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## UNIT 4 REFLEXIVITY\*

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this Unit, you will be able to understand:

- the meaning of reflexivity and how it is useful in social science research;
- the meaning and significance of reflexivity; and
- the works of A. Gouldner, H. Garfinkel and P. Bourdieu on reflexivity.

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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Reflexivity is the process by which the researcher reflects upon the data collection and interpretation process. The term, reflexivity has different meanings in different contexts. It is a term used in a wide variety of senses. In general, it means 'reflecting' and specifically, as part of the social research, reflexivity is the process by which the researcher reflects upon the data collection and interpretation process. Talcott Parsons, Anthony Giddens, Harold Garfinkel have used this concept in their works. Two very important usage of the term can be identified. It is used to characterise the general features of the modern social life and secondly it is used more specifically to refer to certain characteristics of social scientists' attempts to explain social life (*Kuper and Kuper, 1996*).

The term reflexivity was coined by Alvin Gouldner, who desired sociological examination of sociology. A very substantial and exhaustive argument for a so called reflexive sociology is found in Gouldner's work, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (1970). He transcends the methodological and theoretical contexts of ethnomethodology and proposed reflexive sociology. Sociology was viewed as a discipline that was inclined to produce an objective knowledge of the social reality which was not agreed upon. He, therefore, argued that knowledge was not independent of the knower and sociology is intimately bound up with the political and socio-economic context within which it exists. Therefore, for him it was important to be aware of this connection and of sociology's role as part of the way we look at ourselves and our future. Reflexive sociology requires us to really examine what we are doing, how we think, how we feel, what are our attitude, beliefs, feelings prejudices about particular things in social reality and if we really grasp this idea of being sceptical about our own views it helps us to get rid of the preconceived notions that we have about other people behaviour.

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## 4.2 GOULDNER AND REFLEXIVITY

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Gouldner wants to illuminate the manner in which theory products and theory performances are generated and received. The methodologists, for the production of theory stresses on the interaction between theory and research but Gouldner's conception is different. He argues that it is impossible to understand how social theory is actually made or how it makes its way in the world (*Gouldner, 1970*). He is of the opinion that the presence of a researcher alters reality. The objectivity that the researchers talk about is based on their values and the justification of them and it projects the reality as in the way the researcher wants to see it. The knowledge therefore can never be independent of the knower. A communication theory is very complex and this can be understood if we are able to comprehend the various ways in which the theorist is placed in their theories.

Social theorists take certain facts as given because these facts have resulted from their experience rather than research. The reliability of the facts is not problematic for them. What determines the facts is not important but the ordering of these facts are. "Social theorizing, then, is often a search for the meaning of the personally real, that which is already assumed to be known through personal experience" (*Gouldner, 1970:484*). Therefore, it is an endeavour to locate and interpret the meaning of what one has lived and to reduce the tension between a social event or process that the theorist takes to be real and some values which this violates.

For the social theorist there are two kinds of social world the 'permitted' and the 'unpermitted'. The theorist tries to transform the unpermitted into the permitted world and therefore the threat of the unpermitted and strengthen the permitted. Theorists do this in two ways 1) by communicating the importance or potency of the normal world, 2) by denying or ignoring the potency or values of what he considers to be an unpermitted world. Social theories in an effort to find and assign meanings of the social objects is simultaneously also locating objects in terms of their potency and goodness. In a value free social theory this is done in a covert manner. "The pressure to situate social objects in terms of their moral values abides and shapes the work of social theorists, whatever their professed conception of their technical role (*Gouldner, 1970:485*).

According to Gouldner sociologists are not able to tell us what they are doing and to distinguish this from what they should be doing. Reflexive sociology is therefore concerned with what they want to do and what they actually do in the world. Reflexive sociology has been perceived to be another field in sociology but he further argues that it is not and therefore it intends to transform the sociologists to penetrate deeply into his daily life and work enriching them with new sensitivities and to raise the sociologists self awareness to a new historical level (pp 489). Reflexive sociology presupposes a new praxis that would transform the sociologist himself/herself. Consequently our consciousness comes to deeply reflect upon our sociological work and social position. This is one of the objectives of reflexive sociology and to succeed in this reflexive sociology according to Gouldner needs to be radical because to advance the knowledge of the world it is important for the sociologist to understand his/her knowledge of himself/herself and one's position in the social world and also understand the social world of the other men. This demands that the sociologists have to view their own beliefs as they view the beliefs held by others and this would change how sociologists

have been viewing themselves and others. Reflexive sociology pursues the change of the self of the sociologist and subsequently his praxis in the world. This would end the distinction between the layman, who are studied and the sociologist, who studies. But in the absence of reflexive sociology this distinction would always remain.

Gouldner asserts that the separation between the knower and the known must be overcome, because it is impossible to know others without knowing yourself. To know the others the sociologist cannot simply study them but must also listen to them and confront himself/herself. Reflexive sociology changes the meaning of knowledge. It does not remain merely a piece of information, but becomes awareness. Reflexive sociology for Gouldner is moral sociology as it demands moral and ethical commitment unlike the positivistic sociology which demands the sociologist to be neutral and apolitical. “A Reflexive Sociology, then, is not characterised by what it studies. It is distinguished neither by the person and the problems studied nor even by the techniques and instruments used in studying them. It is characterized, rather, by the relationship it establishes between being a sociologist and being a person, between the role and the man performing it. A Reflexive Sociology embodies a critique of the conventional conception of segregated scholarly roles and has a vision of an alternative. It aims at transforming the sociologist’s relation to his work” (Gouldner, 1970: 495)

#### **Box 4.1: Information and Awareness**

The objective of Reflexive Sociology is to extend knowledge but there are difficulties because of how knowledge has been understood either as ‘information’ or ‘awareness’. The unstated doubt in the meaning of knowledge was brought into social sciences when natural and social sciences were differentiated from one another in the 19th century. The positivists conceived knowledge, about reality, as information which could be empirically proved. Therefore, the goal of science was to produce information either for its own sake or to improve power over the surrounding world. Science conceived in this manner therefore becomes an ideology.

“1) behind which all “humanity” might unite in a common effort to subdue a “nature” that was implicitly regarded as external to man and 2) with which to promote technologies that could transform the universal into the usable resource of mankind as a whole” (Gouldner, 1970: 495).

This idea of knowledge sees humans controlling the rest of the world and has the right to use the resources for its advantage. The assumed unity of mankind created problems when science was used to study human beings themselves, as it brought out differences among them and it was expected that social science would be used to control men as physical science was used to control nature. Such a view of social science premised that a man might be known, used and controlled like any other thing: it “thingafied” man. The use of the physical sciences, as a model fostered just such a conception of the social sciences, all the more so as they were developing in the context of an increasingly utilitarian cultures.

With its vehement criticism of the utilitarian culture, this information producing conception of social sciences by the Positivists was opposed by a different method of verstehen. Verstehen emphasised on producing knowledge that

would enhance men's awareness of their place in the social world rather than simply facilitating their control over it. This approach sees the social world being constructed on the basis of the shared meanings men have as there is "no knowledge of the world that is not a knowledge of our own experience with it and our relation to it" (1970:493).

When knowledge is conceived as awareness the concern is not with discovering the truth of the external reality but with seeing the truth as the product of the knower's interaction with the reality and the knower's effort to order his experience with it. "Knowledge as information, then, is the attribute of a culture rather than any person; and consequence are all depersonalized." On the other hand knowledge as "awareness, is an attribute of persons, even though it is influenced by the location of these persons in specific cultures or in parts of a social structure" (1970:493-494).

Awareness, therefore, requires a relationship between persons and information but information is not a sufficient condition for awareness. Information is never neutral to the men. It is either good or bad. Awareness is the openness to bad news and is born of a capacity to overcome resistance to its acceptance or use. "A scholar's ability to accept and use hostile information about his own view of social reality and his efforts to know it is part of what is usually called "objectivity"" (1970:494).

A Reflexive Sociology opposes and rejects the methodological dualism as witnessed in positivism. This dualism separates the subject and objects of research, separates the facts from values, reduces the knowledge of the social world to mere information and sees social world as mirrored in sociologist's work rather than as "constituted by the sociologists cognitive commitments and all his other interests" (1970:496). The practitioners of methodological dualism feel that if the sociologist engages politically, socially and emotionally with the objects of study the scientific nature of the discipline would be lost. This cold objectivity as Gouldner argues is essentially an expression of alienation of the sociologist from his/her own self. "It strives to free him from disgust, pity, anger, from egoism or moral outrage, from his passion and his interest, on the supposition that it is a bloodless and disembodied mind that works best" (1970:496). However, according to Gouldner "both the inquiring subject and the studied object are seen not only as mutually interrelated but also as mutually constituted" (1970: 493).

The aim of the Reflexive Sociology is not to remove his influence on others but to understand his own influence "which requires that he must become aware of himself as both knower and as agent of change" (pp 497). Reflexive Sociology recognises "that there is an inevitable tendency for any social system to curtail the sociologists autonomy in at least two ways: to transform him either into an ideologue of the status quo and an apologist for its policies or into a technician acting instrumentally on behalf of its interests" (1970:497-498).

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### 4.3 GARFINKLE: REFLEXIVITY THROUGH ETHNOMETHODOLOGY

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One of the most important thing in studying sociology is how do you look at things. In the book *Studies of Ethnomethodology*, Garfinkel's aim was to understand the methodologies used by social scientists. Sociologists have been

interested in order and its explanation, Garfinkel, however, is not concerned with order. Social life appears to be ordered and regular and that social action is systematic and patterned. Sociologists have assumed that social order has an objective reality. According to ethnomethodology, the social world is a natural world which contains a common stock of knowledge and precedes any individual. Subjects appropriate this common stock of knowledge with respect to their goals. The description or interpretation of facts and the performative accounts of daily action are regarded as the elementary basis on which the re-construction of the social world takes place (*Tsekeris & Katrivesis, 2008*). For Garfinkel, the world is chaotic and within this chaos sociologists try to discover and unravel a pattern or an order. So the perception of this order and how the social scientists arrive at it is the important concern for Garfinkel. Is it possible to perceive order when there is no order, is the question that Garfinkel wants to address. Garfinkel suspends or abandons the belief that an actual or objective social order exists and proceeds from the assumption that social life appears orderly to the members of society. This order is not because of the fundamental nature of the social world. Social order is an appearance constructed by the members of the society.

He argues that sociology has characteristically depicted man as a 'cultural dope' who simply acts on the basis of norms, values and the culture of his society, without thinking and produces a stable feature of the society. Garfinkel replaces this 'cultural dope' in society by the skilled member who is constantly attending to the particular, indexical qualities of situations, giving them meaning, making them knowable, communicating this knowledge to others and constructing a sense and appearance of order. The members, for Garfinkel, construct and accomplish their own social world rather than being shaped by it.

Garfinkel was of the opinion that our understanding of anything is interpretative and the manner in which a social scientist works is the manner in which a man in the street also works. There is a lot of taken-for-grantedness in case of interaction, communication among street men. There is a lot of taken-for-grantedness in sciences as well. Without this taken-for-grantedness there can be no communication. When somebody asks you "How are you?" You answer, "I am fine, thank you," irrespective of your condition. This is taken-for-granted. The person may not be concerned of your wellbeing but he asks. If the latter takes a scientific approach to the question asked, you may answer "with respect to what?" Such a question if asked, in reply to the question how are you? will be considered to be irrelevant. Theories and explanations are also taken-for-granted. At some stage questions and answers become meaningless and at times you are satisfied by the answer without asking any further because it is taken-for-granted, therefore you are trying to understand the reality.

According to Garfinkel there is no reality and to discover this reality you fall back on some pattern which is taken-for-granted. There cannot be any discovery of reality which is not taken-for-granted. That is the meaning of reflexivity. You are looking for data but for the analysis of the data you fall back on a theory. To arrive at a new theory an old theory is being made use of. A new law or theory is not being produced because to discover this new law or theory is rooted in the taken-for-grantedness of certain patterns and laws. If this concept is applied to social order, then order is all perceived. Under certain conditions you construct certain images of an order. It is your construction that means, the ideas of order

are as much dependent on what is ordered as on those people who are constructing the order.

Garfinkel argues that members employ the 'documentary method' to make sense and account for the social world and to give it an appearance of order. This method consists of selecting certain aspects of the infinite number of features contained in any situation or context, of defining them in a particular way and seeing them as evidence of an underlying pattern. In Garfinkel's words, the documentary method 'consists of treating an actual appearance as "the document of" as "pointing to" as "standing on behalf of" a presupposed underlying pattern. Not only is the underlying pattern derived from its individual documentary evidences, but the individual documentary evidences, in their turn, are interpreted on the basis of "what is known" about the underlying pattern. Each is used to elaborate the other. Thus the documentary method can be seen as reflexive. Garfinkel argues that social life is essentially reflexive. Members of society are constantly referring aspects of activities and situations to presumed underlying patterns and confirming the existence of those patterns by reference to particular instances of their expression. In this way members produce accounts of the social world which not only make sense of and explain but actually constitute that world.

In Garfinkel's discussion of ethnomethodology, reflexivity refers to the intimate interdependence between surface appearances (documents and accounts) and the associated underlying reality (a distinction which is characteristic of the documentary method of interpretation). The sense of the former is elaborated by drawing on knowledge of the latter, while at the same time the sense of the latter is elaborated by what is known about the former. Accounts are thus constituents features of the setting they make observable. Constitutive reflexivity has radical implications for social science's pretensions of causal argument, since it casts considerable doubt on the extent to which explanans and explanandum can be considered distinct elements in an explanation.

Reflexivity is often said to be engendered by all social science with relativising tendencies. Any claims about the influence of social circumstances on a particular situation can be understood as also referring to the claim itself. This aspect of reflexivity comes into particular focus in work in the sociology of scientific knowledge. Whereas it has been convincingly demonstrated that natural scientific knowledge is a product of social cultural historical and political processes, rather little attention has been given to the fact that social science itself is an activity generated by these same forces. Sociology of science treats scientific knowledge in broadly relativist terms, but often continues to practise its own craft in realist terms. This has led to criticisms of inconsistency especially from objectivist philosophers of science. The recommended solution from this latter quarter is to abandon relativism. By contrast a body of work has arisen which takes the opposite tack and upholds the principle of consistency by exploring ways of abandoning realist methods in the social study of science.

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#### **4.4 BOURDIEU: REFLEXIVE SOCIOLOGY**

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When we are dealing with human behaviour reflexive sociology becomes important. Bourdieu is of the opinion that we need to deepen our understanding of our position in the world to better understand the social reality of the others.

Bourdieu insists on the importance of a reflexive sociology in which sociologists must at all times conduct their research with conscious attention to the effects of their own position, their own set of internalised structures and how these are likely to distort or prejudice their objectivity. A researcher needs to get out of his or her own way of thinking about social reality and be willing to step on other persons' shoes to understand why things are happening the way they are. In addition reflexive sociology requires us to be sceptical about our own views and really examine what we are doing, how we feel, how we think, what are our attitudes and assumptions, beliefs and prejudices and biases about particular things in social reality, then it allows us to step outside of our judgement of the situation. Bourdieu provides the following definition of reflexive sociology:

‘Understood as the effort whereby social science, taking itself for its object, uses its own weapons to understand and check itself, it is a particularly effective means of increasing the chances of attaining truth by increasing the cross-controls and providing the principles of a technical critique, which makes it possible to keep closer watch over the factors capable of biasing research. It is not a matter of pursuing a new form of absolute knowledge, but of exercising a specific form of epistemological vigilance, the very form that this vigilance must take in an area where the epistemological obstacles are first and foremost social obstacles.’ (Bourdieu, 2004:89).

According to Bourdieu (2004), social scientists themselves, are also objects under study and participating in the reality of society that is the object of their study. The social researcher occupies a place in the social world, which is the object of study, and must therefore adopt a critical awareness of his or her own social location in relation to both the research object and process. According to the precepts of reflexive sociology, social research must account for the interplay of objective and subjective social factors. Reflexive sociology focuses on overcoming the contradiction of objectivism and subjectivism” (Wacquant, 1998, p. 220). This is achieved largely through Bourdieu’s dialogic theoretical constructs of “field,” “capital,” and “habitus”

#### **Box 4.2: Field, Capital and Habitus**

Bourdieu understand the social world as being divided up into a variety of distinct arenas or fields each with their own unique set of rules, knowledge and forms of capital. Different social fields can be distinguished, e.g. the field of art, literature, science or careers that can be further subdivided into subfields. For him these social fields were microcosm in which the agents and institutions are integrated and interact with each other in accordance with field-specific rules. Rules are not formalized but rather tacit in nature (Wacquant, 2011) and need to be internalized by the agents in order to demonstrate appropriate practices and strategies. The internalization of the field-specific rules enables the agent to anticipate future tendencies and opportunities. There is no global rule that applies to all fields. Therefore, Bourdieu (1966) argues that due to their unique rules, fields are autonomous, which is relative as one field may be influenced by other social structures like economy, polity etc.

A social field represents a network of positions (Bourdieu, 1972). Boundaries of social fields are where their respective effect ends and where the effects of another field begin. These are not pre-defined and have to be found out empirically. The position an agent occupies on a field creates self-evident rules

that determine the limits of social mobility within a social field (*Bourdieu, 1972*). This forms the sense of our place and the feeling of what is possible and what not. Fields are places of power relations where practices of agents are not arbitrary. Once it has been understood that all interactions are anchored in a specific social field, it now has to be examined how positions on the respective fields are gained.

### Capital

Taking as a basis that a social field represents the playground where certain rules apply (*Bourdieu, 1972*), agents need to be endowed with a specific quantity and structure of resources they can put at stake in order to obtain the right to enter a social field. Each field values particular sorts of resources that Bourdieu named capital. Bourdieu distinguishes between four types of capital, namely economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital which agents mobilize in order to enter and move on social fields. Although all types of capital appear to be distinct, in reality, they are very closely linked to each other and can be converted. Economic capital is related to a person's fortune and revenues. This form of capital can be more easily transformed into other types of capital than vice-versa. For an example when you buy a book you are exchanging economic capital to buy cultural capital. Cultural capital is especially transferred by family and education and may be institutionalized in the forms of educational qualifications. Cultural capital is the primary cause for status and relative positions within a social field. Social capital can be institutionalized in a title of nobility and requires efforts for its creation and maintain. Lastly, the notion of symbolic capital is related to honour and recognition. It is not an independent type of capital within itself, but rather consists in the acknowledgment of capital by the entirety of the peer competitors on a specific field.

Besides the right to enter a social field, the capital structure also determines an agent's position on the field or social space in general. Bourdieu insists on the fact that positions on social fields are relative. They are determined by the volume and structure of the agent's capital portfolio that is compared to that of other agents on the same field, especially regarding economic and cultural capital (*Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992*).

The Habitus is one of the important concept in Bourdieu's sociology. It must not be mistaken for the common notion of habit as a mechanical adoption of a previously determined program. Habitus refers to the physical embodiment of cultural capital to the deeply ingrained habits, skills and dispositions that we possess due to our life experiences. It also extends to our taste for cultural objects such as art food and clothing. It is the system of dispositions as a product of history that "produces practices in accordance with the schemes engendered by history" (*Bourdieu, 1984, p. 82*). At the core of Bourdieu's habitus lies the tendency to always act the same way in similar situations. The habitus is acquired during primary and secondary socialization. Primary socialization is the socialization that comes from the family during childhood. The resulting primary habitus is rather stable. The schemes of action and perception that have been transferred during childhood are an education that is linked to the parents' social position in the social space. Therefore, the primary habitus is about 'internalizing the external' as the parents' modes of thinking, feeling and behaving that are linked to their position in the social space are



internalized in the children's own habitus. This is what Bourdieu (1977) also calls class habitus that reflects the different positions people have in society and that leads to different lifestyles tastes and interests among social classes. The secondary habitus is built on the primary habitus and especially results from one's education at school and university, but also from other life experiences. The primary habitus never loses its impact and always influences the development of the secondary habitus. In this respect, the primary and secondary habitus can also be summarized into one single habitus that is constantly reinforced and modified by life experiences giving it a dynamic quality. According to Bourdieu (1977, p. 72), habitus is "the strategy generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations".

Furthermore, the habitus ensures that agents act in accordance with the field specific rules as all agents tacitly recognize "the value of the stakes of the game and the practical mastery of its rules" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 117). This also ensures that agents are competitors for positions within the field as they pursue the same objective in the game.

## 4.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have understood that reflexivity is the process by which the researcher reflects upon the data collection and interpretation process and the term has different meanings in different contexts. To understand this we have referred to three important theorists of reflexivity: Gouldner, Garfinkel and Bourdieu. Gouldner argued that knowledge was not independent of the knower and sociology is intimately bound up with the political and socio-economic context within which it exists. Therefore, for him it was important to be aware of this connection and of sociology's role as part of the way we look at ourselves and our future.

In Garfinkel's discussion of ethnomethodology, reflexivity refers to the intimate interdependence between surface appearances (documents and accounts) and the associated underlying reality (a distinction which is characteristic of the documentary method of interpretation). The sense of the former is elaborate by drawing on knowledge of the latter, while at the same time the sense of the latter is elaborated by what is known about the former.

According to Bourdieu, the social researcher occupies a place in the social world, which is the object of study, and must therefore adopt a critical awareness of his or her own social location in relation to both the research object and process. According to the precepts of reflexive sociology, social research must account for the interplay of objective and subjective social factors.

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## GLOSSARY

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**Reflexivity:** It is the process by which the researcher reflects upon the data collection and interpretation process.

**Ethnomethodology:** means the study of the methods used by people. It is concerned with examining the methods and procedures employed by members of society to construct, account for and give meaning to their social world.

**'Cultural dope':** A man-in-the-sociologist's society who produces the stable features of society by acting in compliance with pre-established and legitimate alternatives of action that the common culture provides.

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## FURTHER READING

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