

# Reflexivity and Research : 'We and They', 'Us and Them'.

Tanuja V. Koli.

Associate Professor.

Department of Sociology,

Chetanas H. S. College of Commerce and Economics, Smt. Kusumtai Choudhari College of Arts, Mumbai,  
India

**Abstract :** As part of fieldwork we are also studying ourselves, while we are studying others. In the present paper I will discuss the reflexivity in the research, the research study I carried out during my Ph.D. research on "Women's autonomy and Subjective Agency in the context of women's hostel". Thus, through reflexivity I bring out my own experience while understanding women's identities as well as I am also building my own identity by looking at it critically and also resisting the world outside us. Field work interactions changes every researcher in many ways. This paper shares the various reflexivities, that I underwent as field researcher during my research study, from the time of selection of my topic for Ph.D. research, my interactions and experiences during research. I will discuss this in the brief background of scope of reflexivity in research.

**IndexTerms - Reflexivity, field research and Interaction.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

As part of field work, we are also studying ourselves. Through reflexivity, researcher acknowledges the changes brought in themselves as a result of the research process. The journey of discovering how researchers shaped and how they were shaped by the research process is an empowering process (Palaganas, et.al,2017 : 426). Reflexivity has been increasingly recognized as crucial strategy in the process of generating knowledge. (Berger, 2013 :219). Reflexivity entails self awareness, which means being actively involved in research process. Reflexivity as a process is introspection on the role of subjectivity in the process of research. It involves continuous process of reflection by researchers on their values and of recognizing, examining and understanding how their social background, location and assumptions affect their research practice". The key to reflexivity is "to make the relationship between and the influence of the researcher and research participants explicit" (Palaganas, et.al, 2017: 427)

Scope of Reflexivity: The term "reflexivity" is poorly described and elusive, as most investigators only focus on the varied approaches towards successful qualitative studies, but the value of reflexivity has been widely neglected (Palaganas, et.al, 2017:426). Specifically, researchers role and influence in shaping the representations of participant experiences are never completely accounted for or addressed, and sometimes they are not even acknowledged. A common position is that the researcher and researched should be seen as occupying the same world and mutually influencing, to conceive research as a social rather than one sided process. The concept of reflexivity, has grown to include different meanings among the research traditions that helped to advance it- including ethnography, hermeneutic phenomenology, participatory and feminist research (Gentles, et al, 2014: p3). I approach reflexivity in my Ph.D. research, through Ethnomethodology in the background of feminist research to display real sensitivity to how a social situation or process is interpreted from a particular background and set of values and not simply based on situation itself. (Nayak and Singh, 2015:150)

## II. REFLEXITIVITY AND RESEARCHER:

I will discuss my experience as participant researcher during my Ph.D research study, on the topic titled "Articulations of Autonomy and Subjective Agency in the Context of Women's Hostel". Thus, I will discuss critically various reflexivity's of my field research starting from selection of my research topic, followed by my interactions with the research participants and interpretations of those interactions.

The journey of my present research study began, while I was doing my refresher course at Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, in Aurangabad in the year 2010. The duration of my refresher course was 21 days. It was during my stay at the University guest house, I regularly visited women's hostel for the purpose of food. During my visits, I used to interact with few women from the hostel, whom I regularly met at dinner and soon became friends with them, sharing information about each other. What I gathered from them was, they had taken choice to live away from their families to pursue their goals for higher education i.e. to pursue

M. Phil and Ph.D. Thus, these women hostellers had migrated from rural areas to city, who were first generation of graduates in their families to pursue goals of their choice. I found this as an empowering experience in the context of the women mainly belonging to rural backgrounds. Their experience took me back to my experience when I had to negotiate with my parents to permit me for pursuing my post graduation, (being the first generation of graduate) though within the same city limits, just a journey of 2 hours daily. It was this experience of mine, which made me feel these women in the hostel had taken an empowering step and choice for themselves, and probably might have undergone number of obstacles like family restrictions, dominating cultural norms, and so on. Thus, it was after coming back to Mumbai, after the 21 days of refresher course with long interactions with my new friends in hostel, I decided to register for my Ph.D course, under the topic 'Women's Empowerment in the Context of Hostel', which was latter articulated with the guidance from my research guide under the title "Articulations of Autonomy and Subjective Agency in the Context of Women's Hostels".

After the registration of the topic, and completion of my course work, I interacted with women hostellers, broadly on their experiences of autonomy and agency, and limits to it. During my interaction sessions with my research participants, I could gather that most women faced limitations in achieving their autonomy and agency mainly due to their marginalized caste backgrounds, which also impacted their class position in society. I could relate their experiences with the marginalized caste students in my college, and also as women belonging to marginalized caste and have been actively working as member of special cell in my college. I could especially relate my women students experience with my research participants, as they too faced limits to their autonomy and agency due to their marginalized caste and class backgrounds, which they experienced while filling their online forms due to no access to technology, while paying fees or restrictions from family and relatives to pursue higher education. My analysis shows that the research participants in the field and my experience with the marginalized caste students in the work place that is my college, points to failure of implementation of affirmative action in true spirit towards the marginalized caste which restricted women's autonomy and agency in the field of higher learning.

The analysis of my research study shows that, women hostellers from marginalized castes and communities are ridiculed publicly due to their marginalized caste, in the classrooms, in the work places by openly pointing to their caste and class backgrounds, by the members of dominating caste and class thereby lowering their confidence and limiting their autonomy and agency in life. I could relate this experiences of the research participants with my friends belonging to marginalised caste in the work place, as one them was ridiculed by vice principal for not reporting on time for exam supervision. The vice-principle in charge of the exam publicly commented at her: that, "if you have capacity to wear blazer dress, why can't you afford to commute by cab and come in time". Yet another friend of mine belonging to marginalized caste was isolated and ignored by her departmental head by not involving her in the work related to examination thereby showing mistrust against her and making her feel incapable for pursuing her job. To resist against the discriminatory behaviour of the vice-principle, I joined for protest along with my friends by writing letter to the Principal informing about the incidence and asking for apology for the same by the vice-principal.

While discussing the various experiences of autonomy and agency many women hostellers belonging to marginalized caste, ethnic groups and Muslim communities have credited to their autonomous decisions and agency in life due to the influence and support from their caste conscious and sensitive friends, colleagues and teachers belonging to scheduled caste category, which lead them to rational thinking and their sensitiveness towards marginalized castes groups and their issues. I do share similar experience with my colleagues teachers and friends belonging to the scheduled caste category, due to whom, I developed more sensitive and serious approach towards the marginalized castes and communities in the society, which was not lacking but not intensified due to the urban set up around me. Also many research participants have credited the writings of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, the sociology course, the Gender Studies Course as among the few factors which helped them gain autonomy and agency in life. My analysis in the present research as well as my personal experience shows there are objections to organizing programes like talks or lectures on Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and various Bahujan intellects in the institution of higher learning and work place. However, this objections are counteracted through collective actions, as in our institution we have formed 'Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Adhyasan'.

While in the final stages of writing of my thesis, I encountered with Dr. Payal Tadvi's suicide case through newspapers (Mumbai Mirror, May 22, 2019) .I relate my research study with Dr. Payal Tadvi's case, a doctor, a woman hosteller who committed suicide, for being ridiculed by her colleagues on social media due to her marginalized caste / community position in society. My analysis of this case focus on the way dominant media like newspaper highlights the suicide case of Dr. Payal Tadvi by focusing more on the work pressures faced by the residential doctors as reason for her suicide (Mumbai Mirror, May 29, 2019, p.6) thereby ignoring and

misleading the case which is more about caste based violence inflicted by dominant caste and class people on the marginalized caste and community people. Here, I would also like to focus that any injustice faced by marginalized caste and community people, are fought only through their marginalised caste and community based organizations for their justice. This also shows lack of sensitivity on the part of civilised society, in which Vivek Oberoi's meme on Aishwarya Rai Bachhan was considered as disrespectful and offending to any women by many dominant class men and women along with The National Commission for Women which is mulling to take action against actor Vivek Oberoi (Indian Express, May 20, 2019). Payal Tadvi's case also focuses how the complexities faced by marginalized caste groups of women in the medical profession gets compounded due to their marginalized caste and community position in the society thereby limiting their autonomy and agency in life and also destroying their lives...

Conclusion : Reflexivity, the 'active acknowledgement by the researcher that his / her own actions and decisions will inevitable impact upon the meaning and context of the experience under investigation', is a prime measure used in qualitative research to secure credibility, trustworthiness, and no exploitative researcher views the phenomenon studied (Berger, 2015 : 229). Thus, reflexivity is sharing participant's experience, as in the aforementioned study on women's autonomy and subjective agency in the context of women's hostel, enabled better in depth understanding of participants perception and interpretation of their lived experience. Through reflexivity, researcher acknowledges the changes brought in themselves.

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