

Diffraction or reflection? Sketching the contours of two methodologies in educational research

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Abstract

Internationally, an interest is emerging in a growing body of work on what has become known as ‘diffractive methodologies’ drawing attention to ontological aspects of research. Diffractive methodologies have largely been developed in response to a dissatisfaction with practices of ‘reflexivity’, which are seen to be grounded in a representational paradigm and the epistemological aspects of research. While work on ‘reflexivity’ and ‘critical reflection’ has over the years become predominant in educational and social science research methodology literature, our reading indicates that there is still important conceptual work to be done putting these two practices – reflection and diffraction – in conversation with each other and exploring their continuities and breaks as well as examining the consequences for research methodologies in education. This article raises important questions about how the concepts of diffraction and reflection are defined and understood and discusses the methodological implications for educational research.

Introduction

Dissatisfied with epistemological practices of reflexivity grounded in representationalism, scholars immersed in feminist science studies began to raise questions about the theoretical assumptions and consequences of reflexivity. Haraway (1997), a pioneer in these debates, proposed the notion of *diffraction* as an alternative to reflexivity. As she expressed her misgivings at the time:

Reflexivity has been much recommended as a critical practice, but my suspicion is that reflexivity, like reflection, only displaces the same elsewhere, setting up worries about copy and original and the search for the authentic and really real. (1997, p. 16).

Haraway suggested instead that, ‘[w]hat we need is to make a difference in material-semiotic apparatuses, to *diffract* the rays of technoscience so that we get more promising interference patterns on the recording films of our lives and bodies’ (1997, added emphasis). Thus diffraction for Haraway was suggested as a metaphor and a strategy for making a difference in the world that breaks with self-reflection and its epistemological grounding, which she regarded as problematic as it lures us into a reductionist way of thinking about things and words (Haraway, 2000). The Cartesian belief that we have direct access to representations or our thoughts and that we do not

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