers have a long tradition of debating issues of power and representation, that is, raised by the “writing culture” debate in ethnography and anthropology, by postcolonial theories, indigenous methodologies, and feminist research (for a vivid example of feminist reflexivity in research practice, see Luff 1999; for suggestions on how to decolonize qualitative research practice, see González y González and Lincoln 2006). However, I would argue that the explosive nature of representations has never been as great as it is today in the age of the Internet, in which researchers, participants, and third parties are digitally connected. Organizations have websites, often listing the names of employees and management. In a similar vein, details concerning academics and their research projects can be easily searched and found. Open-access publications, online portals, pressures from funders, and so on, make project-related information, presentations, and publications by researchers more accessible to a broader public. As Liz Tilley and Kate Woodthorpe (2011) demonstrated, and Benjamin Saunders and colleagues convincingly illustrated with an example (2015, 629-30), pseudonyms can be deciphered with a simple internet search. Digitalization thus exacerbates the fundamental challenges of representation, including strategies to protect participants through anonymization. This process is due to networks and technologies and the fact that the fields of data collection and dissemination of results overlap like never before.

If, through our analysis, we extend the boundaries of what can be said and if we put into words what previously was concealed and silent, this may have real consequences. We must consider what damage we may cause in the field, for participants and organizations, through our actions and representations.

However, the anticipation of possible damages is always partial and uncertain as it depends on the knowledge of those who make this anticipation. As long as there is no possibility to look into the future, it remains speculative to a certain extent. In addition, risks cannot be completely avoided, and it is ethically justifiable to take certain risks in certain study contexts. However, the participants should have a say on this point. This commitment is also formally laid down in the legal principle of informed consent. In research practice, however, it refers primarily to the decision to participate (or not) in a study. In the phases of writing and publishing, participants usually have little influence. And while, on the one hand, it is necessary to produce critical interpretations that go beyond the self-interpretations of actors in the field, it is equally necessary, on the other hand, to identify a form of representation that does not additionally harm those who have limited power in the field – especially with regard to suppressed voices and disadvantaged groups. We thus need to “work the hyphen,” as Michelle Fine (1994) put it, which both separates and connects “us” (the writing self) with representations of “others.”

In the above-mentioned study, we informed the key persons in the organization at the beginning of the study that our analysis will be critical and may not please the organization in all respects. We applied a classical qualitative, not a participatory, study design. That means, we worked closely with the organization and its members and were open to their points of view and to what was relevant to them. We aimed to generate scientific knowledge and to *give something in return* in the form of suggestions on how to foster organizational change towards becoming more inclusive of diverse groups including ethnic minorities and migrants. However, the analysis was solely in our hands as academic researchers and we aimed to be critical – also of such phenomena as organizational inertia, exclusion, and racism. Yet we agreed that we would discuss sensitive or potentially harmful quotations and results beforehand with the individuals concerned and – if the organization as a whole was the unit of analysis – with the key persons, if the organization could potentially be harmed. Furthermore, we agreed to address sensitive issues and present criticism in a way that could not be traced back to individual members of the organization (through techniques of summarizing, grouping, or paraphrasing data). We reflected on ethical aspects of research and sought conversations with relevant partners in the field in order to find a form of presentation that did as little damage as possible to those who gave us access to their organizations, experiences, interpretations, and struggles over meaning.

However, a feeling of ambivalence lingered: Could we “bite the hand that feeds us”? (Weinberg 2002). As Naheed Islam (2000) pointed out in her study on racism in a disadvantaged, ethnic minority community in the US, critical research may always involve an “act of betrayal.” As issues previously kept hidden or private are made public, there may always be someone unhappy

with a critical analysis who disagrees with the (re)presentation of unflattering aspects or with secrets being exposed. Researchers have a situated perspective; their interpretations necessarily differ from those of participants in the field. In fact, it is their responsibility to offer a differing, empirically based and theoretically informed understanding of reality. So, if differences of perspective and quarrels over issues of representation are built into the research enterprise, does this mean it does not matter how we phrase our criticism? That we should not worry about what participants think of our results because someone would always disagree? Certainly not. Given the third dimension of ethical reflexivity, the more fundamental issues, I would argue the question is: How does one navigate the minefield of representation without reproducing power inequalities and harming those who are most vulnerable in everyday life?

In the example given above, subsequent fieldwork revealed that the conflict in the team described to us informally by A. was later confirmed and discussed (on tape) by other participants as well. Some of these other participants did not consider what had happened an instance of racism, providing us with an opportunity to understand both sides of the dispute. As researchers, we turn to the analysis of situations with an open mind but also with certain assumptions. As Adele Clarke (2005) argued in the quote cited earlier, we are called upon to use this theoretical knowledge and to reflect whether it is actually relevant for the analysis of the present situation. If so, it helps to identify and scrutinize relevant “sites of silence” (Clarke 2005, 85). In the context of the example discussed here, concepts such as silent racism, institutional racism, and inequality regimes can be considered to be sensitizing. However, when interpreting our data with reference to such concepts, we need to ensure that our conclusions are empirically grounded and that we question both the data and our interpretations throughout (that is, we ask ourselves the question “How could we be wrong?”; Maxwell 2013). This in fact is a crucial difference between the researcher’s perspective and the situation of actors in the field. While we enter the field to understand a situation from within the life worlds of the participants as well as from their perspective – and while we are asked, in the context of ethical reflexivity, to consider the social and political implications of our research actions and findings – we are still not situated in the field in the same way as the participants. For example, as researchers, we are not responsible for and involved in an investigated organization in the same way as members of that organization. Struggles over diversity and racism in the organization are not *our* struggles – even though we might (intentionally or unintentionally) contribute to these struggles through our research actions and publications. However, our positionality is different: Even if we work closely with the organization, for example, in the context of participant observation in which we take over certain roles to

immerse in the field for a certain amount of time, we do not have the same stakes and interests as the members. At some point, we step back and become outsiders again – we may still be part of the organizational field, but not members of the organization. Instead, we are members of academic institutions. And as such, we have different responsibilities (including to question our assumptions and results) and accountabilities, both vis-à-vis the field and vis-à-vis the scientific community and further contexts that may be of relevance. For researchers, it is important to call out this difference in positionality in order to capably explain and defend the legitimacy of the difference in perspective and interpretation that comes along with it. As Adele Clarke and colleagues put it, “the researcher is a designer, actor, interviewer, observer, interpreter, coconstructor of data, writer, ultimate arbiter of the accounts proffered, and to be held accountable for those accounts” (2018, 35). How do we fill these roles with integrity? How do we develop and communicate our ethical positions to various stakeholders and audiences involved? I would suggest in dialogue with the field, but not restricted to the perspective of the participants.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I aimed to show that researcher reflexivity is an established concept and practice in qualitative research, which may also be used for ethical purposes. My objective was not to specify how reflexivity should be practiced for analytical purposes – as this depends on the respective theoretical and methodological assumptions that inform a study. Instead, my aim was to show that methodological reflexivity is a sound basis for ethical reflexivity. Ethical reflexivity is inclusive of methodological reflexivity but goes beyond it. It also takes the concerns and rights of participants into account, as well as the possible social and political implications of a study. Practicing ethical reflexivity as proposed here entails: a) anticipating potential ethical issues to the best of one’s ability and available knowledge, b) addressing ethically important moments as they emerge during the research process, and c) reflecting on more fundamental issues concerning the larger role of social science research in society. The example discussed was intended to show how methodological and ethical reflexivity can be combined in a fruitful manner – with a research interaction serving both as a datum in the analysis and as an ethically important moment giving rise to a reflection of research relationships and accountability. One way to respond to the complexity of these issues may involve collaborative and critical approaches that strive for social justice and align “the ethics of research with a politics of the oppressed, with a politics of resistance, hope and freedom” (Denzin and Giardina 2007, 35). However,

even if we commit ourselves to such a stance in addressing ethical issues with partners and allies in the field, this will neither suspend nor fully resolve the challenges involved in research practice. One way or another, ethical reflexivity as an ongoing practice will be required. The responsibility to practice ethical reflexivity lies first and foremost with the researcher(s; Hitzler 2016), but it can best be met in dialogue with scientific peers, key informants, and partners in the field. Risks and potential gains need to be assessed and weighed – and those participants and communities who are most vulnerable need to be protected. However, it is about finding the right balance in the specific research situation, as some risks are worth taking, and some participants may want to have a say in the matter. Also, as I aimed to illustrate with the example discussed here, one must consider, weigh, and balance risks to the participants, obligations to the organizations, and communities and scientific standards of what constitutes good and critical research. The larger questions identified here relate to the role research can play in addressing racism and other forms of oppression in organizations that commit to an anti-racist and inclusive agenda but may nevertheless be a site of contradictions and implicit, structural forms of inequality and exclusion in lived reality. There is no golden standard for how to conduct research in an ethical manner. However, one conclusion can be drawn: Positionalities must be reflected vis-à-vis the field and the subject matter, not only in scientific terms (that is, on methodological grounds), but also on moral grounds regarding the smaller and larger implications of research practice. Researchers will be held accountable, not only by their own scientific communities, but also by actors in the field and various third-party audiences. While the reception of research findings cannot be controlled, it must be anticipated. Therefore, the scientific quest for generating valid and trustworthy knowledge must be combined, balanced, and juxtaposed with considerations of the social and political impact of the research in acknowledgment of the fact that research is not separate from or outside of the social phenomena under study, especially in a digitally connected world.

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