

Reconceptualizing rigour: the case for reflexivity

Dr Tina Koch RGN PHD

RDNS Chair in Domiciliary Nursing, Flinders University of South Australia

and Ann Harrington RN DNE BEd MN

Senior Lecturer, School of Nursing, Flinders University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia

Accepted for publication 3 October 1997

KOCH T. & HARRINGTON A. (1998) *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 28(4), 882–890
Reconceptualising rigour: the case for reflexivity

This paper is a critical review of recent discussions of rigour in nursing research. We will argue that ‘borrowing’ evaluation criteria from one paradigm of inquiry and applying them to another is problematic. We attempt to map the ‘rigour’ field and add a dimension to the existing debate about rigour and qualitative research through inclusion of reflexivity guided by philosophical hermeneutics. We describe reflexivity and appeal to writers to incorporate a reflexive account into their research product by signposting to readers ‘what is going on’ while researching. We contend that researchers bring to the research product, data generated, a range of literature, a positioning of this literature, a positioning of oneself, and moral socio-political contexts. We suggest that reflexive research is characterized by ongoing self-critique and self-appraisal and that the research product can be given shape by the politics of location and positioning. We emphasize that in the creation of a text (the research product) it is desirable that the researcher be a skilled writer. Finally we claim that if the research product is well signposted, the readers will be able to travel easily through the worlds of the participants and makers of the text (the researchers) and decide for themselves whether the text is believable or plausible (our terms for rigour).

Keywords: rigour, reflexivity, journal, qualitative research, representation, legitimization, philosophical hermeneutics, plausability

INTRODUCTION

We assume that interpretation is at the heart of all research practices. We will enlarge upon this conception as the paper progresses and hope to extend the discussion toward reconceptualizing rigour. The question is: What makes a research product believable or plausible? To that end we explore ‘reflexivity’ and we ask you to consider the entire research process as a reflexive exercise which

provides answers to the question: ‘What is going on in methods?’ Our position is informed by Gadamer’s (1976) philosophical hermeneutics which does not show us what to do, but asks us to question what is ‘going on’ while researching. Monitoring ‘what is going on’ requires that a reflective journal be maintained throughout the research process.

We are two woman academics, experienced and engaged in the complexities of both quantitative and qualitative research through our own research and teaching. The first author completed her PhD in 1993 in a study entitled ‘Toward fourth generation evaluation. Listening

Correspondence: Professor Tina Koch, School of Nursing, Flinders University of South Australia, GPO Box 2100, Adelaide, South Australia 5001. E-mail: Tina.Koch@flinders.edu.au

to the voices of older patients; a hermeneutic inquiry' (Koch 1993). The second author completed her master's thesis entitled 'Registered nurses perceptions of spiritual care: a descriptive study' (Harrington 1993) and is currently enrolled as a doctoral candidate. Initially, the second author was not convinced that she would class herself as a critical hermeneuticist; however, she accepted that the basic tenet of hermeneutics was not to develop a procedure for understanding, but to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place (Gadamer 1994). Further there was an agreement from both authors that despite their differing history (bringing to the research process their own experience, values and beliefs) their central premise was the same.

With the assistance of some talented graduate students in the classroom we explored the notion of rigour in nursing research. What follows are some of the conversations we have had with nursing higher degree students who have struggled with the notion of rigour for their particular research project. However, the main thrust of this paper comes from the issues arising from our research practice and the debates surrounding rigour in the literature. Our position is tentative as conversations, reading and the dialectic continue.

The first author's concern about the notion of rigour emerged from her PhD. Three concerns identified in the PhD were: understanding the philosophical underpinnings of the methodology, the participation of the researcher in making data, and the way in which believability of hermeneutic research could be established. These concerns have currency because they attempt to deal with two central issues in interpretative research: representation and interpretation. This is confirmed by Lincoln & Denzin (1994) who perceive representation and legitimation to be in crisis in qualitative research.

On the question of representation we ask: how do we study the other without studying ourselves? Should the research be characterized by ongoing self-critique and self-appraisal, or is this self indulgence? What constitutes representation? And on the question of legitimation, we ask whether the research project has the right to assert not only the interests of those studied but also the researchers' interests. What makes the research project believable? What does the notion of rigour have to do with it? Have traditional criteria for evaluating and interpreting qualitative research become problematic? It is our opinion that researchers undertaking interpretative approaches will be confronted by these questions and with the issues of representation and legitimation.

In the effort to bring the above questions to this discussion we have explored the conditions for rigour by examining a range of literature. We will briefly map the field. First we will present the challenges to researchers involved in qualitative research; second, we will demonstrate the preoccupation of qualitative researchers with

methodological rigour as a legacy of a positivist (empirical) epistemology; third, we will trace some of the debates concerning standardized evaluation criteria and will argue that 'borrowing' evaluation criteria from one paradigm of inquiry and applying it to another, is problematic.; fourth, we will argue for an expanded conception of rigour which moves the discussion to include moral and socio-political contexts; fifth, we will dwell briefly with feminist critiques of claims of positivist epistemology; sixth, we will focus on counter practices and suggest reflexivity as a counter practice towards making a research product believable or plausible.

The terms 'research product' and 'text', used interchangeably throughout this paper, suggest that there could be a final product. While we use these terms to indicate that a thesis or research report resulting from reflective inquiry may be regarded as a product, we believe its contents are likely to reflect an ongoing integrative process as the dialogue continues and interpretative possibilities are revealed.

CHALLENGES TO QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

It is recognized that qualitative research is an umbrella term covering a variety of research traditions in philosophy, anthropology, psychology, history, literary criticism, cultural studies and sociology and that there are debates about approaches within traditions. For example, there are many phenomenological approaches, at least two grounded theory approaches, a variety of feminist methodologies and a range of participatory action research and evaluation research approaches. These traditions have managed the issue of rigour according to research product requirements within disciplines. In other words, conditions for rigour are prescribed within these approaches.

A CDROM literature search surrounding the issue of rigour (over 100 articles since 1990) revealed some of the debates, but most importantly it suggests cross-fertilization of ideas and blurring of discipline boundaries. Although our interest in the debates derives from activity in nursing research practice, we believe the discussion is relevant across disciplines.

In the health field, with its strong tradition of biomedical research and use of conventional quantitative methods, qualitative research is often criticised for lacking 'scientific' rigour. Until recently qualitative researchers have responded to these criticisms by claiming that the integrity of the research process can be protected by attending to the issues of objectivity and generalizability and their use as evaluation criteria. These evaluation criteria are often used to assess a piece of qualitative work and are derived from conventional (a term which will be used in this paper) quantitative research practice. The most commonly heard criticism is that qualitative research is anecdotal, impressionistic, and strongly subject

to researcher bias. It is said that qualitative research is not able to be reproduced and that there is no guarantee that another researcher would not give an entirely different account. Qualitative research is criticised for its inability to generalize the findings as large amounts of detailed data are generated from small samples. In terms of 'making' the research product (text), its results may be seen to be fabricated. There has not yet been a major scandal of falsification in qualitative research, but it could happen. So how can the reader be assured that the text is believable or plausible?

Here it is argued that borrowing evaluation criteria from one paradigm of inquiry and applying them to another is problematic.

THE PREOCCUPATION OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCHERS WITH METHODOLOGICAL RIGOUR AS A LEGACY OF A POSITIVIST EPISTEMOLOGY

In the last two decades the issue of rigour in qualitative research including evaluation criteria initially referred to as 'reliability' and 'validity' persists as a legacy of the scientific method. Rigour, legitimation and representation issues continue to challenge new researchers as they shift from this conventional paradigm to alternative paradigms. Research, driven by a positivist account, is a systematic and methodological process for acquiring knowledge. Much of the current literature in qualitative research is also analytical or empirical, and tends to be methodologically driven. As evidenced by the vast literature, this preoccupation with rigour appears central to much research within nursing and social science. The legitimation of the qualitative research process is closely tied to success in demonstrating rigour.

Nurses who use methodologies that pursue 'understanding' as their goal have yet to agree how rigour can be achieved and maintained. In our experience, beginning PhD students are quite persistent in their search for a 'method'. Some methods such as phenomenology, are particularly appealing to students in the current environment. Often these 'methods' are not suitable for the question to be answered or explored. The attraction of a 'method' is that it comes with rules to follow and application of a set of rules makes the research endeavour accessible to novice researchers.

In 1982 a nurse phenomenologist, Oiler, using the terms 'bias' and 'validity', states that these are problematic in phenomenological research and consequently suggests some strategies for dealing with rigour issues. According to Oiler, the nurse researcher should examine closely all the reasons for selecting a particular phenomenon for study, and take every possible opportunity to explain choice in the study, because it is argued, these choices stem from the researcher's own predispositions and val-

ues. Researchers are encouraged to clarify these beliefs and position before the data generation phase of the research process (Parse *et al.* 1985) and to bracket them. Phenomenological methods are believed to be adequate if they 'bracket' or suspend the bias of the researcher. Thus central to maintaining 'objectivity' is the strategy of bracketing.

The use of structured analysis frameworks is another strategy. The procedures nurses are using for analysis of phenomenological data are based on the work of psychologists such as Giorgi (1985) and Colaizzi (1978). Nurses claim that if these procedures are followed validity can be attained (Knaack 1984, Lynch-Sauer 1985, Munhall & Oiler 1986, Drew 1986, Santopinto 1988, Banonis 1989, Loos 1989). These researchers rely on the data analysis framework to assist with obtaining 'validity'. Drew (1986 p. 42) draws on Colaizzi's framework to provide validity by making the suggestion that 'listening to each session supplies continuous evaluation of interviewing technique and wording of the questions'. Similarly Haase (1987) states that each step of the seven provided by Colaizzi contains evidence of validity checks. It is clear that prescriptive, structured approaches to analysis of data given by psychologists have been both adopted and adapted by nurse researchers.

Schwandt (1996), in a recent edition of *Qualitative Inquiry*, coined the preoccupation with rigour as 'criteriology' and suggests that criteriology is obsessed with method producing the findings of research. This preoccupation motivates a continuing quest for standardized evaluation criteria.

TRACING THE DEBATES CONCERNING STANDARDIZED EVALUATION

Although the nature of the debate has shifted since 1980, it is clear that the language (the terms objectivity, reliability, validity and generalizability) and ideas from the 1980s continue to be imposed upon some qualitative research. For instance, Hinds *et al.* (1990) still refer to the terms 'reliability' and 'validity' and develop a method to estimate these for a qualitative inquiry, while Hogston (1995) agrees that these terms are contentious in qualitative research and uses the terms 'truth and accuracy'. However, most authors have chosen to use Lincoln & Guba's (1985) parallel terms (Table 1).

Lincoln and Guba in their 1985 text *Naturalistic Inquiry* were among the first to challenge the use of standardized evaluation criteria utilized within the dominant conventional paradigm for qualitative work. Their first seven chapters argue against the conventional paradigm and challenge its way of knowing:

We are so imbued with the tenets of science that we take its assumptions utterly for granted. So much so that we almost

Table 1 Establishing trustworthiness

	Scientific paradigm criteria	Constructivist paradigm criteria	Sandelowski (1986) Beck (1993)
Truth values	Internal validity	Credibility	Credibility
Applicability	External validity	Transferability	Fittingness
Consistency	Reliability	Dependability	Auditability
Confirmability*			

*Confirmability is when credibility, transferability and dependability issues have been addressed. (Adapted from Lincoln & Guba 1985 p. 300).

cannot comprehend the possibility that there may be other ways of thinking and when other ways are suggested we are inclined to shut our ears, feeling that merely to listen to them is, quite literally heresy.

(Lincoln & Guba 1985 pp. 8–9).

They argue for an alternative ‘constructivist’ paradigm and ask ‘what makes for trustworthiness of the research product?’ To establish trustworthiness in ‘qualitative’ inquiry, they appeal to the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Table 1) as parallel terms to be used instead of dominant positivist language.

Sandelowski (1986) brought these evaluation criteria to the attention of nurse researchers, and since that time, most of the discussion surrounding rigour in qualitative work has incorporated Sandelowski’s influence. Beck (1993) uses the terms credibility, fittingness and auditability (Table 1) in phenomenological research, where ‘credibility’ refers to vividness and faithfulness to the description of the phenomena, ‘fittingness’ is possible when data can fit into a context other than the one in which they were generated and ‘auditability’ refers to the decisions made by the researcher at every stage of the research process. Implied in Beck’s discussion is that these criteria are seen as appropriate and can be applied within all qualitative work. Indeed many authors draw upon Lincoln and Guba’s alternative evaluation criteria and are influenced by Sandelowski and Beck’s work. Often these criteria are promoted as universal standards for qualitative work. While these terms and applications are appropriate in some qualitative research approaches, it is also clear that in some nursing research studies these criteria appear to be uncritically adopted.

In summary thus far we state:

- Qualitative researchers have struggled to apply criteria from quantitative research to qualitative work.
- Nurses have adapted the parallel criteria for assessing qualitative work (based on the work by Lincoln & Guba (1985)) to enhance trustworthiness but they have done this somewhat uncritically.

- In its commitment to ‘canons of good science’, much of literature is concerned with ‘rule governed approaches’ (Healy 1996 p. 156).

One strong example of a ‘rule’ is the return of data to the research participants. This application is given priority in work by many nurse researchers including Hoffart (1991), who used a member check procedure in a study of nursing joint appointments. Indeed this is one of the most discussed techniques in the attempt for rigour. The claim is that the research report derived from this process authenticates data and contributes to the rigour of the research process. There are ethical and practical problems with the return of data to the participants which are not often discussed. In the first author’s PhD study 14 older patients were interviewed about their experiences of care while in Care of the Elderly wards. Not only was it impossible to return transcripts to the participants, seven patients had died, and some of the survivors were not well enough to be able to read through 20 or more pages of transcript.

The second author had similar problems with her masters’ thesis. It was not feasible to have the respondents check the data collected or consider the analysis made of the data or the outcomes drawn from the research. This was due in part to the sheer difficulty of tracing respondents up to a year after their interview. Moreover the benefit to be gained was questionable. First, as far as the basic data was concerned, the fact that the interviews were tape-recorded and directly transcribed provided a guarantee of at least verbal accuracy. Second, in regard to the analysis and discussion, the method used in the study subsumed individual statements under many different themes and it would have been extremely difficult for a respondent to identify his or her contribution. Therefore we suggest that member checking has more problems than the literature reveals.

This drive for ‘rules’ within a methodology includes ‘member checking’. It is further pursued through bracketing, memo writing, peer review and triangulation. Indeed there is a huge literature concerned with the processes of

triangulation based on Denzin's (1978) formulation. For instance, the argument for triangulation is that it maintains multiple sources of data, multiple theories or multiple investigations within a study. Triangulation deems to overcome bias from using a single method, a single observer and a single theory study.

In an introduction to Schwandt's (1996:57) work it is reported that the entire project of:

'criteriology' is the attempt to settle once and forever the standards for judging the 'goodness' of the inquiry — and is rooted in historical commitments to objectivism and to a form of rationality that is rooted in the epistemic assertion of some reality outside of moral and political choices. We have to abandon the idea that somehow methodological criteria exist that will insulate the inquirer from the moral and the practical/action implications of his or her work.

So far, it is the project of 'criteriology' that has shaped our way of thinking about social inquiry. In so doing qualitative researchers have avoided engagement in moral or political contexts. In post modern work this disengagement is being contested. Therefore the fourth task here is to argue for an expanded conception of rigour which moves the discussion to include these moral and political contexts. This is viewed as an 'epistemological' as opposed to a 'methodological' driven project.

EXPANDED CONCEPTUALISING OF RIGOUR

The nursing literature further supports the case for reconceptualizing rigour. There is movement as Ratcliffe & Gonzalez-del-Valle (1988 p. 388) argue for an 'expanded conceptualising' of rigour. Their condition for expansion includes moral, political and ideological value-commitments in the research process which they argue goes beyond 'merely a set of methods for gathering and treating data', to a rigorous approach to the entire process. Porter (1993) refers to the problem of naive realist thinking in nursing research and invites nurse researchers to leave behind objectivity. Researchers are encouraged to incorporate their social self into the research project. These authors provide support for engagement of the researcher, in the making of the research product. In this selected literature there is a sense that nurse researchers are seeking liberation from the stranglehold of objectivism. Increasingly nurses ask: What legitimates their claims to knowledge? In which way is their research product believable? What can be done if they no longer accept any autonomous criteria against which to judge their research? Debates among qualitative researchers give promise of lending clarity to the reconceptualizing of rigour. At the same time, there is a move to argue for no formal set of criteria and this leaves the methodological preoccupation behind.

Recent literature surrounding the notion of rigour attempts to reconceptualize the process of research from a methodological project to an epistemological project. For instance, in the United Kingdom (UK) Avis (1995) provides an account of 'validity' (his term) in the establishment of the credibility of research findings. He argues that there can be no formal set of criteria with which to judge the validity of qualitative research findings; rather the credibility of research findings should be judged on the usefulness of the research product.

Nolan & Behi (1995 p. 587) enter the debate over the criteria that differentiate 'good and poor "research"' and support the claim that 'there are no hard and fast rules'. In addition they agree with our claim that the way in which a research study is legitimated depends upon the paradigm within which a given study is conducted. By this we mean exploration of conditions, philosophical underpinning's and assumptions within research work.

So far we have entered into some of the discussion that places epistemology on the agenda and we believe that there is a need to explore the philosophical/epistemological roots informing our inquiry. Set rules, i.e. 'methodology', are no longer the only way in which rigour is plausible (Nolan & Behi 1995, Avis 1995). We suggest that evaluation criteria can be generated within the research product itself through detailed and contextual writing and a reflexive account of the actual research process. Before moving on to possible ways in which reflexivity can be incorporated into a study, it is prudent to observe that many feminists have developed their own critique of the universalist claims of positivist epistemology, and as a result have contributed extensively to the rigour debate.

FEMINIST CONTRIBUTION

In the fifth place, feminist research projects are considered by feminists as having epistemological concerns at their centre. Often the notion of value neutrality and knowledge claims within conventional approaches to research are challenged. Bhavnani (1993) claims that knowledge is constructed and that scientific insights derived from the use of the conventional paradigm have social origins. Therefore it is possible to trace the historical development of such insights. Exploring such insights can raise questions about the politics of knowledge production. This means generating data in the awareness that this process operates in a world of existing alternative representations which serve to shape the research process with political and critical insight. This is often referred to as the politics of location.

While undertaking the politics of location, Bhavnani (1993) appeals to a set of counter practices based upon feminist principles to guide the inquiry. The principles are accountability, partiality and positioning. She draws attention to 'positioning' as a practice in feminist work.

This position rejects fundamentalist rhetoric and binarism from conventional modes of inquiry. The practice of positioning opens the possibilities for different sorts of identities, concepts of race and culture to emerge. The interest in Bhavnani's study is that its evaluation criteria are intrinsic and self generating to this type of research project. That is to say: a study driven by clearly defined principles has the potential to generate its own set of evaluation criteria. Finally, she believes that credibility of research findings should be judged on the usefulness of the research product.

Hall & Stevens (1991) contribute to the debate by arguing that credible feminist research should appeal to the criteria of dependability and adequacy. Establishing dependability or maintaining an audit trail means recording decisions throughout the research process and incorporating these in the final product. So the point we emphasize here is the intrinsic/internal logic reflected in the writing of the final research product.

Lather (1993 p. 674) refuses to jettison the term 'validity', preferring to retain it 'in order to both circulate and break with the signs that code it'. Her aim is to reconceptualize validity that is grounded in theorizing our practice. Lather is interested in the way in which validity is shaped by the proliferation of 'paradigms' and traces the constructions surrounding the issue of research legitimation from discourse analysis, ethnographic authority, post-structuralism, emancipatory interest and naturalistic/constructivist approaches to research. She writes:

It is not a matter of looking harder or more closely, but of seeing what frames our seeing — spaces of constructed visibility and incitement to see which constitute power/knowledge.

(Lather 1993 p. 675)

Lather reminds us that relevant stories about science are those which question representation. Our interpretation is that this refers to reflection about what is going on while using methods, in other words, 'a reflexive exploration of our own practices of representation' (Lather 1993 p. 675). It suggests moving beyond the audit/decision trail recorded in a daily journal toward a critical reading of those constructions (political and social) that inform our research practice. This is exactly the point we take on board to further our position as critical hermeneuticists.

So far we have selected literature to support an expanded conception of rigour which moves the discussion to include epistemological concerns and within this, the moral and socio-political contexts of an inquiry. We now build upon this by suggesting that, in writing the research product, the plausibility may depend upon the intrinsic (or internal coherence) of the study with reflexive exploration of the entire research process.

We have stated that most researchers commence with methodological concerns and adopt a pathway provided

by a methodology (e.g. grounded theory approach) to ensure rigour. We suggest the research process is reversed, so that ontological questions surrounding the researcher and researched are dealt with first. This then is followed by epistemological questions which in turn lead to the methodology of Guba & Lincoln (1989).

COUNTER-PRACTICES

In this section we describe 'reflexivity' and ask writers to incorporate a reflexive account into their research product by signposting to readers 'what is going on' while researching. We contend that researchers bring to the research product the following: data generated; a range of literature; a positioning of this literature; a positioning of oneself; and moral socio-political contexts. We suggest that reflexive research is characterized by ongoing self-critique and self-appraisal. The research product can be given shape by the politics of location and positioning and this is precisely what makes it a critical process. We emphasize that in the creation of a text (the research product) it is desirable that the researcher be a skilled writer. Finally we claim that if the research product is well signposted, the readers will be able to travel easily through the worlds of the participants and makers of the text (the researchers), and decide for themselves whether the text is believable or plausible (our terms for rigour).

Research as an ontological project

We assume that interpretation is at the heart of all research practices. That we drive research projects with our values, histories and interests is central to this understanding. Such a conception of interpretation is fundamentally critical. This position assumes that the researcher makes the text. As researchers guided by Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics, we assume that the research is an interaction between 'an historically produced text and an historically produced reader' (Allen 1995 p. 176). The reality we propose is that the situation of the researcher (interpreter) can never be separated from the ongoing traditions in which he or she is engaged. Although Gadamer (1976) did not write a methodology for the social sciences, philosophical hermeneutics affirms the position of the researcher in the hermeneutic circle. 'The hermeneutic circle cannot be avoided, rather it is a matter of getting into it properly' (Bleicher 1980 p. 103). Within this tradition, in gaining access to understanding, the researcher and researched move 'between a background of shared meaning and a more finite, focused experience within it' (Thompson 1990 p. 243). The hermeneutic circle is a metaphor for describing the movement between the part and the whole. Palmer (1969 p. 87) identifies that by dialectical interaction between the whole and the part, each gives the other meaning; 'understanding is circular,

then. Because within the “circle” the meaning comes to stand...’.

Getting into the hermeneutic circle ‘properly’ relies on each person’s ‘background’, where neither participants/text nor the researcher can assume a privileged position in interpretation. In the process of interviewing, stories are told by self-interpreting participants, who have brought to them their pre-understandings. The researcher’s situation and background not only influence the interpretation of participants’ stories, but they also bring an understanding that always precedes these situations. We understand something by comparing it to something we already know. At the same time, we can only make explicit what is already understood. Understanding is possible only because, not in spite, of pre-understandings derived from the interpreter’s initial situation (Rabinow & Sullivan 1987). By returning to our personal history we can raise our situation to consciousness in order to monitor the way in which it deals with texts and traditions. Such reflexivity is the critical gaze turned toward the self and the making of the research product. The counter practice to which we appeal is the keeping of a reflexive journal throughout the research process. We will now expand upon the notion of reflexivity.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity, in its various guises, occupies a central place in participatory action research, feminist research, ethnographies, and recently in hermeneutic and post-modern/post-structural approaches to research, taking different forms and raising different questions. Marcus (1994) describes four styles of reflexivity in ethnography.

The first is a baseline form of reflexivity ‘associated with the self-critique and personal quest, playing on the subjective, the experiential and the idea of empathy’ (Marcus 1994 p. 569). He claims that such reflexivity exposed the epistemological and ethical grounds of qualitative research (he refers to anthropology) to full critical discussion, and ‘opened the way for critical hermeneutics’ commenced in the debate between Habermas and Gadamer (Boyne 1988, Nicolson 1991, Misgeld 1991). The outcome of this reflexivity opens the possibility for the research product (text) to incorporate many voices. Without a ‘many voiced’ account, this type of reflexivity can be charged with self indulgence and narcissism. A counter-practice we suggest is that the reader examine closely the text for incorporation of voices other than the voice of the lone introspective researcher and that many voices (and their influences) be recorded.

The second type of reflexivity has the effect of sustaining objectivity. The research process retains its identity as ‘method’ and reflexivity is valued as a research tool. Within this process, practitioners disapprove of reflexivity

touching on the subjective, and oppose any sort of identity between the worlds of the observer and the observed (Marcus 1994 p. 570).

The third type of reflexivity is one that emphasizes the diverse field of representation and has been termed as the ‘politics of location.’ This type of reflexivity acknowledges that interpretation exists in a complex matrix of alternative representations and ‘derives its critical power and insight from this awareness’ (Marcus 1994 p. 571). Its focus is upon reflexive awareness of the historical connections that already link it to its subject matter; such representations become an integral part of field work (Marcus 1994 p. 571).

The critical awareness we envisage in the counter practice incorporates this third form of reflexivity. It reaches beyond the subjectivist account in the first kind of reflexivity, although we claim the first kind of reflexivity is essential in demonstrating the co-constitution in the making of the text (between participants and researchers).

Feminist experiential reflexivity is the fourth style and refers to positioning. ‘Positioning assumes all work is incomplete and requires a response (and thus engagement) from others positioned differently’ (Marcus 1994 p. 572). As discussed, positioning is one of the feminist principles guiding Bhavnani’s inquiry tracing the contours of feminist research and feminist objectivity. Furthermore notions surrounding reflexivity deserve more attention than we are able to give them in this paper. However, we conclude that complex ideas surrounding reflexivity and in particular the politics of location, give a critical edge to our research project. We embrace the first, third and fourth types of reflexivity described by Marcus.

Creation of a text

In answer to the questions asked at the beginning of this paper, we suggest that reflexive research is characterized by ongoing self-critique and self-appraisal and that the research product can be given shape by the politics of location and positioning. The research project not only has the right to assert the interests of those studied but it is unavoidable that our interests are incorporated into the inquiry. Text is produced within a specific linguistic tradition and you as the reader will interpret the research product from within your specific tradition. Locating specific orientations guides our critical understandings:

So qualitative inquiry in the sixth moment is more than the invention of new forms of textuality... The new writer creates a world filled with multiple, constantly changing interior forms of self awareness and consciousness. This complex world, with its multiple perspectives, is then connected to a constantly changing external world, in which nothing is firm or certain. Consequently there can be no single truth.

(Denzin 1996 p. 237)

In the creation of a text (the research product) it is desirable that the researcher be a skilled writer. Denzin (1996 p. 232) has some suggestions which may help us to write. He presents seven understandings which shape the work of 'new journalists'. These understandings are considered as useful in writing a research product, and, for the purpose of this paper, serve well as counter-practices. Denzin (1996) suggests that: facts are treated as social constructions, blurred writing genres are acceptable (e.g. literary and autobiographical), use of the scenic method (show rather than tell) is advocated, construction of 'real' and composite people is made, multiple points of view are used to establish authorial presence, multiple narrative strategies are deployed and writers position themselves as moral witnesses to radical societal changes.

Furthering the discussion, five criticisms are made of the work of 'new journalists'. These could equally be applied to researchers in the making of a qualitative research product and are similar to the challenges to qualitative research previously outlined. Writers could be accused of falsification. There appears to be no agreed upon method for validating the text and the writers' place in the text could be challenged. Writers are accused of failing to locate the writing in other literatures, and the writers use of literary techniques is seen to violate journalistic norms (Denzin 1996 p. 236). We turn to Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics to guide us through these criticisms. We do this by appealing to writers to incorporate a reflexive account into their research product and thereby describe to readers 'what is going on' while researching. The reader will decide if the research product is believable or plausible.

CONCLUSION

We began our journey into the notion of rigour in nursing research debating with each other and with the assistance of some of our talented graduate students. This paper reflects our position at this point in time, informed as it is by our ongoing debate. Our position will no doubt change as the dialogue continues and our ideas are challenged.

At this stage of our journey we suggest that the research project is plausible when the work is engaging, and has an internal logic achieved by detailing each interpretative, reflective turn of its makers. This means generating data with the awareness that this process operates in a world of existing alternative representations serving to shape the research product with social, political and critical insight. The final research project resembles a thoughtfully constructed tapestry. Its appreciation will rely upon each needle point and the craft of its makers. If, in addition, it is written with eloquence and incorporates reflective accounts, the reader may well consider the research as believable or plausible.

References

- Allen D. (1995) Hermeneutics: philosophical traditions and nursing practice research. *Nursing Science Quarterly* 8(4), 174–182.
- Avis M. (1995) Valid arguments? A consideration of the concept of validity in establishing the credibility of research findings. *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 22(6), 1203–1209.
- Banonis B. (1989) The lived experience of recovering from addiction: a phenomenological study. *Nursing Science Quarterly* 2(1), 37–43.
- Beck C.T. (1993) Qualitative research: the evaluation of its credibility, fittingness and auditability. *Western Journal of Nursing Research* 15(2), 263–266.
- Bhavnani K.K. (1993) Tracing the contours feminist research and feminist objectivity. *Women's Studies International Forum* 16(2), 95–104.
- Bleicher J. (1980) *Contemporary Hermeneutics Hermeneutics as a Method, Philosophy and Critique*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London.
- Boyne R. (1988) Interview with Hans-George Gadamer. *Theory, Culture and Society* 5(1), 25–34.
- Colaizzi P. (1978) Psychological research as the phenomenologist views. In *Existential-Phenomenological Alternatives for Psychology* (Valle & King eds), Oxford University Press, pp. 48–71.
- Denzin N. (1996) The facts and fictions of qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry* 2(2), 230–241.
- Denzin N. (1978) *The Research Act* 2nd edn. McGraw-Hill, New York.
- Denzin N. (1994a) The art and politics of interpretation. *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin N. & Lincoln Y. eds), Sage, London, pp. 500–515.
- Drew N. (1986) Exclusion and confirmation: a phenomenology of patients' experience with caregivers. *IMAGE; Journal of Nursing Scholarship* 18(2), 39–43.
- Gadamer Hans-Georg (1976) *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Translated and edited by David Linge, University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Gadamer Hans-Georg (1994) *Truth and Method* second revised edn. Translated and revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall. Continuum, New York.
- Giorgi A. (1985) *Phenomenology and Psychological Research*. Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh.
- Guba E. & Lincoln Y. (1989) Judging the quality of fourth generation evaluation. In *Fourth Generation Evaluation* (Guba E. & Lincoln Y. eds), Sage, Newbury Park, California, pp. 228–251.
- Haase J. (1987) Components of courage in chronically ill adolescents: a phenomenological study. *Advances in Nursing Science* 9(2), 62–80.
- Hall J. & Stevens P. (1991) Rigor in feminist research advances. *Nursing Science* 13(3), 16–29.
- Harrington A. (1993) Registered nurses' perceptions of spiritual care. A descriptive study. Unpublished Masters thesis, Flinders University of South Australia, Adelaide.
- Hinds P.S., Scandrett-Hibden. S. & McAulay L.S. (1990) Further assessment of a method to estimate reliability and validity of qualitative research findings. *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 15, 430–435.
- Healy P. (1996) Situated rationality and hermeneutic understanding: a Gadamerian approach to rationality. *International Philosophical Quarterly* 2(142).

- Hoffart N. (1991) A member check procedure to enhance rigor in naturalistic research. *Western Journal of Nursing Research* **13**(4), 522–534.
- Hogston R. (1995) Quality nursing care. *A qualitative enquiry. Journal of Advanced Nursing* **21**, 116–124.
- Knaack P. (1984) Phenomenological research. *Western Journal of Nursing Research* **6**(1), 107–123.
- Koch T. (1993) Toward fourth generation evaluation. Listening to the voices of older patients. A Hermeneutic inquiry. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Manchester, Manchester.
- Lather P. (1993) Fertile obsession: validity after poststructuralism. *The Sociological Quarterly* **34**(4), 673–693.
- Lincoln Y. & Denzin N. (1994) The fifth moment. In *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin N. & Lincoln Y. eds), Sage, London, pp. 575–586.
- Lincoln Y. & Guba E. (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Sage, Beverly Hills, California.
- Loos C. (1989) The client's view of hospitalisation during pregnancy. Clinical studies. *Journal of Obstetric, Gynecologic and Neonatal Nursing*, Jan/Feb, 52–56.
- Lynch-Sauer J. (1985) Using a phenomenological research method to study nursing phenomena. In *Qualitative Research Methods in Nursing*. (Leininger M. ed.), Grune and Stratton, New York, pp. 93–108.
- Marcus G.E. (1994) What comes (just) after 'post'? the case of ethnography. *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin N. & Lincoln Y. eds), Sage, London, pp. 563–574.
- Misgeld D. (1991) Modernity and hermeneutics: critical-theoretical rejoinder. In *Gadamer and Hermeneutics. Continental Philosophy IV* (Silverman H. ed.), Routledge, New York, pp. 163–177.
- Munhall P. & Oiler C. (1986) *Nursing Research: A Qualitative Perspective*. Appleton, New York.
- Nicolson G. (1991) Answers to critical theory. In *Gadamer and Hermeneutics. Continental Philosophy IV* (Silverman H. ed.), Routledge, New York, pp. 151–161.
- Nolan M. & Behi R. (1995) Alternative approaches to establishing reliability and validity. *British Journal of Nursing* **4**(10), 587–590.
- Oiler C. (1982) The Phenomenological approach in nursing research. *Nursing Research* **31**(3), 178–181.
- Parse R., Coyne R. & Smith M. (1985) *The Lived Experience of Health*. Brady Communications, Bowie, Maryland.
- Palmer R. (1969) *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer*. Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois.
- Porter S. (1993) Nursing research conventions: objectivity or obfuscation? *Journal of Advanced Nursing* **18**, 137–143.
- Rabinow P. & Sullivan W. (1987) *Interpretive Social Science. A second Look*. University of California, Berkeley.
- Ratcliffe J.W. & del Gongalez-Valle A. (1988) Rigor in health-related research. Toward a conceptualization. *International Journal of Health Sciences* **18**(3), 361–392.
- Reinhartz S. (1983) Experiential analysis: a contribution to feminist research. In *Theories of Women's Studies* (Bowles G. and Klein R. eds), Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, pp. 162–191.
- Sandelowski M. (1986) The problem of rigour in qualitative research. *Advances in Nursing Science* **8**(3), 27–37.
- Santopinto M. (1988) The relentless drive to be ever thinner: a study using the phenomenological method. *Nursing Science Quarterly* **2**(1), 29–36.
- Schwandt Thomas (1996) Farewell to criteriology. *Qualitative Inquiry* **2**(1), 58–72.
- Thompson J. (1990) Hermeneutic inquiry. In *Advancing Nursing Science Through Research* (Moody E. ed.), Sage, London, pp. 223–280.