

Establishing the 'Truth' of the Matter: Confessional Reflexivity as Introspection and Avowal

JOSEPH WEBSTER
University of Edinburgh

The conceptualisation of reflexivity commonly found in social anthropology deploys the term as if it were both a 'virtuous' mechanism of self-reflection and an ethical technique of truth telling, with reflexivity frequently deployed as an moral practice of introspection and avowal. Further, because reflexivity is used as a methodology for constructing the authority of ethnographic accounts, reflexivity in anthropology has come to closely resemble Foucault's descriptions of confession. By discussing Lynch's (2000) critical analysis of reflexivity as an 'academic virtue', I consider his argument through the lens of my own concept of 'confessional reflexivity'. While supporting Lynch's *diagnosis* of the 'problem of reflexivity', I attempt to critique his ethnomethodological *cure* as essentialist, I conclude that a way forward might be found by blending Foucault's (1976, 1993) theory of confession with Bourdieu's (1992) theory of 'epistemic reflexivity'.

The ubiquity of reflexivity and its many forms

For as long as thirty years, reflexivity has occupied a 'place of honour' at the table of most social science researchers and research institutions. Reflexivity has become enshrined as a foundational, or, perhaps better, *essential*, concept which is relied upon as a kind of talisman whose power can be invoked to shore up the 'truthiness' of the claims those researchers and their institutions are in the business of making. No discipline, it seems, is more guilty of this 'evoking' than social anthropology (Lucy 2000, Sangren 2007, Salzman 2002).

Yet, despite the ubiquity of its deployment in anthropology, the term 'reflexivity' remains poorly defined. No one *really* knows what reflexivity means in the work of others, even if they claim to know what it means within their own. To be fair, reflexivity *is* a slippery concept – it is evoked differently by different researchers. Reflexivity is never singular, but always multiple; we see not reflexivity, but reflexivities. Yet this recognition of plurality doesn't get us very far – and certainly does not release us from the need to provide a definition of reflexivity.

Most definitions of reflexivity refer to some sort of conceptual 'bending back' of thought upon itself – thought, folded upon thought, folded upon thought, *ad infinitum*. Yet, where reflexivity is *generally* concerned with thinking about how we think, a more *specific* definition appears necessary in order to tease out the multi-form, multi-purpose nature of the term. Michael Lynch, who identifies six 'categories' (2000) of reflexivity, is instructive on this point:

(i) *Mechanical Reflexivity.*

'A kind of recursive process that involves feedback' (ibid:27); a habitual, almost automatic response to stimuli, which nonetheless remains inclusive of the monitoring of action by self and other.

(ii) *Substantive Reflexivity.*

Seen as emblematic of late modernity, substantive reflexivity involves a somewhat calculating monitoring of costs and risks as offset against perceived benefits. Such monitoring is said to be socially constructed and inter-subjective (ibid:28).

(iii) *Methodological Reflexivity.*

Defined as 'philosophical introspection, [and] an inward-looking, sometimes confessional... examination of one's own beliefs and assumptions' (ibid:29), methodological reflexivity oscillates between self-criticism and self-congratulation, and is commonly expressed as both a personal virtue.

(iv) *Meta-theoretical Reflexivity.*

Reflection upon, or interrogation of, all those 'taken for granted assumptions' (ibid:30) that form the basis of academic practices of knowledge production. Such interrogation is made possible by a kind of intentional 'detachment' or 'stepping back', thereby gaining a critical perspective on the modes of thought through which we come to know the world and accept that knowledge as 'true'.

(v) *Interpretative Reflexivity.*

As 'a style of interpretation that imagines and identifies non-obvious alternatives to habitual ways of thinking and acting' (ibid:32), interpretative reflexivity is a project in hermeneutics. By investigating the limits of textual analysis, such reflexivity closely resembles 'literary exegesis' (ibid).

(vi) *Ethnomethodological Reflexivity.*

Described variously as 'ubiquitous', 'unremarkable', 'essential' and 'uninteresting', ethnomethodological reflexivity 'alludes to the embodied practices through which persons singly and together, retrospectively and prospectively, produce *account-able* states of affairs' (ibid:33). Where ethnomethodology is the study of all those social practices that create an ordered experience of the 'everyday', ethnomethodological reflexivity attempts a systematic analysis of 'background understandings of the normal, but unstudied, operations of the ordinary society' (ibid:34).

While Lynch's summary *does* provide a clear sense of the complex and various natures of reflexivity(s), it can only take us so far in our more specific consideration of what I call the 'problem of reflexivity' in anthropology, namely, its being used as a methodology for introspection and avowal. Having surveyed Lynch's classifications of reflexivity, it is to a critical consideration of reflexivity as 'virtue' that I now turn.

1. The problem of reflexivity as methodological virtue

It seems that Lynch has correctly identified a common trend in the way in which reflexivity is deployed as an 'academic virtue' (Lynch 2000:26). But what does he mean by 'virtue'? Answering this is not easy – 'it can be difficult to establish just what is being claimed' (ibid). It is clear that the virtue has something to do with the gaining of 'special' insight. Reflexivity then, is the virtuous appropriation of a kind of 'deep sociological insight' (ibid) which comes about through a simultaneous observation of thought and action. Where scrutiny of personal conduct and mental activity are central to this virtue, Lynch further emphasises here the importance of both 'perspicacity' and 'awareness' (ibid). We are not then, simply talking of a shrewd alertness to the inter-subjective nature of social interaction, but also about the virtue of reflexivity as based on a claim to 'deep' (ibid) insight that allows inward reflection to *transform* outward perception.

The transformation is a transformation of knowledge of the self, which then, and only then, may lead to a transformation in knowledge of the other. And herein lies a key part of the problem. The source and subject of the virtue is the *self* – in our case the anthropological self. This is crucial. The insights granted by reflexivity become dependent less upon a dialogue between researchers and informants, and more upon highly individuated introspection (Woolgar 1988:22).

A foundational sociological premise is thus reversed: we no longer have knowledge of the self through relatedness with others, but rather come to know the other only in so far as we know the self. The result is that reflexivity becomes a largely egocentric, asocial activity – the anthropologist becomes a kind of 'pillar saint' whose existence is radically removed from that of the world below, in order to allow full devotion, not to pondering the nature of God, but to pondering the nature of the self. Before I move to discuss the relationship between anthropology and methodological reflexivity in more concrete terms, it first seems necessary to note Lynch's own solution to the 'problem of reflexivity' – ethnomethodology.

Ethnomethodological reflexivity is concerned to show how the 'bending back' of thought is not 'individual or intentional' (ibid:46), as in methodological reflexivity, but is viewed instead as 'communal and relational' (ibid), and crucially, as an 'unavoidable' (ibid:26) feature of everyday life. There is no real divide between being reflexive and unreflexive; being unintentionally *unreflexive* becomes a logical impossibility. Reflexivity exists as an *essential* mechanism whereby humans become persons capable of operating in an ordered social universe of their own making. The very fact that social order exists, is enough, for ethnomethodologists, to suggest that reflexivity is at work within all social actors¹.

¹ I return in more detail to this argument in section five. Its being mentioned here serves purely to provide some sense of the continuity in Lynch's own argument.

I want now, however, to return to the problem of reflexivity in anthropology, rather than looking at Lynch's specific sociological solution. To more fully substantiate the claim that reflexivity in anthropology has become a specific kind of virtue, a virtue that is at heart concerned with the transformative potential of individuated introspection, my focus for the rest of the essay will be upon what Lynch refers to as 'methodological reflexivity' (ibid:29).

2. Methodological reflexivity and the case of confessional ethnography.

I have suggested that the 'virtue' of reflexivity in anthropology is introspection. But are anthropologists really guilty of becoming pillar saints? To further elucidate some of what I have said in section one, I consider a more tangible, if not strictly 'empirical' example within anthropology – the 'confessional tale' (Van Maanen 1988). In looking to Van Maanen, and his discussion of this very specific kind of writing, in which some ethnographers engage, I suggest that the 'virtue' of methodological reflexivity in anthropology is not simply that of introspection, but is also bound up with the avowal of confession.

'The fieldwork confessional', Van Maanen argues, has several defining features, all of which seem to be centrally bound up with the researcher's own sense of self (ibid:73). 'The distinguishing characteristics of confessional tales are their highly personalised styles and their self-absorbed mandates [which exist as]... mini-melodramas of hardships endured (and overcome), and [give] accounts of what fieldwork did to the fieldworker' (ibid). Confessional ethnography is personal, self-absorbed, melodramatic, self-pitying, self-congratulatory and self-transforming. Such efforts are explicitly confessional in so far as 'the ethnographer mentions personal biases, character flaws, or bad habits *as a way of building... [a] modest unassuming style* of one struggling to piece together something reasonably coherent out of displays of initial disorder, doubt, and difficulty...' (ibid:75). Confessional tales produce a certain kind of anthropological self; modest and unassuming, but also humble – fully aware of personal weaknesses and shortcomings. Reflexivity in anthropology becomes viewed as 'something of a character building conversion tale' (ibid:77). Methodological reflexivity, as expressed in confessional ethnography, transforms the self by *converting* it to a new way of thinking and acting and writing – that way being the way of introspective reflection.

But what of avowal? How are confessional tales and assertions of truth conjoined? The obligation to reveal the sources of one's own ethnographic knowledge is at heart an attempt to establish the authority (Hepworth and Turner 1982:107) and crucially, the *truthfulness* of that knowledge (Woolgar, 1988:24. See also Clifford and Marcus 1986, on the 'fiction' of ethnography). Where some feel that the credibility of anthropology as a science is all but lost, it seems that confessional tales exist as a mechanism whereby some of the scientific dignity of the discipline may be salvaged. How can anthropology hope to pass off navel gazing as a science? In a strange way, it seems that the interpretative introspection of confessional ethnography can be used to 'lift the veil of public secrecy surrounding fieldwork' (Van Maanen 1988:91), by both

admitting to the problems of 'missing data, incompleteness, blind-spots and various other obscurities' (ibid) as well as by more generally demystifying the whole process of fieldwork by discussing methodology. By 'lifting the veil', anthropology seeks to reinforce its own authority by making certain truth claims about its practice: "Look, I'm *not* a fake; I know what I know because I was *there* – I *saw* these things, and *spoke* to these people, and I've already admitted I made a few mistakes, but look, what I've told you is basically sound". So goes the avowal of the methodologically reflexive anthropologist.

In speaking of confessional ethnography as a combination of introspection and avowal, what we are describing is a whole host of virtues – modesty, thoughtfulness, humility, understanding, but perhaps most important for establishing the credibility and authority of the truth claims contained within ethnographic accounts, we speak of the virtues of honesty and self-awareness. Such virtues are not simply obtained and then forgotten about, as if they could function on a kind of anthropological autopilot, but are instead constantly interrogated and tested 'by way of a continuous dialogue' (ibid:93), with the aim of stimulating their further development. A more substantial theoretical questioning of confession appears necessary at this point. It seems helpful to turn to Foucault for some answers.

3. Foucault's theory of confession.

Where anthropology adopts methodological reflexivity as a primary way in which it seeks to reflect upon its own practice, we should not be surprised at the ubiquity of 'confessional tales' (Van Maanen, 1988) within the discipline, with confessional ethnography being an entirely consistent carrying through of the logic located within the 'virtues' of introspection and avowal. Methodological reflexivity gives birth to confessional ethnography. But what is confession? I understand confession to be a deeply historical phenomenon concerned, above all, with the production of 'truth' via discourse saturated in power relations, a phenomenon best understood in Foucauldian terms.

In *The Will to Knowledge* (1976), Foucault states that: 'since the middle ages at least, Western societies have established the confession as one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth' (ibid:59). Confession, then, is not only a mechanism for stating truth, but also of *making* truth. For Foucault, truth claims are creative acts closely associated with the genealogy of the word 'avowal' (ibid:58). The word avowal 'came to signify someone's acknowledgements of his own actions and thoughts' (ibid). Confession, as with methodological reflexivity, is concerned not only with 'truth', but also with credibility and authenticity; 'Western man', was 'authenticated by the discourse of truth he was able or obliged to pronounce concerning himself' (ibid). Such pronouncements occurred on a massive scale: 'The confession has spread its effects far and wide... One confesses in public and in private... One confesses – or is forced to confess... Western man has become a confessing animal' (ibid:59). Yet, as we shall see, we are animals who exist not within a kind of paradise of freedom, but in an environment that is defined by the power relations that saturate it.

Confession not only reflexively changes how we think about the self and the other, nor does it only concern the discourse of speech. Its effects are wider: confession actually changes the way we *write*. 'Whence a metamorphosis in literature: we have passed from... heroic [and] marvellous narration... to a literature ordered according to the infinite task of extracting from the depth of oneself, in between the words, a truth... [in] the very form of confession (ibid). I want to suggest that the anthropological version of such a metamorphosis is the metamorphosis from 'realist' to 'confessional' ethnography (Van Maanen, 1988), and that the 'truth' being extracted is the truth of the ethnographic encounter, as known through, and established by, methodological reflexivity.

But for Foucault, there is a dark shadow cast over confession, a shadow whose existence we are totally ignorant of most of the time; that shadow is power, and our ignorance is blindness to its workings. 'We no longer perceive [confession] as the effect of a power that constrains us' (Foucault 1976:60); we have wrongly persuaded ourselves that (i) 'confession frees', that (ii) 'truth does not belong to the order of power' but rather (iii) 'shares an original affinity with freedom' (ibid). All three assumptions are, for Foucault, misrecognitions of the functioning of power; it is, he states, the 'internal ruse of confession' (Foucault, 1976:60. Also Foucault 1980, 1993. See also: Hepworth and Turner 1982).

How have we been duped by the obligation to confess to the extent that we view its constraint as freedom? It is because confession *changes* us. The 'ritual of confession' (Foucault 1976:62) functions as a discourse that 'produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it' (ibid). But *how*? 'It exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation' (ibid). The similarity here to Van Maanen's notion of confessional ethnography is striking. Confession redeems the sinner (ibid). Confessional ethnography validates the anthropologist (Van Maanen 1988:75). Confession grants the sinner salvation (Foucault 1976:62). Confessional ethnography converts the anthropologist (Van Maanen 1988:77). The point seems clear; confession and confessional ethnography both exist as technologies of the self (Foucault 1993. See also Carrette 1999) that transform the self. It is through the 'bending back' of introspection and the truth telling of avowal that such salvation is achieved, that is, it is achieved by conversion to methodological reflexivity.

For Foucault, confession is about the voicing of 'everyday deficiencies... oddities [and] exasperations' (Foucault, 1976:64). For Van Maanen, confessional ethnography is about voicing 'personal biases, character flaws, [and] bad habits' (Van Maanen 1988:75). What they both share then, is not only 'an inducement to speak', but also a near totalising scope - 'having to tell everything' (Foucault 1976:65) - as Foucault puts it. Power is everywhere (Foucault, 1979), and confession is telling everything; the two could not be more intimately linked.

Where confession is a form of power, it is also an entity born of its own history, that is to say, confession is not only historically *specific*, but also historically *dependant*. Confession, and by extension, confessional ethnography, would not

exist in the way it does if it were not for the conditioning of its own past. Defined as authoritative, and framed by history, the discourse of confession, 'by virtue of the power structure immanent it' (Foucault 1976:62. See also Carrett 1999:38) continues its work without ceasing – variously constraining and freeing, wounding and healing, condemning and saving, reproducing and transforming, discovering and exposing, captivating and capturing all those it obligates to speak the 'truth' by inventing and then silencing falsehood.

4. Defining confessional reflexivity.

But what does Foucault's notion of confession have to do with misrecognising reflexivity as a virtue? We have already more than hinted at the answer by discussing the relationship between confessional ethnography and methodological reflexivity. My aim in this section is to provide a clear definition of what I will call 'confessional reflexivity' as a backdrop for a critique of Lynch's notion of ethnomethodological reflexivity.

I define confessional reflexivity as:

The act of continually bending one's own conceptual practice back upon itself, by employing the 'virtuous' mechanisms of introspection and avowal to produce the truth of certain claims, all within a discursive field saturated by historically specific power relations.

Let me try to unpack this definition a bit, briefly commenting on its implications for our understanding of both reflexivity and confession as distinct yet related concepts.

(i) *The continual bending back of conceptual practice.*

By this I mean to refer to the 'classical' understanding of reflexivity as thinking about thinking, yet not as a bounded, 'one off' activity, but as an ongoing process of evaluation and re-evaluation of our own interpretations.

(ii) *The virtue of introspection.*

Where, at points, I (crudely and disparagingly) refer to introspection as 'navel gazing', what I am really concerned with is the way in which reflexivity and confession engage in a kind of epistemological solipsism that views the individual as the primary source of knowledge about the self and the other.

(iii) *The virtue of avowal.*

By this I mean the ways in which (methodological) reflexivity and (Christian) confession both act to produce the moral authority of certain descriptions of reality. In anthropology, these descriptions take the form of ethnographic accounts.

(iv) *The production of truth claims.*

By this I mean the way in which the epistemological solipsism of introspection and the moral authority of avowal come together in confession and reflexivity to validate certain points of view as true and, by extension, to reject others as false. This is by nature a hegemonic process (in the Gramscian sense) (Gramsci, 1975) concerning control over the production and consumption of 'truth'.

(v) *The discursive field.*

By this I mean the way in which such 'truth' is created in and through discourse, that is, the way in which confession and reflexivity are played out through the spoken and written words of those who engage in its practice. This clearly logocentric description seems justified when we take anthropological ethnography as our subject matter.

(vi) *Historical specificity.*

I emphasise here, in line with Foucault (1976, 1993), the fact that our understanding and use of both confession and reflexivity are not timeless, unalterable givens, but instead are deeply influenced by and dependant upon the specific course of events that constitutes history as we know it. Had events played out differently, our understanding of these concepts would likewise differ.

(vii) *Saturation by power relations.*

This part of my definition again stems from Foucault. Power is everywhere, existing as a defining feature of reflexivity and confession. Confession is a restricting obligation to tell all. Reflexivity, in anthropology, is a disciplinary requirement. As such, neither of these processes are neutral or passive, but operate on the basis of the working of various socially and politically inequitable forces, which, while appearing to function as an 'invisible hand' (Smith 1776), are actually manipulated (albeit differently) by all the players within the field.

Having explicated a definition of 'confessional reflexivity', I consider the implications of this definition for Lynch's ethnomethodological understanding of reflexivity. In doing so, I contrast his notion of the 'unavoidable' and 'unremarkable' (Lynch 2000:26,34) nature of reflexivity with Foucault's own emphasis on history and power.

5. Supporting the diagnosis not the cure.

In speaking of 'ethnomethodological reflexivity', Lynch is primarily drawing upon Garfinkel's (1967) *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, which, according to Lynch, is concerned to show how 'the reflexivity of accounts implies interpretation – expressing, indicating or recognising meaning – ...[which] alludes to embodied practices through which persons... produce *account-able* states of affairs' (Lynch: 33). Such accounts are 'ubiquitous', 'unremarkable' and 'uninteresting' (ibid: 34) because they take as their object all those 'background understandings of the normal... operations of the ordinary society' (ibid). To this end, 'reflexivity shines for nobody in particular and its illumination is controlled by no special theory, method, or subject position' (ibid: 48).

Reflexivity, according to Lynch, is 'unremarkable' and 'uninteresting' exactly because it is 'unavoidable' (ibid:26). The impossibility of being *unreflexive* stems from the fact that reflexivity is so fundamental to our sociological character, that it can never be escaped. Wacquant, summarising this conceptualisation, states that ethnomethodologists hold reflexivity to be 'a key constituent property of

social action...woven into the fabric of everyday life' (Wacquant 1992:37). Crucially, it exists as a mechanism by which 'people *universally and necessarily* deploy "ethno-methods" to give sense to the practices of the daily round' (ibid. Emphasis added). For Lynch, this view saves us from the problem of misrecognising reflexivity as a virtue, because in universalising the practice, it becomes utterly mundane².

Where I agree with Lynch's diagnosis of the problem of reflexivity as misrecognising it as a virtue, I disagree with his claim that a universalising treatment of reflexivity at the hands of ethnomethodology is the proper cure. Where I have suggested that the model of reflexivity commonly found within anthropology is 'confessional' (in so far as it is bound up not only with introspection and avowal, but also with historically specific power relations), it seems that Lynch's account of ethnomethodological reflexivity would sit uneasily with Foucault. Confessional reflexivity is neither 'unavoidable' nor 'unremarkable', quite the opposite in fact; it is a product of the specificity of history and of the workings of power, that is, it is both avoidable (in the sense that its form could be different from what it is at the moment) *and* remarkable (in the sense that it is not a mundane and insignificant social process, but is rather a dynamic process of considerable effect).

Any social process that comes about because of the specificity of history cannot be an *unavoidable* process. Any political process that operates through dynamic power relations cannot be an *unremarkable* process. Any intellectual process that is so active that it comes to be described as ubiquitous, cannot be an *uninteresting* process. Indeed, its social, political and intellectual ubiquity shows it to be a centrally important process to be grappled with.

Reflexivity *is* viewed as a virtue in anthropology. I have suggested that the virtue is understood in terms of confession. But this reflexivity *cannot* be viewed as unavoidable – to do so is not only to view the concept as *essential*, but is actually to *essentialise* the concept as an 'unalterable given' that is not subject to change³. Where I have suggested that the side effect of essentialism is too problematic to justify the use of Lynch's ethnomethodological cure, I want to conclude by suggesting my own cure: a combination of Foucault's emphasis on historically specific power relations with Bourdieu's 'meta-theoretical' (Lynch 2000:30) analysis of reflexivity as 'epistemic' (Wacquant 1992).

Conclusion

Searching for a cure: blending Bourdieu and Foucault

I want to suggest that the solution to the 'problem of reflexivity' within anthropology is only arrived at by viewing it as a simultaneously historical and social phenomenon. We seem to have already arrived at the first conclusion – that reflexivity is historically specific – via Foucault (1976, 1993). My argument

² It is in this sense that reflexivity is *essential*, that is, universally unavoidable.

³ It is anthropology, ironically, that has most commonly warned us against the dangers of essentialism.

here is to suggest that we can arrive at the second conclusion – that reflexivity is fundamentally social – via Bourdieu.

In Bourdieu and Wacquant's book *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (1992) Wacquant considers Bourdieu's 'signature obsession with reflexivity' (ibid:36) in an essay entitled 'Epistemic Reflexivity'. Epistemic reflexivity then, unlike its confessional counterpart, is *not* fundamentally concerned with self-reflection, self-awareness, or the achievement of role distance; reflexivity is *not* about the kind of epistemological solipsism that we have used to define certain aspects of both methodological reflexivity and confessional ethnography. Epistemic reflexivity is not about the self at all. Indeed 'reflexivity calls less for intellectual *introspection* than for the permanent *sociological* analysis and control of *sociological* practice' (ibid:40. Emphasis added).

Epistemic reflexivity is clearly something quite different from Foucault's description of confession, entailing, as it does, 'the systematic exploration of the "unthought categories of thought" which delimit... the practical carrying out of social inquiry' (ibid). Reflexivity becomes a necessarily *social* act; 'it is not the individual conscience of the researcher, but the epistemological unconscious of the discipline, that must be unearthed' (ibid:41). It seems then, that Bourdieu explicitly wants to distance himself from any sense that reflexivity is a 'virtue' to be claimed by the researcher. Yet where Lynch talks of 'virtue', Wacquant talks of 'honour'. The effect is the same: 'the necessity of the reflexive return is... not [located in] the expression of a sort of epistemological "sense of honour" but a principle that leads us to constructing scientific objects differently' (ibid:42). Bourdieu's vision for reflexivity is not a moral task undertaken by individuals but a *sociological* task undertaken by collectives.

The implications for the intellectual worth of 'confessional tales' are severe; it is quickly left out of the picture in favour of a more objective, that is, a more scientific approach. On this point, Wacquant suggests that Bourdieu 'declines to enter the game of intimist confession... [because he] sees no need to make resounding private revelations to explain himself *sociologically*, for what happened to him is not singular: it is linked to a *social* trajectory (ibid:44. Emphasis added). This is crucial. Bourdieu's vision for reflexivity not only excludes its methodological, but also its confessional form.

Reflexivity is epistemic – it is concerned with shared systems of knowledge. Importantly, those systems of knowledge are not located at the level of everyday "ethno-methods" (ibid:37) as suggested by Lynch (2000:34), but rather at the level of 'scientific practice' (Wacquant 1992:46). Reflexivity is not about the creation of an ordered social universe from *below*, as is the case in ethnomethodology. Rather, it is concerned with a 'systematic exploration of the "unthought categories of thought"' (ibid:40) from *above*, that is, at the level of *intellectual practice*. It is in this sense then, that 'Bourdieu's concern for reflexivity, like his social theory, is neither egocentric nor logocentric but quintessentially embedded in, and turned towards, *scientific practice*. It fastens not upon the private person of the sociologist in her idiosyncratic intimacy, but on the... acts and operations she effectuates as part of her work and on the

collective unconscious inscribed in them' (ibid:46. Emphasis added). Reflexivity is about *practice* – collective, scientific, intellectual *practice*.

Reflexivity is not about self-reflection or self-awareness, or about role distance, or about introspection, or about confession, nor is it about a social awareness of the everyday functioning of “ethno-methods”. In sum, reflexivity is not a ‘sense of honour’ to be defended, but a ‘principle of practice’ to be deployed – not a moral principle based on virtue, or an essentialised principle based on unavoidability, but a principle of practice based on the historically contingent nature of knowledge production. Where social enquiry into knowledge production is bound up with hegemonic systems of power relations that delimit ‘truth’, anthropology would do well to revisit the ‘strangeness’ (Woolgar 1988:29) of its own highly confessional notion of reflexivity, and consider whether a more sociological notion of the historicity and sociality of reflexivity would not furnish it with greater insights into the nature of culture.

REFERENCES

- Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L. J. D. 1992, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Cambridge, Blackwell.
- Carrette, J. R. (1999). *Religion and Culture by Michael Foucault*. Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- Clifford, J. and Marcus, G. E. (1986). *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. London, University of California Press.
- Foucault, M. (1975). *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison*. London, Penguin Books Ltd.
- (1976). *The History of Sexuality v1: The Will to Knowledge*. London, Penguin Books Ltd.
- (1980). ‘The Confession of the Flesh’, in Gordon, C. (ed.) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. London, Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- (1993). ‘About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Two Lectures at Dartmouth’ in *Political Theory* 21 (2).
- Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Gramsci, A. (1975). *Prison Notebooks v2*. Columbia, Columbia University Press.
- Hepworth, M. and Turner, B. S. (1982). ‘Power, knowledge and confession: the work of Michael Foucault’ in *Confession: Studies in Deviance and Religion*. London, Routledge.
- Lucy, J. A. (2000). ‘Reflexivity’ in *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 9 (1-2).
- Lynch, M. (2000). ‘Against Reflexivity as an Academic Virtue and Source of Privileged Knowledge’ in *Theory, Culture and Society* 17 (26).
- Salzman, P. C. (2002). ‘On Reflexivity’ in *American Anthropologist* 104 (3).
- Sangren, P. S. (2007). ‘Anthropology of Anthropology? Further reflections on reflexivity’ in *Anthropology Today* 23 (4).
- Van Maanen, J. (1988). ‘Confessional Tales’ in *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. Chicago, Chicago University Press.
- Woolgar, S. (1988). *Knowledge and Reflexivity: New Frontiers in the Sociology of Knowledge*. London, Sage.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Joseph Webster is currently completing his MScR in Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh. His PhD, also in Social Anthropology, is on Protestant fundamentalism and death in North East Scotland. Email J.Webster-2@sms.ed.ac.uk.