

SELF-REFLEXIVITY: A CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Origins of an Idea

This overview begins with excerpts from a book review because that's where the idea for a special issue on theory and method started -- after reading Franken's essay on Sally Ness's book (see *infra* pp. 65-70, including reference). Franken's review thus begins and ends the main body of this issue of *JASHM*, because she raises important theoretical and methodological issues, among them current usages of the terms 'reflexive' and 'reflexive anthropology'.

Several misconceptions seem to exist among a significant number of dance scholars, performance studies advocates, dance ethnologists and dance anthropologists about the concept of reflexivity and what it means in sociology and anthropology. I begin with something Franken says because she indicates a trend that needs fuller treatment:

. . . the author [Ness] wanted to bridge a gap that has appeared in dance scholarship in recent years. *On the one hand is the new and growing reflexive or experiential school, influenced by the intellectual trends of other disciplines, especially reflexive anthropology, post-modernism, etc. This group focuses on how it feels to dance, what goes on internally or subjectively in the muscles, joints, personality and consciousness of the dancer.* The opposite approach is a sociological one; dances are seen as group activities that are performed by certain sub-sets of a society, communicating messages to the members of the society about status, role, social transitions, change and so forth.

I think the attempt to reconcile such opposing analytical approaches has pushed Ness into some untenable conclusions. Determined to find both subjective and social meanings of the dance, she traps herself into highly suspect statements, i.e. choreography is inspired by architecture; linguistic patterns are repeated in dances; bodily parts are chosen as expressive instruments to correspond to history, moral values, etc.

As far as the anthropological study of dancing is concerned, the social kind of analysis is far from exhausted, regardless of what the rest of anthropology is doing. Few anthropologists yet realize that discovering that the cliché, "the dance reflects society" is re-discovering the wheel (see Kaeppler 1978: 45). It is an old, trite, worn-out non-explanation of the presence of dances in human social life (see *infra*, 69-70 - italics supplied).

Two writers who infer that they expound new ideas and uses of reflexivity in human movement and performance studies are Drewel (1991) and Sklar (1991a and 1991b), both of whose ideas are examples of the misconceptions mentioned above. Both authors also fulfill a prediction I made years ago -- that the term 'reflexive' would sooner or later become synonymous with 'subjective', thus attached to the familiar positivist set of terms, 'subjective-objective'. The list of Drewel's papers following her extended essay *The State*

of *Research on Performance in Africa* (1991) doesn't refer to her earlier publications, yet that is where my familiarity with her work began.

Twenty years ago, I wrote:

I have in front of me now an essay which I am asked to comment upon for publication. It is a fairly good essay, rather better written than most, by someone who obviously has excellent intentions and who is doing her best to say something about a West African people whose religion and beliefs are living, vibrant and real -- as her own probably are not. The author has tried very hard . . . to be as faithful to her research and the people about whom she writes as she can, yet, the essay is sprinkled -- as with a pepper-shaker -- with terms like 'dichotomy', 'kinetic', 'standardized', 'dutifully', 'deified', 'mythical' and many more. One's eyes, and mind, are irritated -- as by pepper -- with these terms.

How would they translate, if indeed, they would at all, into the spoken language of the people concerned? . . . As with my own pre-anthropology essays, I have the curious experience reading this writer's work, that sometimes I get rather large glimpses of "them", but on the whole, I seem to see more of "us", especially "her" and it is this split, this severance, which is so worrying. . . .

The writer to whom I referred (although not by name) in that passage (see Williams 1976: 25, or 1991: 312-313) was Margaret Thompson Drewel. In the earlier paper she wasn't preoccupied with theory or methodological approaches. In the recent *African Studies Review* article, however, she is.

Drewel

Apart from the fact that this author lays yet another guilt trip onto the members of western academic disciplines for ethnocentrism and inadequate methodologies in *The Problematics of Performance Research*, 1991: 11, she proposes "three simultaneous paradigmatic shifts" regarding research in performance in Africa:

- 1) from structure to process (from an essentially spatialized, distanced, objectivist view to a temporal, participatory, interactive research practice;
- 2) from the normative to the particular and historically situated (from the timeless to the time-centered); and 3) from the collective to the agency of named individuals in the continuous flow of social interactions. Only then can performance as *praxis* be historicized and long-term transformations be revealed (Drewel 1991: 2-3 - italic supplied).

I would want to ask two things with reference to 1) above. First, *whose* notion of structure? Historically, studies of performance by anthropologists yield several different notions of structure, all sufficiently different that the in-

tended (or unintended?) conflation indicates serious naiveté. Second, how can anyone at the end of the post-Einsteinian 20th century advocate the separation of time/space in this way? Does the author mean to infer that "a temporal, participatory, interactive research practice" will *not* be "objectivist", or does the point of view she advocates represent a *subjectivist* standpoint? What I understand from what she says after reading her entire essay is that space is objective (in the old sense) and time is -- well, time just "is" -- and is somehow connected with the new forms of ethnography she aims to establish that will arise from realizing that *performers* are self-reflexive.

With reference to 2), it would be tedious to invoke literature dealing with the problems of "timelessness" in ethnographic writing, particularly between the two World Wars. Equally, it is tedious to have to point out that normative approaches were never thought to be superior to, nor have ascendancy over, historically situated approaches by anyone I know of. Or, does the author refer to functionalist studies, which *were* historically situated in the 'slice of time' sense? Again, readers aren't provided with clues regarding the ethnographers the author has in mind or the schools of thought to which she refers, except in her overview (1991: 5-7), in which she attempts to "situate performance studies historically as an emerging field of inquiry", but in those pages, readers are left strictly to their own devices and to whatever knowledge they may possess about the history of ideas in the field.

With reference to 3), considerable confusion reigns: (a) participant-observation, a time-honored method in social and cultural anthropology, precisely set out to document events "in the continuous flow of social interactions"; (b) the notion of "process" (as Drewel calls it) has always been with us, and (c) many studies in social and cultural anthropology, starting with the functionalists (see Williams 1991: 117-150) adhered to the prevailing scientific paradigm of that time which *was* dominated by positivist thinking, but everyone probably knows that. Indeed,

The image of a stream of events that the social anthropologist's initial task was to meter was never far from the minds of early fieldworkers. The journalist's idea of a 'newspaper of record', the old historian's conception of a 'chronicle' or 'annals', and the whole modern development of methods of documentation suffice to show that the image of the notionally complete registration of events has a respectable genealogy -- respectable enough for its implications to have the invisibility of either the self-evident or the unexamined. . . . (Ardener 1973/1989: 86-87).

The most discouraging feature of Drewel's proposals lies in this statement: "Performance participants can self-reflexively monitor their behavior in the process of the doing" (1991: 2; footnote not included). Reflexivity in performance studies as an established discipline (apparently in contrast to anthropology, folklore and ethnomusicology) is attributed solely to *performers*.

Pocock and Varela

The reflexivity involved in Pocock's idea of a personal anthropology pertains to the anthropologist -- to the investigator -- *not* to the subjects of the investigation, although self-reflexivity is recognized as a common, general feature of the nature, powers and capacities of human beings.

The reflexivity involved in the idea of a personal anthropology turns around the assessment of facts, to *judgments of what it is to be human*. Pocock advocates a thoughtful, responsible interaction with ethnographic facts first as they are represented by received authorities at student levels and second, as they are represented by informants during periods of fieldwork and in the investigator's subsequent writings. In no case did he argue that facts are objective or value-free in a positivistic sense:

13.1 Yet it is my contention that precisely because we believe that we can objectify our language, I mean in the sense that it should float free of our historical selves, neutral and available to the apprehension of other neutral observers, because and to the extent that this is our aim, we are at loggerheads with our personal anthropologies (see p. 27).

Pocock focuses exclusively on the observer; on the person who is going to "do" the anthropology -- the knower, including himself. Moreover, in the passage above, he clearly states his position about objectification, starting with the language(s) we all use. With reference to the distinction he makes between an investigator's personal anthropology and their individual psychologies (a frequent source of confusion for some), he is unambiguous:

6.3 These features which are distinctive to the individual psyche are separable from the judgements of the person which constitute the personal anthropology (see p. 17).

6.5 . . . It can from this, I hope, be seen clearly that the assumptions of the personal anthropology are of a different order from that mass of assumptions, judgements and hypotheses which constitute the individual psyche (see p. 18).

There is no connection between reflexivity as part of a personal anthropology and "subjectivity" of the type we associate with the positivist dichotomy of subjective and/or objective views of the world. Moreover, "This shareability of the personal anthropology is what distinguishes it from the individual psyche" (see p. 17). Varela states the point regarding objectivity succinctly:

. . . Pocock is for objectivity essentially in the form Polanyi presented it in *Personal Knowledge*. Pocock is against *objectivism* precisely because he

wishes to free anthropologists from such a conception so that they may be free to be objective as personal anthropologists. . . . (see p. 45).

Varela convincingly shows that "All three social scientists are for objectivity and against objectivism" (see p. 44). In so doing, he was bound to talk about reflexivity, because reflexivity as it is used by semantic anthropologists and semasiologists doesn't authorize undisciplined usages of personal elements of individual psychologies in an investigation. It doesn't permit the investigator to write his or her speculations about what the subjects of the investigation are imagined to feel or experience. It requires a different notion of objectivity from the familiar positivist formulation.

In defining what is meant by 'reflexivity', Varela provides a lucid contrast between *reflection* and *reflexivity* (see pp. 62-63 - Note 2):

Reflexivity is to be distinguished from reflection in the following way: to think about *others* is to be *reflective*, to think about one's self is to be *reflexive*. To think about the self, one can focus on the *psychological* dimension, i.e. personality -- the subjective. To think about the self, one may also focus on the *sociological* dimension, i.e. person -- the objective. Reflexivity in the context of the work discussed here is a *sociological* activity concerning itself with the tacit commitment of a person to a framework of meaning which authorizes claims to and achievements of knowledge. To be *reflexive*, then, is to think about one's commitment critically and responsibly: an objective interest in the relation between the person and his or her role of knowledge.

The significance of having a clear idea of what reflexivity amounts to lies in its relation to *knowing* -- to becoming a *knower* in a social scientific discipline. Sklar's work, examined later, grasps this point, but locates the self-thinking in realms of the emotional and psychological. Both Sklar and Drewel minimize (and Drewel virtually ignores) the *self-critical* aspects of the exercise.

Varela's succinct formulation of the problem locates Drewel's problem, which turns around a failure to deal with issues of the knower and the known:

In their initial reactions, Pocock, Williams and Gouldner all deeply and poignantly reflected the impact of Polanyi especially, and Kuhn. Pocock sensitively and daringly exemplified Polanyi's idea of personal knowledge. Using himself as a case in point, he hoped to bring home to anthropologists the meaning of Polanyi's idea: the shift from a mathematical to a semantic ideal of objectivity, *and the shift from impersonal to personal, but not subjective, knowledge* (italics supplied). . . . At the heart of these changes was a new understanding of the human knower. A person knows and does so from a commitment to a tacit ground of assumptions and world view. The implication of this understanding was a new role of the

knower; the discovery of the central importance of the tacit ground for objectivity and the control of prejudice meant that *reflection* is not enough. The knower is now required also to be *reflexive, meta-theoretical, introspective* and *evaluative*. Pocock seemed to have hoped that by informing his colleagues of this by way of personal example, they would see the liberating consequences of Polanyi's idea. *Knowing who one is when one is knowing others puts one in a better position to control for distortion* (see *infra*, p. 59-60).

If one doesn't know who one is when knowing others, anything can happen.

Sklar

This writer cites the original publication in 1976 of *An Exercise in Applied Personal Anthropology* in her essay (Sklar 1991a). Embedded in a paragraph beginning "Theoretical approaches to movement analysis vary" (1991a: 6), however, Kaeppler's (1972) and my work is characterized as "advocat[ing] the use of a linguistic model for dance ethnography", which is dead wrong. Both Kaeppler and I have gone to great lengths publicly to explain that we *don't* use linguistic *models*, but linguistic *analogies* to human movement, including dances (see Kaeppler 1986). A great deal hangs on that difference, as I attempted to reveal in Williams (1983) in a keynote address to graduate ethnologists at U.C.L.A. But, everything to Sklar seems to come back to the fact that "all these women [including Keali'inohomoku] describe people moving" (1991a: 6).

True, the author admits that ". . . we all attend to people moving as our subject", that she characterizes as "a phenomenological foundation" (1991a: 6) which I take to mean little more than the fact that dances are "phenomena" that incorporate people moving -- a description of dances, dancing and the dance that recommends itself poorly to a sophisticated reader and has about as much substance as Marcus and Fischer's description (**see note on p. 9) of the ethnographic enterprise as a "messy, qualitative business" (1986: 22).

The most disappointing feature of Sklar's two essays consists of the fact that she pushes Geertz's admonition to know *how* something is done over the edge; to the way people move as "a key to the way they think and feel and to what they know" (1991a: 6). This is because "Dance ethnography is . . . grounded in the body and the body's experience rather than in texts, artifacts, or abstractions (1991: 6). Not true. Bodily experience is certainly grounded in language, culture and considerable degrees of abstraction. But the real difficulty emerges in a sub-section, *Ethnography and Self-Reflexivity* (1991a: 8-9). Here, the author doesn't reveal the tacit commitments of a person to a sociological framework of meaning which authorizes claims to and achievements of knowledge, as Varela suggests, nor does she understand that to be *reflexive*, is to think about one's commitment critically and responsibly: an

objective interest in the relation between the person and his or her *role of knowledge* (Varela, p. 63 - italics supplied).

Because she had become aware of, thus wanted to confront her own prejudices (an admirable aim), she chose to emphasize the personal feelings of the investigator -- an enterprise that, in our estimation, shouldn't be grafted onto the *subjects* of an investigation. This, in fact, is what *An Exercise in Applied Personal Anthropology* (Williams 1991: 287-321) is all about: a criticism of the self of an investigator who made these kinds of unconscious mistakes, plus the shift to the idea of a personal anthropology and an understanding of self-reflexivity that corrects for such distortions.

At least Sklar, unlike Drewel, discovers that self-reflexivity centrally involves the knower (herself), but the discovery is vitiated by personal confessions, for example, ". . . feeling [herself] melt into a shivery connection with [the Virgin]" and into the somewhat misguided belief that she was feeling what her informants felt. There is a sense in which Sklar's ideas of self-reflexivity are connected with the identification any ethnographer feels towards his or her people, but, as a non-Catholic, Sklar's "shivery connections" couldn't be easily identified with by ethnographers who, like myself, are cradle-Catholics and less prone, perhaps, to such responses. There is another sense in which Sklar indulges in some slightly embarrassing self-revelations -- where the ethnography becomes more a travelogue including her emotional responses than it is an account meant to articulate features of a performed event.

In another article, she says:

Most of us are trained to perform and describe movement articulately and to analyze it in relation to layers of cultural meanings. *In an academic climate that has finally warmed to discussion of the body and bodily experience*, this combination of skills gives us a unique vantage point for expanding that discussion. . . . (1991b: 4 - italics supplied).

"Dance ethnology", she says, "is invigorating to do" (1991b: 4). But why? Primarily because it permits the ethnographer to incorporate his or her personality and feelings into the final product of the investigation. Sklar clearly equates self-reflexivity with the personal and subjective.

The idea of a personal anthropology involves a shift from impersonal to personal, *but not subjective*, knowledge. Sklar seems to advocate a shift from *impersonal to personal*, subjective knowledge -- to the inclusion of elements of the investigator's *personal psychology* into the enterprise. Evidence for this, I think, is to be found in the passage of movement ethnography in the second article, which space prevents reproducing here (see Sklar 1991b: 4-8).

I do not protest against the development of a new and different form of reflexive anthropology, if that is how the recent developments to which Franken alludes can be defined -- specifically to those which have appeared in performance studies and dance ethnology. What I *do* protest against is the carelessness (perhaps ignorance?) that allows this presumably new theoretical approach to be advanced with little or no recognition of already existing usages of reflexivity in anthropology and without clear statements of where it does or doesn't depart from the original formulations. Especially with regard to the anthropology of human movement studies and performance studies there can be no excuse that the original usages aren't available.

Crick wrote of the introduction of these ideas into British social anthropology in a book entitled *Towards a Semantic Anthropology: Language and Meaning*, (1975). *The Exercise in Applied Personal Anthropology* first appeared in 1976 and is well-known to be based on Pocock's 1973 paper. Major articles by Kaeppeler appeared during this time (and still do), which space prevents documenting here. From September, 1979 to June, 1984, the use of reflexivity in anthropology outlined in Crick's book and Pocock's and Williams's papers were taught at New York University. Several Master's theses at N.Y.U. were completed, all using the idea and *JASHM* was published from N.Y.U. then.

From June 1986 to December 1990, graduate students at the University of Sydney in Australia who qualified in the anthropology of dance and human movement studies followed this intellectual tradition, which then included Varela's paper, first published in 1984. Four M.A. theses, one Doctoral dissertation, and several subsequent articles were based on it. From February, 1991, to January, 1993, the ideas were perpetuated in classes on research methods at Moi University in Kenya. At least 20 important papers have appeared -- many of them on dances, sign systems, martial arts, etc. -- using ideas about reflexivity that originated in Pocock's paper in 1973. For those who want to know when the notion of reflexivity appeared in American sociology, consultation of the final chapter in Gouldner (1970) will answer the questions.

If there *is* a new, reflexive anthropology now existing in the United States, I challenge its advocates to explain how it is different from (or the same as) the ideas of reflexivity held by numerous sociologists, social anthropologists, semantic anthropologists and semasiologists for the past 20+ years. It is perplexing that Drewel felt she could write about this feature of performance studies ignoring the work to which I have alluded.

Moreover, there are serious epistemological and ontological problems in ethnographic practices that conflate the notions of 'reflexive' with 'subjective' and/or 'personal'. In his explanation of what comprises a 'personal anthropology', Pocock made these points:

7.2 How is this to be done? Obviously the simplest way is to remind the student that she must make up her own mind about her relation to the facts. What is being described or explained is being posited of human beings. She is a human being. Does she believe the facts as they are described, does the explanation truly satisfy in the sense that she can positively affirm, "Yes, that could be true of me". Or can she with equal conviction insist that she does not believe that human beings could ever believe this, act or be motivated to act like that. Either response to the extent that it is a personal one is the **beginning** of genuine interaction (see p. 19 - bold face type added).

In a field as small as the anthropology of the dance and human movement studies (or, as some prefer to call it, 'dance ethnology', 'dance anthropology' or 'performance studies') it is possible to know what ideas have currency, which ideas are being perpetuated, and what is taking place at theoretical and methodological levels. Drewel's and Sklar's works were singled out because (a) they are both status-holders in the field and (b) they incorporate, between them, radical misunderstandings of what 'reflexivity' consists as it has been defined and used in anthropology and sociology up to now.

While new ideas about reflexivity and solid theoretical advances in reflexive anthropology are always welcome, it is reasonable to inquire of what these presumed advances consist and to subject them to criticism. The mere *use* of the word, 'reflexive' and its forms doesn't satisfy. The significance of theoretical statements, however, lies in the question of whether or not there is a real field of study. Critical dialogue is generally considered to be essential.

Drid Williams

****NOTE:** Marcus and Fischer's approach comprises little more than a shallow, trendy treatment of ethnography that, in the end, has little to contribute to serious researchers, but the book has had extraordinary effects on studies in dance ethnology.

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