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Reflections on reflexivity in leisure and tourism studies

Scott Cohen

Bournemouth University

Reflexivity is the capacity for researchers to reflect upon their own values and actions during the research process, both in producing empirical material and in writing accounts (Feighery, 2006). Leisure and tourism scholars have come some way in addressing issues of reflexivity in their own research. This effort towards engaging with positionality, however, has lagged approximately ten years behind when the broader social sciences confronted the 'reflexive turn' (see Ashmore, 1989; Lynch, 2000), as evidenced in a later string of leisure and tourism publications aimed at mobilising reflexive approaches in these fields (e.g. Ateljevic, Harris, Wilson & Collins, 2005; Dupuis, 1999; Feighery, 2006; Hall, 2004). Despite this headway, detached and disembodied 'objective accounts' are still relatively common in leisure and tourism social research, with qualitative approaches that feel quasi-positivist non-exempt. The lack of reflexivity in some qualitative work is curious, considering Johnson's (2009, p. 485) note that 'reflexivity has established itself as an essential feature of qualitative inquiry, pushing researchers to be introspective, collaborative and political'. Feighery (2006) suggests that it is not unawareness of issues of reflexivity among researchers in our fields that is the problem, but it is more attributable to disciplinary guidelines influenced by positivism that shape if, and how much, we are able to write ourselves into our texts.

In the present text, rather than attempting to build conceptually on reflexivity in leisure and tourism theory, I choose to illustrate two of the subjective lived experiences of my own research that were constrained to date by both my own unwillingness to take risks in my writing and through institutional guidelines that disparage such accounts. Reflexivity, however, is not just a reflection or 'confessional writing', but rather a methodological approach embraced (ideally) throughout the entire research process (Feighery, 2006). Reflexively aware of my own role in co-constructing knowledge *at times* during my research, and at other times forgetting to monitor the influences of my own subjectivity, I have largely only written myself previously into 'safe spaces', such as methodology sections. Like many researchers, the reflexive dimension I have chosen to write into methodologies has sometimes been no more than a sentence or two that divulges my own socio-cultural background and reasons for interest in the context. In a sense, this has been no more than a tipping of the hat to my own role in the research, akin to issuing a warning of – 'beware – findings may be influenced by the researcher's background', before proceeding to 'get on with it' in reporting my 'results'.

Whilst Perriton (2001) summarises the type of calculated reflective reflexivity to which I now endeavour as 'textual guerrilla warfare', wherein the aim is to make a point by disrupting or

destabilising (my own) past tales, my account is aimed at giving a louder voice to a handful of issues that, for me, have so far been sidelined in my own research. This is despite the importance of these experiences in shaping my past published products. Johnson (2009) takes a similar, although more comprehensive, approach, openly questioning where and how he has been willing to risk writing himself into accounts, where he has socially conformed to conventions and where he currently writes 'the risky'.

The two cases I choose to reflect on both took place during my PhD research in India and Thailand in 2007 with individuals who I have since termed 'lifestyle travellers' in leisure and tourism scholarship (e.g. Cohen 2010a, 2010b). I have described lifestyle travellers as individuals for whom extended leisure travel is a preferred way of life that the individual returns to repeatedly. For five years prior to entering academia, I moved around the world myself as a lifestyle traveller. My eventual research into this social world was a qualitative inquiry based on 25 interviews with individuals who had been travelling through backpacker circuits anywhere from three to 17 years. I explored the social practices and meanings surrounding their mobilities.

One of the key findings in my research with lifestyle travellers has been that these individuals tend to be searching for 'self' through their leisure travels. I have presented evidence in which participants described attempts at 'learning' about self, 'knowing' the self and even, 'finding' the self. Secondary in these accounts have been participant understandings of self as multiple, relational and performed. I have gone to great lengths to illustrate the tensions that exist between lifestyle travellers who seek an essentialised or 'true self' and conflicting academic discourse that conceptualises human selves as multiple and fragmented. One of my conclusions has been that many lifestyle travellers are chasing a socio-historically constructed myth of 'Self'. Absent from my accounts have been my own understandings of human selves as I moved through the research process. Although I now understand selves as dialogically constructed, multiple and performed, my understanding of selves when I began my research (and entered the field) was instead romanticised and essentialised. As such, my worldview certainly influenced the vocabulary of self that I mobilised during the interviews. Were my research participants a proxy in my own search for an essentialised notion of self?

As an empirical example, during one interview in India when I was exploring with a participant the meanings behind why she travels, the participant volunteered that 'travelling is really about the self'. I then asked her to expand on how travel relates to *the* self. Inherent in this question was my worldview at the time of self as essentialised. In response to my question, she suggested her past leisure travels had been characterised by 'searching for identity or a sense of self – a sense of freedom in order to arrive at self'. Hypothetically, if I had viewed selves as multiple and performed at the time, it is quite possible that I might have challenged the participant on her views of self, or posed my question differently, possibly leading to a different empirical account. But because I had not reflected upon how my own held beliefs and assumptions might influence the discussion, I missed the opportunity to explore with her other ways of understanding selves.

Retrospectively, I cannot locate the moment during my research when my own worldview moved away from an essentialised self. I can at least partially attribute it to reading Foucault. Nonetheless, the self-other dialectic during my fieldwork was clearly grounded in shared essentialisms. This does not discount the knowledge we produced, but overtly recognising my own disposition towards conceptualising self before, during and after fieldwork would have likely

produced different insights. It would have affected the words I used, the questions I asked, how I interpreted the discussions, and ultimately, my interpretation of the empirical material. The irony of omitting my subjective understanding of subjectivities when questioning other subjects on subjectivity may require a moment to digest. The value in reflecting upon this omission now, however, is that it illustrates how influential the researcher's selves are in the construction of knowledge. While reflexivity may not result in sanitised, hygienic accounts, or as Geertz (1988, p. 141) describes them - 'author-evacuated' texts, it does provide qualitative researchers the ability to produce more transparent and trustworthy knowledge.

The second case through which I will 'risk' myself in this article is again through the notion of disembodied knowledge. Although the body often receives due attention in sport-related studies (e.g. Lewis, 2000), the body, particularly in terms of the quotidian, is often absent from leisure and tourism studies. Conducting fieldwork in Asia, particularly in India, was a strain upon my body, and this connection between my body, mind and spirit is largely lacking in my previous works. Instead, when recognising myself in the text (usually only in methodology sections), I have typically written myself as the consummate rational actor, impervious to emotion and strain. Missing from the text are the stories of the times when my body failed me, with diarrhoea, fever and fatigue. Missing are the accounts of when I conducted interviews from my bed, as my participants sat bedside after bringing me bottled water and biscuits, and vice versa. Mutual challenges to the body that were shared with my participants afforded common reference points upon which sympathy, empathy and trust could develop in our relationships.

As my body adjusted to the vegan diet typical of Rishikesh, India and to the heat and humidity that precedes the oncoming Indian monsoon, I struggled at the time to not let my body influence my disposition towards the research. But the knowledge we co-produce cannot be considered separately from our daily embodied experience. The bodily sensations and emotions I experienced in the field undoubtedly influenced how I perceived, interpreted and attributed meanings to others' experiences. It likely coloured my attitudes towards place, participants and practices. The construction of seemingly disembodied accounts can only thus contribute to the bleaching of knowledge, wherein the textures of how particular accounts are contextually co-created are written out.

My aim in this text has been to use two cases from own research to illustrate how a reflexive approach can help to generate more trustworthy, richer texts. Rather than being problematic, the ways in which our embodied selves and emotions intersect with the research process are 'aspects central to strong, rigorous qualitative research and good science' (Dupuis, 1999, p.59). Dupuis (1999, p.60) suggests that a rigorous reflexive approach in qualitative leisure research will be characterised by 'continuous, intentional and systematic self-introspection beginning before we ever enter the field...and continuing throughout the writing of our stories'. Perhaps this is an ideal, a goal towards which researchers can aim, but will likely not attain. For continuous self-introspection denies those moments when we, as social scientists, turn our gaze outwards. Furthermore, as Feighery (2006) rightly illustrates, institutional structures, whether through the form of journal gatekeepers, postgraduate supervisors or word limits, can constrain our ability to write reflexively. Nonetheless, to engage with issues of reflexivity, increasingly in leisure and tourism contexts, is, in Dupuis' words 'good science'.

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