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# Epilogue: intersectional reflexivity and social science training

Michelle Marzullo

*Department of Human Sexuality, California Institute of Integral Studies,  
San Francisco, California, USA*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This epilogue explores the role of intersectional reflexivity in social science training, emphasizing how the practice of reflexivity when paired with intersectionality, enhances both personal growth and academic scholarship. It critiques the tension between the concepts of “false consciousness” and “authenticity,” highlighting the risks of authenticity being co-opted as a societal control mechanism that reinforces dominant norms.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Theoretical comment on the reflexive autoethnographic narrative form.

**Findings** – The piece draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s thinking to argue that scholars must recognize their social locations and personal biases to avoid distorting research outcomes.

**Research limitations/implications** – By practicing “intersectional reflexivity,” researchers better navigate their roles, remaining aware of ethics and their positionality toward engaging responsibly with the communities they study.

**Originality/value** – This approach fosters more ethical, unbiased research that respects the interconnectedness of social identities and experiences.

**Keywords** Intersectionality, Reflexivity, Ethics, Autoethnography, Intersectional reflexivity, Social science training

**Paper type** Research article

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The articles presented in this special issue illustrate that the pursuit of authenticity through the practice of reflexivity may be used to informed research and scholarship via the lens of intersectionality rather than downplay or ignore connection, power relations, social responsibility and empathy. This is of course the expectation of social science research in the 21st century yet the actual doing of this training is an internal conversation that each researcher and scholar must individually address.

The narratives here find common themes of being cast as different, not normal or even abject. They each journey through attempts to hide, fear or change themselves. Yet they also articulate how their experiences also inspire radical self-acceptance, proclamation or even reclamation as DDS Dobson-Smith writes, some have come to the: “radical act of living authentically in a world that constantly tries to erase difference.”

Common themes present in these narratives are as follows:

- (1) Reflexively coming to understand identities and feelings as continually and contextually informed by others and the self
- (2) An appreciation for the framework of intersectionality as an interpretive lens, and
- (3) Authenticity functioning at the level of the individual

In many ways, these emergent critical sexuality studies scholars point us to the tensions between the concept of “false consciousness,” the academic debates over the dangers of “authenticity,” and the pedagogical concerns with training future researchers to actually see what is in front of our noses and outside of hegemonic pressures to conform or be silenced or worse use our own stance as a way of analytic interpretation.

These tensions in the social sciences are not new. [Bourdieu and Wacquant \(1993\)](#) wrote extensively on the subject in their book *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. This excerpt captures such paradoxical tensions:



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What distresses me... is that people whose profession it is to objectivize the social world prove so rarely able to objectivize themselves, and fail so often to realize that what their apparent scientific discourse talks about is not the object but their relation to the object. (p. 68–69)

Here I will briefly unpack the nuanced theoretical work that I see happening in these papers in what Jones (2010) terms “intersectional reflexivity” to bring us to a shared understanding of the power of this approach.

For the concept “false consciousness,” I am of course using Engle’s (1893) concept and drawing on Marxist critiques of how societal power structures, particularly under capitalism, shape individuals’ beliefs, perceptions to internalized values, ideologies and norms that align with the interests of the ruling class and often leading them to accept social inequalities as inevitable, thus stealing agency or stalling or stopping collective mobilization to resist or transform oppressive systems. Here I contrast this idea to that of personal authenticity, which focuses on the pursuit of an individual’s “true self,” values and beliefs – often in opposition to societal pressures or norms.

On one hand, false consciousness critiques the influence of external social forces that lead to misaligned interests and stalled or warped actions in the social spheres leading to individuals betraying their own material needs. On the other, tropes of authenticity often require rejecting such social norms or customs to remain “true to oneself.” Critics of the ideal of authenticity include that it becomes too focused on self-determination and individual expression, such that this “subjective turn” can undermine a sense of shared meaning, collective responsibility, dismissal of others’ perspectives and loss of empathy detached from real social conditions and relationships thus paradoxically serving as a vehicle for reinforcing social norms, especially in how authenticity is often policed within discourses on identity. Foucault (1978) warns that, paradoxically, tropes of authenticity may become a mode of societal control, where individuals feel pressured to conform to a particular narrative of the “authentic self,” reinforcing dominant cultural norms (today these may be heteronormative, homonormative, transnormative, race-normative, sexist, classist and the like) rather than resisting them.

And this is where reflexivity joined with the concept of intersectionality is most transformative for both personal growth and pedagogical training of social researchers. Using “intersectional reflexivity” deployed as a way to retain a sense of personal authenticity as a lens allow scholars to avoid a solipsistic or overly subjective outlook, which can obscure social interconnectedness and mistakenly prioritize individual views to replace and obscure realities of the people at the center of our research with those of ourselves. This is the error that Bourdieu was pointing us to be careful that our analyses do not replace our *relation to the object* rather than actual analytics that are drawn from the data.

When we practice “intersectional reflexivity,” we are simultaneously attentive to the ways that social location such as race, gender, sexuality, class, religion, geographic location and so on inform our own perceptions and take this a step further to test those positionalities and our affective engagements with others, especially our engagements with our research subjects, to best situate ourselves as social scientists in a pursuit of research that is as unbiased as we can possibly perform it. This practice in a sense attempts to avoid “false consciousness” for the researcher while at the same time being aware of the hegemonic social conditioning forces impacting them/ourselves as well as others. As Bourdieu’s quote at the start of this paper underlines, a major critique of social science is that it prioritizes the sensibilities of the researcher or scholars as the orienting stance that animates our analyses – doing so does real harm to science, scholarship and the communities we engage by allowing our personal interpretations to guide our analytics.

Using “intersectional reflexivity” changes the self in order to change the world, as Wittgenstein (1953) argues. The narratives in this special issue play with the tension between authenticity at the personal level in order to stay critical of social forces and aware of the evidence in front of them. In so doing, shows how such insights allow the scholar and cultural worker to do work that is not unduly influenced by either their own stance nor disciplined by

hegemonic expectations or discourses – to see with and to feel with because we have been with and felt with ourselves – not in spite of others or to “help” others – but *to work with, to struggle with, to learn alongside and to articulate and synthesize from our vantage as scholars*. The tension between self-awareness and social responsibility in conducting research is at the center of ethical analytic approaches: using essays such as those modeled in this special issue show how “intersectional reflexivity” may be engaged for the training of scientists and scholars alike to meet these ends.

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### Corresponding author

Michelle Marzullo can be contacted at: [mmarzullo@ciis.edu](mailto:mmarzullo@ciis.edu)