

EDITORIAL NOTE

In the social sciences (and perhaps especially in Anthropology) “reflexivity” refers to an awareness of one’s subject position, as a researcher, in the ethnographic/research encounter. To be reflexive is to be alert to the ways in which the researcher’s own gender, class, caste, ethnicity, age, sexuality, nationality, education, linguistic competence, social privilege, colonial legacy, and other dimensions of subjectivity may in fact shape or constrain research contexts and interactions in ways that, in turn, shape the research’s outcomes and conclusions. At stake is the legitimacy of the ethnographic insights and analyses that drive processes of social science knowledge production.

In the United States a focus on reflexivity and the politics of knowledge production dates from the 1970s and 80s when ascendant Marxian/political economy, feminist, and Foucauldian critiques triggered a period of intense disciplinary angst within Anthropology (and allied fields) known since as “the crisis of representation.” Did the often extreme differences in power and privilege between researcher and research subject render anthropological knowledge invalid? Were claims to “objectivity” only a politically-implicated scam? Was “ethnographic authority” more than a rhetorical trick? Works like Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), Talal Asad’s edited volume *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (1973), and many others cast doubt on even the possibility of legitimately representing “the Other.”

Yet within the confines of “scientific” epistemology (in which truth or reality are determined through research methodologies), representation is an inherently problematic practice. Like subatomic particles that are altered by the very act of observing them, knowledge production (in the social sciences and elsewhere) is inevitably the result of an encounter in which the observed (and maybe the observer) is transformed. Yet, there is no escape from the epistemological dilemma of representation. In his famous critique of representation, Said himself noted that, even with the most “critical consciousness,” he was unable to offer any alternatives to the politics of “knowledge and power.”

Therefore, the “crisis of representation” remains a crisis. It has never been resolved and is, perhaps, irresolvable. Eventually various domains within social science came to the conclusion that the best way to address the

crisis was to overtly acknowledge it. It is in this context that “reflexivity” emerged as a method of critical awareness. Researchers will never escape the politics of “objectivity” but they can work hard to both recognize how power differentials shape their research methods and conclusions, and to at least try to compensate for these dynamics by employing alternative methods. Reflexivity therefore begins with critical self-reflection and ends with recognizing that all knowledge is situated and incomplete.

This issue of SINHAS contains a special section dedicated to “Reflexivity and the Research Experience.” The section contains five articles and a commentary written by authors with various Nepal-related research experiences. These writings add to a small but growing corpus of similar articles that have been published by both Nepali and non-Nepali researchers of Nepal in the most recent past. We hope that they will help to generate further reflections on research experiences related to Nepal.

The idea for this special section emerged from a conversation between SINHAS editor Pratyoush Onta and Chudamani Basnet who teaches in the Department of Sociology at the South Asian University. They have coordinated the work needed to put together this special section. We would like to thank Dr Basnet for his role in making this possible.

References

- Asad, Talal, ed. 1973. *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*. New York: Humanities Press.
- Said, Edward. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.