

Are you sitting comfortably?

Christina Richards calls for reader injunctions as a useful addition to the methodologies of the human and natural sciences

Researchers in both quantitative and qualitative science are often reminded that they must be aware of the possible ways in which their own assumptions, biases and beliefs may influence the design, procedure and reporting of their research. This article argues that readers should also be enjoined to consider these matters. We must all recognise the lenses through which we are likely to be reading the research.

When Julia Lang opened BBC Radio's *Listen with Mother* on 16 January 1950 she ad-libbed the now famous injunction to her (one might imagine) fidgeting audience of children: 'Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin'. In so doing she widened the focus, beyond her own performance to her listeners. She asked that they bring certain behaviours to the endeavour in order for it to be fully realised: that they be sitting comfortably in order that they could attend to the story fully, while at the same time respecting her position as co-creator of the encounter.

Philosophically, this can be situated within the idea that people co-construct meanings in interaction (Gergen, 1999) – there is not a reader and a listener, but two parties fully engaged in the act of 'storying', albeit with one party (the speaker) as the more apparently active participant. We can see here an example of something many people are intuitively aware of: that true perception requires a great deal from the perceiver, as well as the originator of the work, to create the desired integration of experience. Consider the deep silence of the audience during an operatic aria, the stillness of an art lover in front of a great painting, the sea of cigarette lighters at a rock concert, or the crease of concentration of the academic as she strives to engage hermeneutically with a text.

Gosh! Lots there – even existentialism at one point (I am smoking a Gitanes in my black polo neck as I type). Perhaps I should have asked 'Are you sitting comfortably?' before I began. Consider:

How did you feel as the tone of the piece changed just then – from the academic style to a more informal tone with that Gosh! – was there a slight jarring? If there was, perhaps it was indicative of your engagement with the piece, if not, consider why not? How are you reading this? Skimming it on a train before a lecture? In review? Because (let us hope) it appears interesting? What are you bringing to the piece? It is this consideration of what the reader (rather than the author or researcher) brings, or needs to bring, to the endeavour that this article seeks to formalise.

Injunction to researcher reflexivity

Many workers, especially in the human sciences and in qualitative research, have explicit injunctions towards researcher reflexivity within their methods: there is an onus on researchers to recognise what notions, ideas, aspirations and, crucially, assumptions they are bringing to the research themselves, and to address these in some manner. Some writers, such as Husserl (1900/1970), the founder of modern phenomenology, suggest that these assumptions can be 'bracketed through epoché' (i.e. that prior assumptions and ideas can be consciously set aside), in order that they do not interfere with our understandings, and so allowing us to take a 'birds eye' view of the work without our assumptions leading us to erroneous conclusions.

In contrast writers such as van Manen (1997) and Langdridge (2007) assert that such epoché is not possible: That, if you will, the brackets 'leak' and the epoché is imperfect; leading to the influence of our 'self' on the research. They argue that, as this leakage is inevitable, researchers should become aware of their self and their assumptions and explicitly recognise, if only to themselves, how this could influence their work. Thus van Manen asks researchers using his method of phenomenological inquiry to recognise the essentially reflexive nature of writing that

questions

In what areas would reader injunctions be particularly useful?

How might the recognition of the text being a combined enterprise between author and reader assist understanding in those areas?

resources

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involves 'the totality of our physical and mental being' (1997, p.132). Similarly, Langdridge (2007) asks researchers using his critical narrative analysis to 'subject him- or herself to a critique using the hermeneutic most appropriate to the topic at hand' (p.134). The researcher is invited to become aware of the hidden corners of their self and the assumptions that they bring, which could adversely affect their exploration of the topic under consideration.

Within positivist, especially quantitative, science the influence of the researcher is well known. Consequently the 'gold standard' of this type of research is the double-blind controlled study in which neither the researcher nor the participant is aware of whether any particular participant is in the group of participants to whom an adjustment is applied (e.g. the group who has been given the new drug), or in the group who have not had any adjustment made (e.g. the group who took the placebo). In this way, the researcher is unable to inadvertently

This, however, does not resolve a key difficulty within quantitative research; which is that researcher assumptions may influence the *design* of the study. For example, a study concerning college students' sexualities using an ANOVA – a common statistical test used to determine differences in population samples – might have the categories heterosexual, gay and lesbian – it being assumed by the researcher that these are the totality of available sexualities. In this case the design would miss people who identified as bisexual. Similarly, if bisexual is included to give the assumed totality of available sexualities the design would miss sadomasochistic, asexual, furry, etc. – again through the researcher's assumptions affecting the design.

Common to both quantitative and qualitative methods are further researcher injunctions. For example, professionalism is expected and lying is unacceptable, as is falsification of data. Researchers are expected to be as dispassionate as possible and to report their findings 'as they are'

rather than with political or ideological slants. Researchers are expected to be competent in their chosen methods, or supervised by someone who is. The method is expected to be clear to the reader in order that the findings can be considered in light of the modality of elicitation of data. Quite often the researcher is expected to present their findings in some formalised manner. Thus the onus is on the researcher, whether they are undertaking a qualitative or quantitative study, to conduct and present their findings in a certain defined way; a way that requires a great deal of knowledge and professionalism from the researcher. This is especially so if the findings are of a potentially incendiary nature.

We can see this in work such as Golombok et al. (1983) on children in lesbian and single parent households. It required a great deal from the authors in terms of methodology and mode and style of communication in order for the findings to appear valid and to be communicated properly. Similarly, Green's (1978, 2000) findings that trans parents are just as good as cisgender (those who remain the gender they were assigned at birth) parents required a great deal of Green for the same reasons. In both cases readers, especially those who take umbrage with the notion of gay or trans parents, may well have engaged with the work without any prior reflexivity, or indeed injunctions of any sort as to how they should engage with the text.

Reader injunctions

I assert therefore, that, especially in areas such as sex, mental health, culture, gender, race and conflict, where findings and research are likely to induce strong feelings in the reader, the author(s) should set out specifically how they wish the work to be approached by the reader. I suggest that this should precede, or form a formal part of, the introduction in both quantitative and qualitative research. This is in order that the reader is able to form the correct position vis-à-vis the research prior to engaging with it. This can already occasionally be seen outside the academy; as we saw with regard to *Listen with Mother* above; and also in the introduction to the film *Lemony Snicket* (2004) where the audience is told:

The movie you are about to see is extremely unpleasant. If you wish to see a film about a happy little elf, then I'm sure there is still plenty of seating in theatre number two. However, if you like stories about clever and reasonably attractive orphans, suspicious fires, carnivorous leeches, Italian food and secret organizations, then stay, as I retrace each and every one of the Baudelaire children's woeful steps...

Here the audience are required to consider whether they like the outline given and so to engage with the film on its own terms – they are no longer passive observers but are rather co-engaged with the creators in the endeavour, in a sense they are co-creators of their experience. Similarly Pirsig (1974) recounts some Japanese bicycle assembly instructions which assert that assembly requires 'great peace of mind' (p.167). Indeed, some aspects of reader reflexivity could be seen as having much in common with the



True perception requires a great deal from the perceiver, as well as the originator of the work

influence the outcome of the trial (perhaps by treating each group differently) until the final data are analysed and the participant groupings become known.

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reader injunctions

Buddhist (and lately psychological) concept of mindfulness: putting oneself in a state of open awareness, with a willingness to be present with the materials at hand (see Langer, 1990, for a wider summary of mindfulness research).

What then of reader injunctions from within the academy? I propose the following reader injunctions as being a sound base, especially for work within contentious fields, although the list will of course need to be tailored to the specifics of the topic under consideration. Readers will need:

Specific prior self-education on the topic

The archetypal 'educated lay person' will mostly have been educated on psychological topics through the popular media. Thus accurate education will be necessary prior to reading a piece on an unfamiliar area of psychology. For example, media representations tend to exaggerate gender differences and attribute these simplistically to biological differences present from birth. It behoves the reader of psychological research on this topic to also familiarise themselves with the social psychology of gender and neuroplasticity through life (Fine, 2010). Similarly, papers on advanced mathematics quite reasonably assume a knowledge of maths beyond that which the educated lay person on the Clapham omnibus might reasonably be expected to have. It is reasonable that the onus is on the reader to obtain some basic level of education on the topic rather than for the authors of the paper to have to explain each point to a 'lay person'.

Consideration of specifically what prior understandings, prejudices, etc. they are bringing to their reading of the text. This is the idea of reader reflexivity, in which the reader identifies those assumptions they are bringing to the reading. For example, if the reader believes that those who commit acts of terrorism are inexplicably evil, they may struggle to accept data on possible motivations for terrorist activities (e.g. Silke, 2001).

The reader should 'first cultivate peace of mind' in order that they are able to engage with the text 'as is' rather than through a lens of extra-text emotion and associated cognitions. In common with building bicycles, peace of mind is useful for reading contentious texts. Being open to the findings and able to consider them fully without being driven by 'hot' cognitions will allow the reader to appreciate the text more fully 'as presented'. For example, someone who



Papers on advanced mathematics quite reasonably assume a knowledge of maths beyond that of the educated lay person on the Clapham omnibus

holds the view that people with a diagnosis of schizophrenia are violent will be less open to appreciating the findings of work stating that those who do not also have a substance misuse problem are no more prone to violence than the general population (e.g. Fazel et al., 2009). In such situations they are more likely to close down and resist further stress though challenges to their beliefs (Fiske, & Taylor, 1991).

Acknowledgement that the author's thoughts may change

In line with many existential authors Spinelli (2007) questions the notion of a single, stable self. Indeed Heckert (2010) suggests that it does a violence to people to 'fix' them as unchanging. As written texts are unchanging (with the rare exception of texts with further editions), the reader must be aware that, while the text may remain fixed, the author does not (Barker, 2011). We can see this, for example, in the work of psychologists such as Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo whose famous early studies have been subject to questions around ethics, methodologies and interpretations, and who have taken on board many of these questions. It would be ludicrous for contemporary readers to criticise them for work from some 40 or 50 years ago which was written during a very different social and scientific landscape.

Acknowledgement that the participants' thoughts may change Similarly participants in research may change their views. The women studied by Carol Gilligan (1982) for her research on moral reasoning in abortion clinics will now be in their fifties. It would be strange to assume that they hold exactly the same views now, simply because they are captured in print.

Suspension of disbelief

The reader must attend to the participants' data (and the author's considerations of that data) as presented, and perhaps sit with them for some time, until fully able to apply their own thoughts in a critical manner. This is similar to a mode of *researcher* reflexivity known as a 'double hermeneutic' in Langdridge (2007) after Ricoeur (1970). In this double hermeneutic a piece of work is first examined without endeavouring to challenge it (a hermeneutic of description) and only then is it examined in a thoughtfully challenging way (a hermeneutic of suspicion). When this is applied to reader reflexivity the reader is able to fully engage with the piece without a reflex response affecting their open consideration of it.

This is of course, only a brief outline of the case for reader reflexivity. I invite you to consider how you engaged with this work. Were you more swayed by the sections with an academic tone or a personal one? Did the different illustrations (trans, abortion, terrorism) change how you engaged with the text? Did you like the references, the long words – did they add weight, quality? What did you bring to this? Is it hubris to question a foundation of the academy – that only the researcher, and not the reader, must work? Who am I writing for – who are you? Is there a meeting of minds? If not, is that solely to do with the adequacy of my writing and my argument?

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