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Book Review: *Reflexive Narrative: Self-inquiry Toward Self-realization and Its Performance.*

Christopher Johns. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE
Publications., 2020. 208 pages.

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“It may be that what you could be haunts you. It is real.
It is a weight you have to carry around. Each failure to be is a weight.”
(Okri, 1997, cited in Johns, 2020, p. xvii)

In language, of course, *reflexivity* is a referral back to the self. Reflexive pronouns refer to both the subject and object of the verb. “She made herself a cup of coffee.” “I washed my face myself.” Those concerned with the deterioration of language in everyday situations decry the recent growing phenomenon in which individuals use reflexive nouns inappropriately as in the following examples: “Please send the report to myself.” “Either myself or one of my colleagues will be at the meeting.” It is easy to see where this practice may have originated; many of us were scolded as children for the inappropriate use of the object pronoun “me”—no doubt many have absorbed the belief that “me” is the wrong word in all instances.

Something similar seems to have happened to the idea of the *self* in general. Its inclusion is seldom without controversy in the academic world. Many of today’s scholars were taught to never use the word “I” when referring to the self in a formal

academic paper; some students are still learning this outdated advice. Even in qualitative research, where reflexivity is generally prized, it can be unclear exactly what it is or how a researcher knows when they are achieving it. As Palaganas et al. (2017) state, reflexivity remains “poorly described and elusive” (p. 426). At its most basic level, it is the “analytic attention to the researcher’s role in qualitative research” (Gouldner, 1971, p. 16, as cited in Dowling, 2006, para. 3). In *Reflexive Narrative: Self-Inquiry Toward Self-Realization and Its Performance*, Johns (2020) envisions the practice as “as a research approach to enable people to strive toward self-actualization, however that might be expressed” (p. xiii). This comes primarily by focusing on individual lived experiences and how these can bring insight and self-awareness.

This book, which offers what Johns calls “a workbook approach to inspire practitioners across disciplines to engage in reflexive narrative research in both

academic and practice backgrounds” (p. xiv), is structured to provide both working examples of reflexivity along with explanations of the methodological influences and dialogical movements that inform the practice. It also provides examples of reflexive narratives taken from doctoral student work and a list of reflexive narrative publications for further investigation.

As a former professor of nursing at the University of Bedfordshire, England and a pioneer in developing reflexive practices, Johns has previously authored books on reflexivity, including *Mindful Leadership: A Guide for the Health Care Professions* (2016) and *Becoming a Reflective Practitioner* (2017), now in its fifth edition. Johns sees reflexivity as part of professional practice, the work of any individual who “takes themselves seriously” (2020, p. 147) and who “will invest in their own development toward effective and desirable practice” (p. 147). His own reflexive narratives, which bookend the theoretical portions of *Reflexive Narrative*, emphasize his attempts to use reflexivity toward developing himself as a leader with authentic attempts at self-critique and empathy toward the perspectives of other people. He maintains that reflexive narrative research “cannot be learned theoretically” (p. 147) and emphasizes the need for someone in his position to be “an active and purposeful role model” (p. 147).

The strength of this book lies in Johns’ consistent passion for his subject, and his strongly articulated belief in reflexivity as a “good thing” (p. 149) and a method of fostering “a meaningful way of living” (p. 149). He makes a compelling case for the

value of reflexive narrative research, in spite of his acknowledgement of the difficulties sometimes encountered in attempting to publish these kinds of works, often for reasons of “style and length” (p. 148), seeming to touch on the controversy that exists around what “counts as real research” (p. 149). Johns notes the excitement people express about learning and expressing themselves through reflexive narrative and maintains that “research should be innovative and exciting” and actively challenge “systems and bias” (p. 149).

Johns is careful to note both the benefits and risks of reflexivity. While it is “self-inquiry through reflection on everyday lived experiences that enable a person to gain insight toward self-realization” (pp. xiii-xiv), an obvious benefit, the risk of “exploring too deeply and critically is to crash against brick walls of reality that are disturbing” (p. 24). Early on, he presents the following strongly worded statement about what he hopes to achieve through the practice. He writes: “Reflexive narrative texts are designed to be dramatic and confrontational, to disturb the status quo and stir the audience to reflect on their own experiences, and to incite reflection on their own practices” (p. 2). He further notes that “doing or living reflexive narrative research is challenging” (p. xvii) and cites the experience of a master’s student in leadership who notes the “sometimes apocalyptic” revelations that can come through reflexivity. Like many things of value, self-realization comes through struggle and pain, Johns seems to say. His own reflexive narrative examples, “Contempt: A Barrier to Realizing

Leadership” and “Through a Glass Darkly,” underscore the painful attempts he has made at greater self-understanding. He acknowledges these narratives were not originally meant for an audience, but were modified to be read aloud “with appropriate dramatic emphasis and embellishment” (p. 2).

Cunliffe (2016) calls reflexivity the process of “questioning what we, and others, might be taking for granted—what is being said and not said—and examining the impact this has or might have” (para. 4). Johns exhibits ample evidence of this practice in his own reflections, where he agonizes about his decisions and the effects they may have had on others (“Contempt”) and tries to understand his role in easing the suffering of others (“Through a Glass”). He does this in part by writing empathic reflections detailing his thoughts about what others might have been feeling. And this is where reflexivity seems to come up short . . . perhaps. In the absence of any form of member checking, it is impossible to know the extent to which Johns’ impressions of other people’s thoughts are anywhere close to accurate. We do not know whether Mike, a doctor with whom Johns had a disagreement over patient treatment, really thinks Johns needs to “know his place” or whether he considers the hospital to be his “fiefdom” (p. 4). One could argue that writing reflexively reveals only insights about an author—in this case Johns—and his empathic poems do expose a great deal about how his own mind works. And, of course, to some extent, if Johns perceives Mike to have this attitude, this is reality for him. However, writing alone does not appear to offer much

opportunity to alter an author’s own reality through confirmation with others. In addition, reading alone does not enable a reader to develop sense of how discerning Johns is as a person. Does he read people well? Can we trust his reflections? Should we? He is comfortable labeling the attitudes of two characters—Mike and Sheila—as contemptuous, with scant evidence to support this judgement. And perhaps, to some extent, this is the point: reflexivity is all about how individuals see their situations. But can it be expanded? What would happen if investigations were undertaken which complicated individual perceptions? Might that deepen the reflexive process?

This book might benefit most from better contextualization of the reflections themselves. In some cases, confusing non sequiturs appear which are a distraction, causing the reader to spend more time than necessary trying to understand their placement. (What is the relationship between Johns’ nickname “Beady Eye” and the concept of contempt?) Rather than beginning the book with the reflection “Contempt: A Barrier to Realizing Leadership,” a more effective approach might have been to place the contextualizing information, including Johns’ beliefs about reflexive narrative, first, to provide a framework for understanding the narrative itself. What is the function of dramatic effect in reflexive narrative? Why are both the second reflexive narrative along with the chapter on coherence and ethics positioned between the chapters on the fifth and sixth dialogical movements? The logic of the book’s order of content often confounds

the sense of a “unified whole” (p. 125) for which Johns advocates.

In spite of the sometimes-frustrating structure of this work, it contains much information that can be of use to anyone seeking to incorporate more reflexive writing into their research or professional practice. It is a book filled with warmth and humanity. Cunliffe (2016) notes the importance of thinking about the “we” in our relationships, valuing people as unique and distinct individuals, and taking our responsibility to one another seriously. Johns echoes this belief, citing Mayeroff (1971), who wrote, “To care for another person, in the most significant sense, is to help him grow and actualize himself” (cited in Johns, 2020, p. 15). Johns himself would probably be the first to recognize and appreciate my minor critique of his work, and use it to improve understanding of himself and his own reflexive practice. Reading and reflecting on the questions he poses will help the thoughtful reader do the same.

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