



CRITICAL AND CREATIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES IN SOCIAL WORK

EDITED BY LIA BRYANT

ROUTLEDGE



CRITICAL AND CREATIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES IN SOCIAL WORK

I love this book. It is just what I and my PhD students have been waiting for. Engaging and scholarly, this book challenges social workers to move beyond conventional models of research to explore critical and creative research methodologies to promote social justice. The practicalities of writing ethnography, the importance of situating oneself and the value of reflexivity are all emphasized, alongside innovative ways of using arts-based methods, including photography, stories, film, sculpture and drawing, to empower research participants. It is a wonderful anthology.

Bob Pease, Deakin University, Australia

Interest in the development of creative practices in research has grown apace in recent years. This stunning book engages with a range of innovative techniques grounding them in the strong methodological orientation of social work's social justice principles. A scholarly collection that significantly advances the field of social work research and is a must buy.

Charlotte Williams, RMIT University, Australia

This unique book presents new approaches to social work research which in their creativity challenge the very way in which we think of research methodology. The authors share their experiences in their multifaceted studies in and about social work. The insights of this book go far beyond individual topics as the creative and critical methods challenge the present rationales of academia. The well-argued and wise views of this book should not be ignored by anyone interested in knowledge in social work.

Tarja Pösö, University of Tampere, Finland

For Katerina Bryant

Critical and Creative Research Methodologies in Social Work

Edited by

LIA BRYANT

The University of South Australia, Australia

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List of Contributors

Lia Bryant is Associate Professor of Social Work and Sociology at the University of South Australia. She is also Director of the Centre for Social Change; Associate Head for Research and Research Education; and Discipline Head of Social Work and Human Services at the University of South Australia, Australia. Associate Professor Bryant teaches research and research methods to undergraduate social workers, honours and master's students. She also runs the doctoral programme in the School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy. She has published widely on gender, emotions, sexuality and embodiment in the rural. Bryant has co-authored *Gender and Rurality* (2011, Routledge) with Barbara Pini and edited *Sexuality, Rurality and Geography* (2013, Lexington Books) with Andrew Gorman-Murray and Barbara Pini. She has published in a variety of academic journals including *Gender, Place and Culture*, *Journal of Rural Studies*, *Feminist Review*, *Sociologia Ruralis*, *Gender, Work and Organisation*, *Ageing and Society* and the *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. She has a forthcoming book with Katrina Jaworski, *Walking on the Grass: Women Supervising and Writing Doctoral Theses* (Lexington Books).

Fiona Buchanan is a lecturer in Social Work with the School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy at the University of South Australia. Her research interests include domestic violence, gender issues, childhood trauma, mothering, innovation in teaching and learning, knowledge in emotions and incorporating arts as research methods.

Roni Kaufman is Chair of the Masters of Social Work at the Spitzer Department of Social Work, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Israel. He is the founder and chair of the Community Organisation and Social Change track in the Master of Social Work programme and the founder and chair of the Food Security Information and Advocacy Project.

Aitor Gómez is Professor of Research Methods at the Rovira i Virgili University, Spain. Professor Gómez is a member of the research project 'PERARES. The Public Engagement with Research and Research Engagement with Society', funded by the European Framework Programme of Research. He coordinated a special issue for *Qualitative Inquiry* on communicative methodology.

Lisa Hodge is a doctoral candidate and sessional staff member in the School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy at the University of South Australia. Her primary research interests include eating disorders and child sexual abuse in particular and mental health more broadly, as well as violence against women, self-harm, and the sociology of emotions. Her most recent publication is ‘The “Beauty” of Eating Disorders’ in *Crafting Allure: Beauty, Culture and Identity* (2014, Inter-Disciplinary Press).

Ephrat Huss is a senior lecturer in the social work department of Ben-Gurion University, Israel, and chairs an MA specialisation in creative tools for social workers. She has published extensively on this subject, including a book called *What We See and What We Say: Using Images in Research, Therapy, Empowerment, and Social Change* (2013, Routledge). Similarly, she has published on arts methodology in social work, and on using arts as a speech act for marginalised groups in both micro- and macro-orientations in the *British Journal of social Work*, in *Social Work Education*, and in *Arts and Psychotherapy*.

Mona Livholts is Associate Professor of Social Work at Mid Sweden University, Sweden; coordinator of R.A.W., The Network for Reflexive Academic Writing Methodologies; and was guest researcher at The Centre for Social Research on Alcohol and Drugs, Stockholm University, 2011–2012. Her research profile focuses on emergent writing methodologies in a wider context of method transformation plagued by inter- and transdisciplinarity. Particular interest is directed towards new methods in the intersection of social sciences and the arts. Current research themes include: media studies, gender, space and memory, alcohol and rape, and scholarly auto/biography/ethnodrama. Among her latest publications are: *Emergent Writing Methodologies in Feminist Studies* (2012, Routledge) and ‘Writing Water: An Untimely Academic Novella’ in *Documents of Life Revisited: Narrative and Biographical Methods for a 21st Century of Critical Humanism* (2013, Ashgate Publishing), edited by Stanley Liz.

Danielle May is an honours student in the School of Business at the University of South Australia. Her thesis focuses on community involvement and expression during the national elections in Malaysia.

Ariadna Munté is a professor of social work at the University of Barcelona, Spain. She has worked for more than 10 years with Romà people and other vulnerable groups, combining her work with research in social sciences. She was member of the research project Roma Immigration in Spain: Challenges for Social Inclusion and Living Together. She has published several articles in JCR journals.

Andrea Nikischer is a full-time lecturer in the Adult Education Department at the State University of New York (SUNY) College at Buffalo, and is a PhD candidate in educational culture, policy and society at the university. Andrea holds an MS in Adult Education, and previously worked as a sexual assault and domestic violence crisis counsellor, educator and community activist. She has received awards for her work in violence prevention education from the Erie County Coalition against Family Violence and the National Organization for Women, Buffalo and Niagara Chapter. Andrea's dissertation research examines social class disparities in high school pathways to science, technology, engineering and mathematics post-secondary education and careers. Her additional research interests include dilemmas in qualitative method, and the impact of sexual violence on academic achievement. Andrea is co-author of an article published in *Qualitative Inquiry* (July 2012), 'Walking the Methodological Tightrope: Researcher Dilemmas Inside an Urban School District in Times of Public Disinvestment', which examines qualitative researcher distress.

Amy Parkes is a doctoral candidate in social science in the School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy at the University of South Australia. Her doctoral thesis focuses on Indigenous women's experience of motherhood unpartnered. She writes on postcolonialism, sovereignty and Indigeneity in Australia.

Fatin Shabbar is a doctoral candidate at the University of South Australia. Shabbar has recently submitted her doctoral thesis on Iraqi women, war and resilience in the School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy. She is a social worker and also teaches social work. She writes about postcolonialism and feminism.

Dorit Segal-Engelchin is Director of the Center for Women's Health Studies and Promotion at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel. She is also a senior lecturer in the Spitzer Department of Social Work at the university. Her major research areas include social work education, women's health and diverse family structures.

Deirdre Tedmanson is a lecturer at the University of South Australia. Before working in the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Tedmanson was a lecturer in what is now known as the David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research. Her experience prior to academe includes work in community development, research, policy and management positions in both the community sector and state government, as well as working in Australia's Commonwealth Parliament as a senior political adviser.

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Introduction

Taking up the Call for Critical and Creative Methods in Social Work Research

Lia Bryant

Introduction

Attempting to understand and depict people's lives and even momentary fragments of those lives through words, numbers and images is 'inaccurate and insufficient' (Cixous, 1993, p. 11). As researchers we are constantly trying to get a little closer to understanding and unearthing the complexity of social worlds and people's ways of moving in them. Sometimes we pause and the awareness of the complexity of our task, like a mist of doubt, covers our consciousness. Too frequently academic research occurs amidst multiple tasks and to timetables and milestones. Reflexivity, on the other hand, requires a purposefully carved space to attempt to sit back and question our place as one who asks questions and attempts to answer them. Perhaps research is just that, an attempt – an attempt to think, to question and to find answers. The appeal of research being an attempt lies in the idea that research is unfinished. Qualitative research with its exploratory focus leaves a lingering sentiment that there are words left unsaid – unable to be reached.

In more recent times the diaphanous quality of qualitative work has inspired researchers to use multiple layers of data collection to foster deeper understandings. A layering of approaches, which brings forth the verbal, textual, pictorial and sensual, has become increasingly available and popular (Pink, 2006; Denzin, 2002; Bryant and Livholts, 2013; Livholts and Bryant, 2013; Ronai, 1999). It has become available as researchers have become increasingly ill at ease with using interviews and focus groups as linear singular methods to analyse the complexity of people's lives. Over the last decade critical cultural and creative studies have made a growing impact on a range of social science disciplines, resulting in researchers writing and doing ethnography differently. Increasingly there has been interest in experimentation in research design and use of creative tools like fiction, novellas, drama, performance, autobiography and poetry as methodologies which place research participants as collaborators and give rise to emotion and sensory understandings of the self as well as allowing for unexpected experiences and knowledges to emerge (Chambon and Irving,

1999; Denzin, 2002). This growth in creative inquiry has been informed and compelled by values of social justice and a desire to transform social conditions by working with communities of people.

In this edited collection the focus is on how social work researchers can take up the challenge to undertake critical and creative research motivated by social justice and methodologically driven by collaboration, empowerment and dialogical reflexive space. Indeed, it is a call to take up research that is *socially creative* (Wilson, 2010, p. 367). Social creativity suggests a creativity that comes into being, a property that emerges through interactivity between people and also between people and landscape and/or objects (Wilson, 2010; Biggs, 2012). In Biggs's words 'creativity is apprehended as a reflexive property of the inter-agency of social interactions' (2012, p. 1). Inter-agency between and among people and things suggests a power and force in the way individuals and objects may come together to deliver an unknown, and it is in the *interaction* where the power to create or bring something new into being is located. Held within this perspective is a view of human agency that sees subjectivity as shifting and open to change and as such research can be a process of the becoming of individuals as well as outcomes and objects. These ethics of research practice shift the focus of research from a scientific model of data collection and discovery and by doing so challenge researchers to move out of their comfort zone to research differently. Ellis and Bochner have suggested that now imagination is 'as important as rigour' (2008, p. 1) in conceptualising ways of doing research to produce ethical outcomes. Imagination 'thrives at the edge of things, between the gaps' (Wilson, 2010, p. 368) and for social work this means opening up ways of working across disciplines, with different mediums and with participants who are now collaborators. Wilson's term 'social creativity' implies a critical and creative research practice, which requires:

refocusing attention on the collective and relational nature of creative practice where divergent thinking (Koestler, 1975), transdisciplinarity, (Cox, 2005), co-ownership (see Bellers, 1695), heterogeneous knowledge production (Nowotny et al., 2001), boundary-spanning, technology-brokering (Hargadon, 2003), collaboration, dialogue and reflexivity (Göranzon et al., 2006), are all important features ... whilst not losing sight of the ... need to imagine and feel. (2010, p. 373)

Wilson's social creativity provides ways of thinking about research that cause pauses. These include pauses to consider the production of knowledge, and to move away from knowledge silos, either disciplinary or indeed academic. Social creativity requires researchers to question, rethink and evaluate their own and others' embodied emotional connections and responses to specific social conditions, practices, discourses and imaginaries – we are called to dialogue

and reflexivity. It challenges researchers to reflect and answer: How do we democratise knowledge? How do we transform ourselves, our collaborators and our readers? How can research transform communities and societies – that is, what are the implications of our research for social change?

The chapters in this edited collection grapple with how to engage methodologically using creative and critical methods to question what constitutes ‘data’ (e.g. Eisner, 1997; Furman et al., 2007; Kearney and Hyle, 2004; St Pierre, 1997), how to write ethnography which is ethical, reflexive and interrogates privilege (e.g. Denzin, 2003; Foley and Valenzuela, 2005; Madison, 2005; Pease, 2010), how to empower participants (e.g. Aziz, Shams and Khan, 2011; Ozer et al., 2013; Rodriguez, 2010) and how to strive for social justice (Wilson, 2010).

In this introductory chapter I aim to provide the context for the book and I begin with an interrogation of ‘reflexivity’ as reflexivity is crucial to the ethics of creative and critical inquiry. Its importance lies in providing a critical and ongoing examination of the production of knowledge beginning with where research often begins, the researcher, thereby involving a reflexive engagement of the self as well as the research process and the questioning of how knowledge is produced, whose knowledge and for what purpose. I examine the concept of ‘reflexivity’ and its relationship to ‘situatedness’ or ‘politics of location’ to bring forth the embodied researcher and her/his intersubjective connection to their embodied participant collaborators and research communities.

In the latter half of the chapter I explore what constitutes ‘critical’ and ‘creative’ qualitative research and focus on textual and visual methods using a selection of examples and in particular creative writing and photography to illustrate possibilities for social creativity. There is a multitude of ways of conducting critical and creative research and the chapters in this volume provide further illustrations of social creativity. Following this, I outline the central aims of the book and provide an overview of the chapters.

Reflexivity

As Pillow aptly states, ‘Reflexivity is invoked in almost every qualitative research book or article and has been posited and accepted as a method qualitative researchers can and should use’ (2003, p. 176). Commonly, the concept of reflexivity is often employed without being defined and it is used interchangeably with reflection. Reflection may be understood as a consideration or thinking after an event (Finlay, 2002a; 2002b) and this does not necessarily involve a change in practice or a consideration of an other. Reflexivity, on the other hand, has been understood in multiple ways (Pillow, 2003; Finlay, 2002a). There are various overarching definitions of reflexivity; common to these is that reflexivity requires an awareness of self-scrutiny in relation to an other (Chiseri-Strater,

1996, p. 130, cited in Pillow, 2003, p. 177). For Finlay 'reflexivity taps into a more immediate, continuing, dynamic and subjective self-awareness' (2002a, p. 533). Reflexivity is about the researcher being thoughtful, insightful and critical of how her lived experience shapes her vision of the world (Finlay, 2002a; Hertz, 1997). As Guillemin and Gillam suggest:

Hertz (1997, p. viii) noted that the reflexive researcher does not merely report the 'facts' of the research but also actively constructs interpretations ('What do I know?'), while at the same time questioning how those interpretations came about ('How do I know what I know?'). (2004, p. 274)

These overarching meanings make apparent that reflexivity is open to further interpretation and the concept has been reconstructed in accordance with specific philosophical and theoretical orientations. Notably, feminist and race scholars have often used reflexivity as a means for accounting for oneself as a researcher – accounting for privilege and power (Oakley, 1981; Harding, 1991; Collins, 1990; Patai, 1991; Hertz, 1997; Wolf, 1996). Reflexivity from these critical perspectives also means to do research differently, to undertake research that is politically aware and leads to political action and empowerment or reciprocity (Oakley, 1981; Riessman, 1987; Rose, 1997). Reflexive practice involves a collaborative relationship with participants involving methods that enable co-production of knowledge, like arts-based research or participatory action research.

Typologies of reflexivity have also emerged as scholars attempt to flesh out its multiple meanings (Denzin, 2002; Finlay, 2002ab; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Pillow, 2003). Finlay (2002b) for example, identifies five forms of reflexivity: '(i) introspection; (ii) intersubjective reflection; (iii) mutual collaboration; (iv) social critique and (v) discursive deconstruction' (Finlay, 2002b, p. 212). I draw on Finlay's typology as it brings forth key inter-relating components that give meaning to how reflexivity is conceptualised and practised.

Beginning with introspective reflexivity, this concept offers understanding about social phenomena or experience from the researcher's insight. Introspective reflexivity is often found in autoethnographic accounts that aim to bring attention to power relations and social conditions through personal experience (see Bryant and Livholts, 2013; Livholts and Bryant, 2013). The following quotation from Bryant and Livholts is an example of introspective reflexivity giving insight into how space becomes gendered.

She opens the door and tells the taxi driver where to take her. She sits in the back. As they travel, a message comes across the taxi radio. The transmitter sits near the dashboard echoing its message. A male voice says 'does anyone want to pick up a fare from Nancy's? You know what kind of payment you will get'. The driver's thick hand reaches toward the radio transmitter and then comes

back. He squirms in his seat. She feels disgust: disgust at him, disgust at the radio message itself. So this kind of exchange happens? A body for a fare. She knows he feels her judgment, her disdain, her contempt for him. This is what causes him to falter in her presence. They are both trapped in this taxi. He does not want her there to remind him of perhaps his wife, perhaps his mother, and perhaps of all things that a woman is – not just a sexual body. (2007, p. 36)

Intersubjective reflection refers to reflexive thinking about meaning making which occurs mutually between participant and researcher. Intersubjectivity has been conceptualised as a process whereby the self is constituted dialogically and co-constructed in relation to the multiple perspectives of others (see Bakhtin, 1981). For Bryant and Jaworski ‘intersubjectivity is more than a dialogical construction but a relation of power whereby subjects draw meanings in relation to other subjects’ (forthcoming, p. 17). In their work on doctoral supervision they reveal ‘inter-subjective relations as attempts to read the “others”’ emotions, attitudes, values, dialogical meaning, and body language’ (Bryant and Jaworski, forthcoming, p. 17). Applied to research, intersubjectivity between participant and researcher is reiterative, involving a recognising and recontextualising of subjectivity and ongoing encounters to allow for the possibility of identification and being shaped by the other (Butler, 1990; Bryant and Jaworski, forthcoming, p. 17). Intersubjective reflexivity in research relationships has the potential to change both researchers and participants.

Mutual collaboration as reflexive practice involves participants and researchers as co-workers in the research process (Finlay, 2002b). The level of reflexive collaboration varies from participants being involved in designing the study from the outset, engaging in data collection, analysis and writing, and in other studies more minimal engagement where participants might provide guidance throughout the project in the form of an advisory board (Christians, 2000).

Reflexivity as social critique especially focuses on the problematics of the power imbalance between researcher and participant (Finlay, 2002b, p. 220). This form of reflexivity involves a reflexive introspection about authority and expert knowledge held by the researcher and its impact on how participants speak to the research questions. Finlay argues that ‘a particular strength of [this variant of reflexivity] ... is the recognition of multiple, shifting researcher-participant positions’ (2002b, p. 222). She provides an example from her work which illustrates this form of reflexivity:

[With one of my participants] I found myself feeling irritated with what I saw as a cold, mechanical approach, one that was inappropriate in a therapist. I found myself being uncharacteristically challenging with him. I pushed him to get an emotional response. Then towards the end of the interview he gave it to me and he spoke quite painfully. (Finlay, 2002b, p. 221)

The fifth and final variant of reflexivity, reflexivity as discursive deconstruction, is concerned with writing texts differently to account for ambiguity and multiplicity of meanings (Finlay, 2002b). This form of reflexivity involves experimenting with words, genres and writing forms to enable multiple voices and multiple stories to engage with meaning making reflexively. Mona Livholts's (2012a) recent edited book *Emergent Writing Methodologies in Feminist Studies* challenges accepted orthodoxy about what is academic writing and illustrates that writing is also a 'method of inquiry' (Livholts, 2012b, p. 3). She points out that researchers seldom question 'what forms of writing does the research question demand?' (Livholts, 2012b, p. 3). There are varied and copious examples of researchers using a range of writing techniques for different purposes in social science research that create a reflexive space for participants and/or researchers (Butler-Kisber, 2002; Clark, 2014; Furman et al., 2007; Jenkins, 2010; Quinlan, 2013; Richardson and St Pierre, 2005; Vickers, 2010).

Inherent within Finlay's and others' typologies of reflexivity is that reflexivity is not only conceptualised in multiple ways but is equally carried out in multiple ways in research practice. Consistent across understandings of reflexivity is that qualitative research involves an accounting for oneself, one's research process and engagement with others. Hence, I now turn to where research often begins – with the researcher – to examine how analysis of situatedness and the politics of location assist in shaping reflexive research.

Situatedness and Knowledge

The idea of *history* is that in general white men have described and theorised the social world, which has often resulted in a universalising story of social history and an exclusion of multiple voices, a colonising of the voices of the most marginalised and a privileging of the white, middle-class male gaze. Since the '70s this positionality has inspired feminist researchers to question whose knowledge is being produced for whom and why. It has resulted in considerations about claiming our own knowledge and social positioning when we research and write. Hence, the practice of situating ourselves as researchers has become a critical practice in qualitative research that is more than locating who we are in the political and social landscape we work within.

Donna Haraway's (1988) conceptualisations of situatedness and partial knowledge have been influential in critiquing the researcher as objective and have been used extensively especially in feminist research. For Haraway situatedness refers to acknowledging that the subject position of a researcher is a located position produced within specific socio-historical conditions and as a consequence the knowledge claims she or he makes are derived from his or her locatedness. This locatedness is embodied and as such is gendered, classed, raced, sexualised and shaped by ethnicity, age and (dis)ability. Locatedness

means that as researchers we read, analyse and write from the perspective of our bodies and thus the knowledge claims we make are not universal claims of truth. Explicitly, Haraway proposes:

I am arguing for politics of epistemologies of location, positioning and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. I am arguing for the view from the body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity. (1998, p. 589)

Haraway's (1988) notion of situatedness enables discomfiting questions about the possibilities and limitations of what I see and how I see. There is always a locatedness for what and why I see and this is the 'politics of location' (Ahmed, 2004).

To reiterate, situatedness then, is shaped by 'vision', 'seeing' or the 'gaze' so that what is viewed 'varies depending on who is looking and what is valued' (Bryant and Livholts, forthcoming). For Haraway (1988, p. 586) there is a multidimensionality of vision not just across populations of subjects but multiple ways of seeing by a subject. Haraway's task is to reclaim the marked body that has a power to see, to represent but at the same time escape recognition. Hence, the task is to challenge the depictions in western social science and science of the objective eye, which sees and represents truth. Haraway aptly states:

all Western cultural narratives about objectivity are allegories of the ideologies governing the relations of what we call mind and body, distance and responsibility. Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see. (1988, p. 583)

Thus, our vision, whilst not complete, is also not fixed in time and shifts for individuals in the context of social meanings that constitute our multiple localities or situatedness.

Whilst the politics of location includes how our bodies are marked by our past it also allows for the notion that our bodies are ongoing achievements (Hinchliffe, 2003) subject to 'shifting practices of privilege and subordination' (Bryant and Livholts, forthcoming).

As I have argued it has become increasingly common for qualitative researchers to write themselves into their text especially in the context of accounting for their privilege (Pease, 2010). Claiming one's colour, class, gender and sexuality for example is important and provides a context to our being in the social; it is the location from which we see. However, it is also common for researchers to use positionality as a description of the self which is neatly

encapsulated in a 'methodology' section in an academic text without weaving positionality throughout the text. I argue that the almost necessary statement of 'who I am' and the explanation for the right to undertake this research can be a way of writing away our privilege, giving permission to go forth with the research. Pease clarifies this argument and states:

those of us who are most unmarked white, heterosexual, able-bodied men, need to understand how our subjectivities are constructed. However, in articulating our positionality, and in demonstrating reflexivity about it, we need to be clear that this does not get rid of our power and privilege. (2012, p. 77)

Hence, a description of our privilege or our positionality per se in academic writing does not rub the slate clean, does not then excuse our privilege and enable us to move on with our analysis, because we might still be strengthening and reproducing the configuration of the 'other' (Ahmed, 2004).

Reflexive Voice(s)

Hence, as Dahl suggests, 'it matters where we stand when we look at the world' (2012, p. 151) as a researcher's vision or gaze provides her/him with the power both to see and to voice and give voice. Thus, vision is also translated to language and thereby implicated in voice when it comes to writing research. The voices of participants have at times been colonised by researchers and carolled into neatly formed quotations. The concept of voice, that is, whose voice and how it is used, raises complex philosophical questions about voice and subjectivity. Witkin's (2002; Witkin and Chambon, 2007) conceptualisation of voice is useful as it denotes a multiplicity of meanings that capture the complexity of this concept. For Witkin voice is:

a form of expression, as in to 'give voice to' ... a consideration ... to have voice in decisions and ... as representing a person, group or concept, as for example in phrases like, in her own voice, the voice of service users ... these meanings [encapsulate] expression, consideration and representation. (Witkin and Chambon, 2007, p. 388)

The challenge of doing research differently is to accept the complexity of voice and subjectivity and 'to think of voice in the plural even for individuals, lest we reproduce the single unitary self' (Witkin and Chambon, 2007, p. 389). Witkin and Chambon (2007) draw on Judith Butler's (1990) conceptualisation of subjectivity to underscore that voices are partial, momentary and do not reflect a coherent and unitary self even though in the moment of reading research they may appear to do so. More contemporary ways of doing research ask of us: how

do we give voice(s), that is, allow voice(s) to emerge, hear voice(s), write voice(s) and read voice(s)? How do we move from subjectivity as a unitary construct?

Writing is also situated and 'objectivity' is about limited location. Commonly the singular voice is evident in social theories which stem from a set of global positioning, a situatedness that encompasses power inherent in the geographical locatedness and historical determinations of what is acceptable knowledge, namely Western knowledge. This position is central to postcolonial theorising which critiques what knowledge is heard, reproduced in social science and given value (e.g. Said, 2003). Further, as social workers through our research and writing we aim to give 'voice' to the oppressed and or marginalised. How we aim to make those voices heard is by us seeing, as Haraway argues, 'from the periphery or the depths' or from the 'vantage points of the subjugated' (1988, p. 584). The voices we aim to make heard are, however, also situated as is our vision, our way of seeing and interpreting the voices of those who collaborate or participate in research. As social workers there is a danger of 'romanticising or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their positions' (Haraway, 1988, p. 584). Giving voice through research, while necessary, is political and problematic as when we give voice it is through our vision and there can be a lack of transparency in academic writing as to who speaks. Participant quotations inserted in writing draw a boundary around whose voice is being presented but the way an academic argument is constructed and the selection of quotations and where they are placed are a representation of the vision and voice of the author.

In summary, using reflexivity in analysis and in writing enables the author to situate themselves and demonstrate their partial and fragmented location and knowledge in the context of research. Reflexive research practice involves engaging with how one sees, one's own marginalisation and privilege, with understandings of the process of being a researcher and being 'researched', and critiquing one's interpretations, contradictions and ethics (Bryant and Livholts, 2013; Lash, 2003; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). Reflexivity in research calls for self-awareness and scrutiny in what we research, the process of undertaking research, our analysis and writing (Pillow, 2003). Promisingly, ongoing analyses of our situatedness enable a reflexivity of vision and also a position from which to (re)vision, resist and work toward social change (hooks, 1990).

Critical and Creative Social Work Research

In this text particular meanings are given to the concepts of critical and creative; however, these are not definitive, as bounded terms are likely to produce contrary results to critical and indeed creative ways of researching. Broadly the term critical is used in this collection to refer to anti-oppressive

approaches both theoretical and methodological which question and critique power relations and the production of knowledge. The emphasis of critical research is to address inequalities, and values of social justice drive the purpose, design and outcomes expected from the research (Strier, 2007). Within the broad rubric of anti-oppressive approaches and theories the common factor is the examination of relations of power, ethics and impacts on inclusion/exclusion. Anti-oppressive approaches largely invoke methodologies that are participatory in a multitude of ways. Firstly, participation is likely to be reflected in a participatory relationship between researchers and participants in co-constituting the research design and/or data collection and analysis to recognise and give value to multiple knowledges which exist in communities (e.g. Buettgen et al., 2012; Cahill, Oujada Cerecer and Bradley, 2010; Collie et al., 2010; Fern, 2012). The co-constitution of research aims to provide greater space for the subject to speak and attempts to delimit the authority of the researcher to allow for the co-constitution of knowledge. Leslie Brown and Susan Strega's (2005) edited book *Research as Resistance* is a case in point. These authors use critical, Indigenous and anti-oppressive approaches to underscore that social work research processes and outcomes are driven by social justice – which is more likely to be achieved by methodologies that work collaboratively with people rather than those used 'on' people.

Secondly, participation may refer to political participation, that is, enabling participants to practise their entitlement to social citizenship through engagement in research that reflects their lived experience, enabling empowerment and/or transformations of social conditions. There are many examples of participation in research which involves the practice of social citizenship (e.g. Fenge, 2010; Greenwood, Levin and Ebrary, 2007; Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005; Schinke et al., 2013). Such research often draws on methods like oral histories, narratives, memory work or arts-based methods. This work enables people to 'recall, recount and review their lives', treating them as 'expert witnesses in the matter of their own lives' (Atkinson, 2004, p. 692). For example Atkinson's (2004) study about understanding the historic context of learning disabilities via oral history interviews enabled people with (dis)abilities to tell their own story and brought to light universal themes about institutional and community care. Finally, participation also involves long-term engagement of researchers with participants and their communities with a central aim being collective advocacy for programme and or policy change (Strier, 2007). This form of participation often but not exclusively uses participatory action research frameworks (e.g. Cammorata and Fine, 2008; Minkler, 2010).

Anti-oppressive research aims to redistribute power in the way academic knowledge is produced but also in effecting social change in the participatory community and/or within broader social systems (Rogers, 2012). Creative research may also be critical. The concept of creativity, however, is more