Walking the Reflexive Talk

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AUDREY ALEJANDRO, SEP 17 2016

We reflexivists are in some kind of limbo. Almost thirty years have passed since Keohane wrote his pessimistic statement about reflexivity in International Relations: "[until] the reflective school has delineated […] a research program […] they will remain on the margins of the field, largely invisible to the preponderance of empirical researchers" (Keohane, 1988:173). Since then, reflexivity has been applied to a vast array of problematiques such as gender issues (Ackerly and True 2008), IR global diversity (Tickner and Blaney 2013), or the relation between science and politics (Berling and Bueger 2013). It has been recognized by Patrick T. Jackson as one of the four main "philosophical ontologies" of the discipline of International Relations (Jackson 2011).

Contrary to Jackson's definition, this piece will focus on the applied dimensions of reflexivity. Practically understood, reflexivity is the practice of putting our everyday behaviors, beliefs, values, and discourses into perspective. By highlighting the social origins and consequences of our activities, we enable the denaturalisation of what appears to be "normal" and "usual". At the individual level, reflexivity thus gives a broader understanding of the choices available to us.

Despite the appealing potential of reflexivity, however, reflexivists lament the limits of the "reflexive turn" (Hamati-Ataya, 2012; Bilgin 2008, 5; Hobson 2007). In the absence of the demonstration of the conditions of its acquisition and implementation, reflexivity remains synonymous with a dead-end: we do not know how reflexivists can apply reflexivity to the different scientific social and political challenges above mentioned.

This piece aims to show how a sociological fieldwork focusing on reflexivity can offer a grounded complementary perspective to the auto-ethnographic (Brigg and Bleiker 2010) and philosophical (Guillaume 2002) works on this topic by using Bourdieu-inspired approach to reflexivity in IR (Eagleton-Pierce 2011). I propose that semi-directive interviews with scholars represent a method of data collection particularly relevant for the study of reflexivity – even including those scholars who do not explicitly identify themselves as "reflexive". This method represents a comprehensive starting point for the sociological study of "reflexivity as a practice", as it addresses both objective and subjective elements of reflexivity. By focusing on the personal narratives of a sample of interviewees, we can simultaneously interrogate which positions and trajectories favour reflexivity in a field (the objective elements) while integrating the interviewees' perceptions and actions regarding their own transformation through reflexivity (the subjective elements).

To illustrate this argument, I will use the results of my fieldwork on the global circulation of IR. The initial aim of this fieldwork was to assess whether the internationalisation of IR in India was determined by national or international variables (such as scientific public policies, national publication markets, relation of IR with non-academic fields, gate-keeping practices, etc.). Although reflexivity was not a topic I aimed to focus on, it came up frequently in the interviews, making this investigation an interesting exploratory case for further research on reflexivity.

This fieldwork was comprised of 40 semi-directive interviews with scholars and PhD students from 13 academic and non-academic institutions, undertaken in 2012 in Delhi, Chennai and Pondicherry. Interviewees were asked about their professional trajectories, their perceptions of the "international" and their daily academic practices. Though the investigation enables the mapping of a diversity of positions regarding reflexivity, in this short article I will focus on the presentation of the trajectories of scholars who have experienced strong "reflexive momentums" in their career.

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The Social Variables of Reflexivity

Two types of variables producing reflexivity have been identified due to the interviews. We have designated them as "internal" and "external" depending on whether reflexivity happens as a result of a conscious decision of the scholar or an uncontrolled aspect of the scholars' life.

The external variables represent events and experiences occurring in the life of interviewees that create what has been described as a "reflexive space". This reflexive space enables scholars to question their current relation to their professional identification and activities (such as publication strategies, ways of interacting with foreign scholars or curricula developments). Events taking place in the professional field can snowball into a series of reflexive epiphanies. An interviewee relates how attending a workshop on "Upgrading International Studies in India," at the LKY School of Public Policy, resulted in a questioning of her perception of the field. She realized that despite having completed a PhD in the US and working in IR for thirty years, she had never attended an international conference, due to what she identified as self-limiting beliefs regarding what were supposed to be "international standards of selection".

Experiences taking place in the domain of private life can also impact professional reflexivity. Various scholars have evoked life-changing health issues as the starting point of a more acute perception of one's professional objectives and values. Spiritual awakenings and religious conversions were also mentioned as they enabled scholars to abruptly dive into an alternative experience of the world, putting in perspective their previous paradigms.

To illustrate how external variables are integrated in the personal narrative of the interviewees, we can take the example of a scholar in her fifties who told how disconnected events in the first twenty years of her career built up a tension regarding her professional position from which she experienced a reflexive momentum. Five main steps can be identified in her personal narrative: 1) the identification of a gap between the theoretical PhD she did in the United Kingdom and her first experience in the field after going back to India; 2) health issues that required her to stay home for several months; 3) historiographical research about the implication of the Ford Foundation in the construction of IR in India; 4) working at the Ford Foundation at the moment of the 9/11 events and realizing the discrepancy between the discourse about India/Pakistan relations and her own fieldwork experience; 5) the gap between the perspective acquired through those experiences and the syllabus she was supposed to teach in India. The following excerpt illustrates the fourth point mentioned:

And then I realized when I was in Ford, I was looking for one year and from a very theoretical side of the problem, [...] we were literally weeks after 9/11 happened and I was there when it happened, India/Pakistan literally was about to blow and we start to have a lot of interactions with people in the State department, [...] and I realized the understanding of Kashmir was so stereotypical, they were living in some other day and other era, you know some are very sophisticated, make no illusions about that very high order politics, very sophisticated analysis but the categories they were using, I felt biased categories " Hindu-Muslim conflict ", " territorial issue ", " nuclear hotspot " [...] I was being [...] driven back into a very simplistic understanding of the world.

The internal variables represent the type of decisions scholars have taken in order to implement reflexivity by consciously re-shaping their mind-set and practices such as writing and teaching. Two variables have been more frequently mentioned: starting or ceasing to expose oneself to a certain kind of literature, and starting or ceasing to interact with specific networks of people. In the following excerpt, a scholar explains how he has become what he designates as a "de-professionalised intellectual" through years of conscious re-programming of his early socialisation:

Late 70's I would say, I began to make deliberate effort to find out writings of scholars, intellectuals and even literary figures from countries near about India; Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal but also Africa. [...] So that was also an interesting experience because it was a deliberate attempt to break away from the mainstream Western knowledge system. [...] That confidence finally liberated me fully; liberated me fully, I guess, from the constraints of my discipline, my education, the dominant conventions of the academic world. I have to care for nothing now and I dealt with only people and began to establish links with people, work with people who were also trying to do the same

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thing. I also began to regularly visit Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh to get a larger perspective of the civilizational compulsions of this part of the world; […] Now I am tempted to call myself a "de-professionalised intellectual". It is a term Gustavo Esteva used. I don't care whether people can fit me into any ideological frame or not.

Such internal variables often resulted from a reflexive momentum created by external variables. In the trajectories of the interviewees, the realization of the relativity and self-limiting character of professional beliefs had a cumulative effect. Scholars found themselves motivated in expanding their reflexivity through more conscious, voluntaristic practices. For example, having accomplished something considered impossible later invites scholar to consciously question any belief regarding what is said to be possible or impossible. Few Indian scholars attend international conferences, and the statistics drop to close to zero when it comes to PhD students and scholars based outside of Delhi. One of the only interviewees who were regularly attending International Studies Association conferences was however a PhD student, teaching in Pondicherry at that time. The fact he was able to do a PhD in India despite being blind created a "the sky is the limit" disposition that invited him to question common sense discourses about how the field was supposed to work, for example regarding the accessibility of international venues.

Though this example is anecdotal, the pattern was representative among scholars based in Delhi but coming from outside of Delhi. The Delhi-centrism of IR in India is largely acknowledged, and scholars denounce the hierarchy existing between Delhi's and regional institutions (Mallavarapu 2005, 4). In the interviews, the effected scholars expressed how the reflexive skills they gathered as a result of coping with the cultural gap and disparities between Delhi and regional education system later gave them an unexpected advantage in the internationalisation process. This was because the difficulties encountered between the national and international levels were experienced as less difficult than the transition between the region and the capital of India. The following interviewee questioned at an early stage the level of English proficiency necessary to interact in international conferences. Having studied in Malayalam and Hindi before university, he felt inhibited by his level of English when entering an English-speaking university in Delhi. According to his testimony, the reflexive perception he developed regarding the relationship among language, communication and legitimacy later helped him to more easily dare to interact with foreign scholars at an earlier stage than other students that were educated in English. He explains his awareness as follows:

Therefore, my ability to understand thick books or to follow big arguments, big debates, was very limited. I always thought that but over the years I think I have been going to conferences ever since I was a student and I've been attracted to these people and I realized that what matters really is that the French, or the German and the Japanese or the Chinese can produce ideas and matter in the world. What matters really is not the language proficiency. Foucault is not known for his English skills right?

Considering those elements, the information provided by the interviewees not only enabled the identification of external variables that would later be backed by others sources of data (historical context, career advancement schemes, socio-economic backgrounds…). The personal narratives also provided precious insights about scholars' interpretations of the lived reflexive processes, which represent a key element in understanding the dynamism of such self-objectifying practice.

Conclusive Thoughts

This piece aimed at opening a discussion about new ways of approaching the study of reflexivity. Its modest ambitions were to illustrate how semi-directive interviews represent an innovative methodology that could apprehend both the subjective and objective conditions of reflexivity understood as a social practice. The interviews enabled the identification of two types of variables qualified as external and internal. The internal variables – relative to personal steps engaged by scholars – often appeared as consequences of the external variables, either professional or private in nature. This exploratory investigation opens new empirical and normative paths for reflexivity. First, it represents a starting point for a comparative analysis between different national fields/disciplines that would assess the impact of internal and external variables at different levels (individual, institutional, national, international). Second, the understanding of internal and external variables will provide new applied opportunities for scholars interested in promoting reflexivity in the field.

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