

The Reflective Worker – Political Economies of Reflexivity

Mr. Jonas Hassemer

University of Vienna

(Self-)Reflection – in the form of more or less institutionalized *reflective practices* – is often seen as a critical element of achieving (desired) social change as well as individual learning. As such, it figures in diverse contexts, e.g., professional socialization and practice, social/political movements, as well as in research methodologies and agendas. From a metapragmatic perspective, reflective practices are a specific form of *reflexivity* in communicative practice (subjects communicatively referring “back” to themselves), and as such do not unsettle hierarchies and inequalities by some “intrinsic” property: as the contributions to this panel will show, they may entail rejecting and changing ways of doing, but also accounting for them, producing and fixating knowledge, disciplining subjects and stabilizing hierarchies or a status quo. They are not ‘neutral’ nor equally distributed, as they may be at the service of specific actors or groups, and invested in certain institutional goals.

The panel features ethnographic research on diverse forms of reflective practices (or reflexive processes, more in general) and shows how they are institutionalized (or not) in different professional contexts and workplaces: a rugby summer camp for learners of English in Ireland, international networks of economists entangled with politics and administration, the corporate world of a transnational company in China, and an employability program for migrants in Italy. The aim is to contribute to understanding (1) what ideologies (of communication/social change) are being (re)produced in situated forms of reflective practice, and (2) how they are embedded in larger processes and conditions of political economy and social inequality. This offers an entry point for a discussion about the ideological and material situatedness of reflective practices and about what is at stake for the workers under different political economic conditions.

Keywords: Reflective Practice, Reflexivity, Political Economy, Ideologies of Communication, Language at Work

1. “Trying to stay ahead and stay relevant”: Selective reflection in rebranding an Irish English-Immersion summer rugby camp

Ms. Jessica McDaid

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

New forms of private English immersion education are currently trending in Spain, responding to the country's chronic dissatisfaction with traditional EFL methodologies. In July 2019 I conducted an ethnographic study at one of these new, immersion-abroad spaces; a rugby summer camp in Ireland. There, international, mixed-sex players aged 8-18 could “experience the best of Irish rugby, improve English and make lasting friendships” through intense day training, taking residence with local host families, and optional EFL language classes. An unexpected finding, however, was the apparent selective presence of reflection at the site.

In an attempt to distinguish itself against the competitive EFL immersion experience market in Dublin, the rugby camp was undergoing rebranding processes which, while explicit in practice at the site, were seemingly implicit in their advertising discourse. The aspired shift meant becoming a Rugby (+ English) camp, rather than an English + Rugby summer scheme. In effect, this translated as apparent institutional attempts to disassociate itself from attendee discipline, linguistic gains, and the affective dimension—despite being fundamental for immersion experiences. The presence of reflection, therefore, was solely connected to their rebranding aspirations (i.e. metacommentary on their role as rugby coaches).

Through the use of ethnographic data, semi-structured interviews with various stakeholders, and social media and advertising material, I aim to examine how the absence of reflection regarding certain important aspects a) revealed extreme dissidence between family consumer expectations vs. site practices, b) enabled episodes of discrimination, social exclusion, and homesickness among players, and, consequently, c) impuled young stakeholders to seek “confessional” spaces in my presence. Furthermore, I intend to address my personal difficulties as an ethnographer in front of these situations and their effect on my detachment from the field, in order to further consider the role of reflexivity in terms of my agenda as a researcher.

Keywords: *Reflexivity, Experience Economy, Immersion, Mobility, Ethnography*

2. Epistemic reflexivity staged in an ethno-tale of economists at work

Dr. Torun Reite

Stockholm University, Sweden

Drawing inspiration from the Bourdieusian notions of reflexivity and ambivalence as critical to stimulate social change, I present some autobiographically and ethnographically inspired tales from communities of practice among economists who work in key policy-making bodies of the executive branch of governments. All participants act or have acted as professionals centrally positioned in institutions intersecting with the general fields of power, as high-level senior officials and key interlocutors with the political level of the executive branch or similar structures at local government levels. Senior officials from both the Northern and Southern hemispheres are included.

The study aims to unravel overt or covert practices of orchestrating reflexivity and containing plurality in these communities of practice. Therefore, I have deliberately chosen economists working in orthodox professional environments with one dominant paradigm, namely the neoclassical economic theory. I adopt a dual perspective on the dynamics at play – the social and the individual. I provide examples of public discourses of institutions and contrast these with discourses of reflexivity and ambivalence performed by the same participants in spaces where venting of personal divergent views is considered safe. I look into the locus of such spaces of venting and whether they are found within or beyond the professional spheres of the participants. I discuss these discourses in terms of epistemic reflexivity, namely the ability to recognise one's own position and dispositions, as moulded by one's field. This will shed light on the perceived and lived experiences of spaces for divergence and plurality, or lack of such. By engaging the participants, including myself, in epistemic reflexivity, I explore lived experiences of the tensions between "structure and agency", and the lived experiences of hindrances to emancipation and transformation.

Keywords: *Reflexivity, Episteme, Orthodoxy, Neoclassical Economic Theory, Bourdieu*

3. Reflective workers: struggling with English and making an international business self

Ms. Eleanor Yue Gong

UCL Institute of Education, University College London

Based on Archer's call to further study reflexivity and ideology of social change in late modernity (2012), my work offers a sociolinguistic analysis of reflective workers who struggle with English, a new form of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986), which attributes value to their labor power and legitimizes stratification. I am giving an ethnographic account of reflexivity in everyday business of a transnational company in Shanghai where workers reflect about their own selves and status in Shanghai society and develop strategies to achieve social mobility and emancipation.

In the documented company good English proficiency is indexical for an international business persona associated with a "promising future" and access to promotion as well as roles of prestige. Self-analysis conversations recurrently happen at specific moments and events, e.g. after promotion list announcements and international business trips. There are also institutionalized reflective practices at review meetings specially held for employees who compete for the same position. Workers with privileged background who have had education in English reflexively construct their trajectories in accordance with elite aspirations. However, those unprivileged take English learning as "self-imposed colonization" (Gao 2014) and, navigating their professional identity in English, face exclusion from positions of prestige. Anxieties, struggles and tensions behind workers' constant analysis and self-analysis activities can be observed. This paper will look at the modes of reasoning about their own selves and the ideas about language and social mobility that inform these modes of thinking the self. I also trace the history of ideas informing these practices of reflexivity and self-analysis and their anchoring in larger cultural formations linked to ideas about what counts as being a good person in China and a good professional in particular.

Keywords: Reflexivity, Ideology of Social Change, Professional Persona, Social Mobility, Language at Work

4 Reflexive Registers: The Shaping of Affective Workers

Prof. Alfonso Del Percio

UCL

The capacity to analyze and reflect about oneself has become part of the skill-set that subjects display when applying for and performing labour under contemporary capitalism. Good workers are able to express empathy and emotional balancedness. They think and talk about their practices, bodies and feelings manage stress and anxieties and express confidence about their future. Language scholars have argued that displays of emotionality and reflexivity are anchored in larger histories of capitalism and colonialism (McElhinny, 2010) and that the regulation of labour has traditionally involved work on people's affect and their capacity to think and manage their own labouring selves (Cameron, 2000). How has the ability to express reflexivity come to be part of the bundled self that workers are required to be? This paper offers a genealogical analysis of the multiple histories of knowledge and power which have informed the emergence of what we may call 'reflexive registers'. It takes as a starting point counseling sessions that I have documented in my ongoing ethnography of employability programs in contemporary Italy in which workers of all sorts are asked to learn examining their own personalities and to express their feelings and anxieties. It traces the 'theories' of language, labour, affect and the self that inform the formation of these registers. It examines the means and circumstances under which these registers got entangled with different logics of productivity, selfhood and emancipation. It contributes to a wider debate about the politics of affect and labour and argues for a sociolinguistic understanding of reflexivity and its communicability that theorizes the self as a product of history and of the complex dynamics of power, exploitation and control history is made of.

Keywords: *Affect, Reflexivity, Work, Language, History*