

## ... reflecting on reflexivity

### **Oi, Karl, what's 'reflexivity' when it's out and about?**

Not now ... I'm trying to download my exam results on this fifth generation mobile .... and all I'm getting is channel 5.

### **Oh go on ... you owe me for the fifteen vanilla cokes you've downed this afternoon.**

But that's my new diet: ice-cream caffeine. Okay ... 'reflexivity' is one of those things that you have to say you do these days or be cast into a dark pit and flayed for your sins. It's a commandment: thou shalt be reflexive. We're all for it, it's a GOOD thing, a necessary thing ... even if we're not sure what it means.

### **But I've heard it used loads of times in lectures, books and that.**

Too true. Let's see .... you've got your various species of reflexivity, like endogenous, referential, indexical, constitutive, etc. Then you've got your theorists of reflexivity, like Schutz, Garfinkel, Mannheim, Giddens, Beck, etc etc. But that's not all.

Don't forget the things you can apply 'reflexivity' to as an adjective: like claiming we now live in 'reflexive modernity' or saying the process of modernization is different. So, like David Beckham's latest barnet, reflexivity is everywhere ... and those were just for starters.

### **Great, thanks ... now my head's gonna explode.**

Okay, let's simplify. First, we can say that talk of reflexivity tends to be about either intellectual practices or features of social life. Next, if we stick to the first of these – reflexivity as intellectual practice – and stand back then it's clear they share the argument that authors should position themselves in relation to their objects of study so that we can assess their knowledge claims. The

reason is that your social position, identity, experiences, basically the point from which you view things helps shape your point of view in all kinds of ways, often without you realising.

So being reflexive is supposed to provide a firmer epistemological base for knowledge. That's the theory anyway. How it works out in research practice is another thing altogether.

### **My lecturer began her conference paper on history teaching by reflexively describing how she had been a history teacher.**

That's one form it can take. I've also heard acute self-awareness of your social identity or providing a travelogue of the fieldwork or a diary of your relation to the object of study ... among many others.

Often it's more 'reflectivity' than reflexivity. Before you know it you're reading more about the author than what they were supposed to be looking at.

The thing is, you might aim to struggle clear of the distorting effects of your social position by discussing it but you're discussing it from a position, so if anything you're adding another distorted view.

It's like trying to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps: it's physically impossible and you're likely to disappear up your backside if you're not careful.

Thing is, the forms taken by reflexivity in research often represent good practice and open up the researcher and research process for questioning ... they're good methods or they give a sociological account of knowledge, but they're not epistemological tools, whatever the intention.

### **Okay, right .... so what's epistemology then?**