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Abstract

This article challenges the neoliberal discourse of “instrumental rationality” that is encroaching on theories of qualitative research, critical reflection, and subjectivity. I return to Foucault’s historical ontology of the *self* and the ancient Athenian precept *care of the self* to show that critical reflection and rationality have never been mutually exclusive. I put the *care of the self* metaphor to empirical use by examining the practical and ethical issues that emerged when I transitioned from a state-sponsored frontline employee working with public housing tenants, to a university researcher investigating public housing tenant participation in a state-sponsored urban redevelopment project. The focus is on my experiences as a practitioner-researcher working within two neoliberalized institutions, while also constructing a *performative* research ethic to mount a challenge against the politics of neoliberal “evidence” in the space between.

Keywords

Foucault, care of the self, action research, critical reflection, reflexivity, neoliberal

Introduction

Only when the Enlightenment’s epistemology is contradicted will there be conceptual space for a moral-political order in distinctively qualitative terms. (Christians, 2011, p. 61)

The debates about the politics of knowledge creation have long histories that span many millennia and discursive doctrines (Erickson, 2011; Tuominen, 2009). Recall the rationalist/empiricist debates of the early modern era; or the objective/subjective debates of the late modern era; or the enduring positivist/relativist dualism of postmodernism (Christians, 2011; St. Pierre, 2011). The prize, to which philosophers and researchers mount struggles in pursuit, is one of the central tenets of academe; the right to place boundaries around what will be constructed as “valid” knowledge (Denzin, 2011; Gutting, 1989; Lincoln & Cannella, 2009). Foucault (1969) showed that it is not by holding knowledge that a social subject can exercise power. Instead, it is through the control of the production of knowledge that power is truly operationalized (Foucault, 1969). Therein resides the politics of “evidence” and “truth.”

These struggles, the politics of placing boundaries around what can be counted as the “truth,” have many institutional and ideological fronts. The technocratic right to set guidelines and ethical standards for “quality” research in research institutions; or the political right to define what

constitutes “evidence-based” policy; or even the philosophical endeavor to call your research “scientific,” are but a few examples (Denzin, 2011; Larner, 2005; Lemke, 2001; Peck, 2010). As St. Pierre (2011, p. 614) argues, science is “a highly contested concept whose meaning and practices shift across philosophical approaches and historical and political moments.” So, although qualitative researchers might expect to find the commitment to (post)-positivism to be an anachronism, the proponents of “evidence-based” research have a new ally in the neoliberalization of state and nongovernment institutions (Christians, 2011; Denzin, 2011; Peck, 2010).

Discursively termed “economic rationalism” during the 1980s in Australia, neoliberal discourses have colonized and distorted “rationality” and thereby rendered invisible the concept’s long and diffuse philosophical history. Peck (2010) recently observed,

The actually existing worlds of neoliberalism are not pristine spaces of market rationality and constitutional order; they are institutionally cluttered places

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marked by experimental but flawed systems of governance, cumulative problems of social fallout, and serial market failure. (pp. 29-30)

In Australia, United States, and United Kingdom, and in pursuit of “economic rationalization,” almost all areas of social life are being brought into the marketplace (Harvey, 1990, 2005). These neoliberalized spaces are quantitative spaces; to be “rational” and “objective” in a neoliberalized space requires you to audit, code, quantify, and commodify (Lemke, 2001; Smith & Hodkinson, 2005; St. Pierre, 2011). This applies as equally to the commodification of academic knowledge within neoliberalized research institutions (Cannella & Lincoln, 2011; Denzin, 2011; Lincoln & Cannella, 2004); or to community knowledge within a neoliberalized nongovernment sector (Larner, 2005); or to business knowledge within a “free-market” corporate sector (Peck, 2010). The ahistorical conception of “rationality” within neoliberal discourses is a form of obscurantism that constructs interpretive knowledge, which is grounded in a commitment to moral and ethical action, as “unscientific” for it lacks “objectivity” (Smith & Hodkinson, 2005). Postone (1997, p. 54) warns we have become, “a society governed by instrumental rationality without any possibility of fundamental critique and transformation.” “Instrumental” is used here to refer to the politics of positioning “scientific”—positivist—inquiry as a necessary instrument for understanding the (social) world.

In the context of the politics of “truth,” the neoliberal turn has political features that are both *unexpected* and others that have come as *no surprise*. The political return, or perhaps continuation, of the positivist/relativist dualism comes as no surprise (Denzin, 2011). While unexpected is how readily neoliberal actors, by deploying a “technocratic instrumental rationality” (Žižek, 2011, p. 187), have marginalized the qualitative research paradigm in light of the now expansive qualitative literatures (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

While this state-sponsored “hegemonic politics of knowledge cannot be allowed” (Denzin, 2011, p. 155), any challenge to the nefarious discourses that have colonized the concept of “rationality”—and neoliberalized public, private, and nongovernment institutions—must be mounted from outside the discursive frame of neoliberalism. In this article, I advocate an ethical and moral research pedagogy, which is both explicitly *antineoliberal* and *performative*, by addressing directly the concepts of “philosophical rationality” and “instrumental rationality.” I historicize “rationality” with ancient philosophical conceptions of subjectivity, morality, and ethics in the interest of conducting more rigorous empirical research.

The analysis is composed of two discrete sections, with the first providing a discussion of an oft-ignored body of Foucault’s (2001b, 2011) work, *care of the self* (*epimeleia-heautu*). I locate the *care of the self* precept within the

reflexive ethics frame not only to accept subjectivity as an important epistemological consideration, but also to show how I also attempted to transform the *self* through my research practice (Carmody, 2001; Christians, 2011; Lincoln & Cannella, 2009). While significant conceptual and theoretical attention has been paid to the issue of reflexivity (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Cunliffe, 2004; Lyons, 2010; van Woerkom, 2010), more empirical work is required to understand the technicalities of using a methodological *technology of the self* to challenge the neoliberal discourse of instrumental rationality (Cannella & Lincoln, 2004a; Cunliffe, 2004, p. 409; Foucault, 2001b; Lincoln & Cannella, 2004a; Myers, 2008; van Woerkom, 2010). The second section provides reflections on some of my consultancy and fieldwork experiences. I draw on critical reflections of the multiple role identities I occupied over a 5-year period while working as a community consultation consultant for a state housing authority, before transitioning to a university researcher investigating the redevelopment of a public housing estate in Southwest Sydney, Australia. These are centered on a series of consultancy events and email exchanges between the author and a private sector research partner in the field, which were further complicated by neoliberalized work environments (Peck, 2010; Peck & Tickell, 2002).

The renewed interest in reflection and reflective inquiry is beginning to challenge the discourse of instrumental rationality that has encroached on theories of critical reflection and subjectivity (Al-Amoudi, 2007; Cunliffe, 2001, 2003; Foucault, 2001b; van Woerkom, 2010). Theorists such as Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), van Woerkom (2010), and Cunliffe (2004, 2009) have shown that critical reflexivity and philosophical concepts of rationalism have never been mutually exclusive (Christians, 2011). Certainly, when I deployed critical reflexivity as a research method in my practitioner-researcher role on a public housing estate, rational thought and ethical action were central to my critical self-reflections. The purpose of critical reflexivity was methodological and “composed of practices of ethical self-governance” (Luxon, 2008, p. 378) to inform my ethical subjectivity and political action throughout my studies. It was not “irrationalism, i.e., disbelief in objective fact . . . [a] desire to assert something for which there is no evidence, or to deny something for which there is good evidence” (Russell, 2008, p. 35).¹ Critical reflexivity was not a form of ego centrism or solipsism, but rather a facilitated process of truth telling about myself that involved public housing tenants and other research partners (Al-Amoudi, 2007; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Luxon, 2008). The purpose of critical reflexivity was to turn rational thought onto the *self* to increase research rigor and this is by no means a new epistemological position (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 46; Foucault, 2011).

The links between rational thought and subjectivity were central to philosophical thought from the classical period, if not before, and continued as a necessary condition of knowledge creation until about the time of René Descartes (1637; also see Foucault, 2001b; Tuominen, 2009). Since Descartes, rationality has been increasingly associated with the confinement of the emotions to quasiresearch roles (van Woerkom, 2010, p. 347), while the “rigorous” work of investigation and hypothesis testing within a neoliberal audit culture has been left to “objective” research processes (Christians, 2011; Cunliffe, 2004; Denzin, 2011; Lincoln & Cannella, 2004; St. Pierre, 2011). At the very least, intuitive insights developed over time at research sites by practitioner-researchers are constructed as subordinate to research paradigms informed by scientism and instrumental rationality (Cannella & Lincoln, 2004; Lincoln & Cannella, 2004). *Care of the self* is a useful construct to further challenge the epistemological bias for a neoliberal discourse of instrumental rationality in the politics of research and practice.

Reflexive Ethics as a Technology of the Self

Marcel Proust’s aphorism, “The real art of discovery consists not in finding new lands, but in seeing with new eyes,” has become a calling card to reflexivity, a metaphor from which to hang a range of epistemic positions constructed around notions of subjectivity and reflexivity (Korthagen & Valsalos, 2010; Lyons, 2010; Serio, 2009). In my view, the real art of discovery consists not in finding new lands, but in seeing with old eyes. I advocate a return the classical period and philosophical questions relating to the passions or emotions to shed light on an old philosophical question, how to *care for the self* (Foucault, 2001b, 2011). If I were to ascribe a maxim to reflexivity from Proust, (1996, p. 217) it would be “the time which we have at our disposal every day is elastic; the passions that we feel expand it, those that we inspire contract it; and habit fills up what remains.”

Foucault’s (2001a, p. 68) latter work on ethics,² predominantly a historical ontology of the *self* starting with ancient Athenian ethical practices, challenges a Cartesian view of rationality by drawing attention to an imagined “Cartesian moment.”³ Foucault (2001b, p. 11) presented a “history of the practices of subjectivity” to show how we have historically constituted ourselves as subjects of knowledge and truth, and thereby showcased the relationship between subjectivity and truth from Socrates to Descartes. By drawing on early philosophical texts from the Platonic dialogues to those of the late Stoics, Foucault (2001b) argued, in the classical Graeco-Roman world, to have access to the truth the subject had to undergo a conversation or transformation of the *self*. The truth was “not given to the subject by a simple act of knowledge founded on his status as subject” (Davidson, 2001, p. xxiv), but

instead to gain access to the truth the social subject was required to *care of the self*.⁴

Foucault argued, in the context of subjectivity, *know yourself*, the famous Delphic prescription, has occupied a privileged place in Western philosophical thought from which *care of the self* should be liberated (Foucault, 2001b; Plato, 1993). For Foucault, *know yourself* “did not prescribe self-knowledge, neither as the basis of morality, nor a part of a relationship with the gods” (Foucault, 2001b, p. 3); it was instead a prescription of prudence. *Care of the self* was, by contrast, a way of thinking about knowledge; a way of acting in the social world; and a way of relating to other social subjects. *Care of the self* is an “attitude towards the self, others, and the world” (Foucault, 2001b, p. 10) and has—rightly so—been largely taken up in contemporary political and social theory as an ontological and epistemological consideration (Bardon & Josserand, 2011; Grint, 2007; McMurray, Pullen, & Rhodes, 2011; Myers, 2008). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 46) argue,

[f]ar from encouraging narcissism and solipsism, epistemic reflexivity invites intellectuals to recognize and to work to neutralize the specific determinisms to which their innermost thoughts are subjected and it informs a concept of the craft of research designed to strengthen its epistemological moorings . . . For it allows us to historicise reason without dissolving it, to found a *historicist rationalism* . . . reason with relativity. (p. 47)

My current reflexive project is more modest than the ontological and epistemological theorizing of Foucault’s ethics of the *self*. I draw on the ontological and epistemological importance of reflexivity, but use the *care of the self* precept as a methodological metaphor of reflexive practice⁵ (Luxon, 2008). However, while Foucault’s 1982 lecture series at the Collège de France initially roused interest in his “project of the self”—a philosophical project furthering Nietzsche’s (1887) “genealogy of morals” (Bardon & Josserand, 2011)—serious epistemological critique inevitably followed.

Habermas’ (1990) critique exemplifies claims Foucault provides both an *outré*-relativism and moral nihilism. Newton (1998, p. 420) suggested Foucauldian ethics provided a psychologization of the *self* focused on “securing a consistent narrative of the self” (Bardon & Josserand, 2011, p. 499). Myers (2008, p. 127) “scepticism toward views that hold out the *care of the self* as a particularly promising strategy for re-shaping the power relations Foucault so deftly theorised.” warns that the emotions and passions can direct the practitioner-researcher toward ambivalence and avoidance, as well as toward challenging established power relationships (also see Morrell, 2007).

Therefore *care of the self*, as deployed in this article, should not be taken in the context of Graeco-Roman subjectivities,⁶ neither as a tool for addressing the disciplining effects political sites infer on human collectives nor as a narcissistic narrative of the *self* (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Cunliffe, 2004, 2009; Luxon, 2008). I am concerned with using *care of the self* as a research method in *practice* that has a means, in subjective moral action, and an end, in leading to more rigorous empirical research.

In ancient Athens, *care of the self* was encumbered and associated with ones will to have power over others (Nietzsche, 1887). Foucault argues, a social subject cannot exercise power over others (in his example political power), or at least cannot do it well, if one is not concerned about the *self*. A social subject cannot turn privilege, the privilege status of being a practitioner-researcher, into political action without reflecting on the very mechanics required to realize this power and the limitations and disciplining effects of ones knowledge (*connaissance*)⁷ (Foucault, 1969; Lincoln & Cannella, 2009).

This way of theorizing research “still requires us to separate ourselves from reality and think about situations objectively, that is, *thinking about reality*” (Cunliffe, 2004, p. 409). Nonetheless, it is different from approaches that are based on instrumental rationality that work to remove the person and subjectivity from the research site. Reintroducing subjectivity to rational inquiry has led more recently to a return to the epistemological theorizing of the morality of our reflexive actions (Luxon, 2008; Robinson, 2003; van Woerkom, 2010). When considering rationalism and morality, 18th Century philosopher David Hume (2001) is particularly useful for his work was influential to both logical positivism and analytic philosophy. Hume is often thought of as a “rationalist” in almost all areas of his philosophical thought, except perhaps, moral philosophy. In his *Treaties of human nature*, Hume (2001) argued that the rational person is not the same as the moral person.

Researchers of many persuasions are trained to use inductive and deductive reasoning in pursuit of knowledge about a particular research question (van Woerkom, 2010). A self-reflexive practitioner-researcher is no less “rational” in their approach to research than an “objective” logical positivist. Both researchers use rationality to answer a research problem, though admittedly through divergent research methodologies. The difference between these two researchers is not in their capacity for reason, but in the methodological focus of their rational thought and an acknowledgment of the “sentiment” of their actions within the qualitative research paradigm (Hume, 2001). For Hume (2001), a highly rational person may not be a moral person and vice versa; it is the “sentiment” of their actions that determines their morality.

Hume (2001) rejected the ideas of the so-called “selfish schools,” including Bernard Mandeville (1711) who believed that morality is an illusion and Thomas Hobbes (1650) who believed that morality is founded on self-interest. For Hume (2001, p. 297), our “sentiments” motivate us toward moral action, and he famously stated that “reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.” By passions, Hume means what in contemporary psychology⁸ might be called the emotions; the feeling of contempt or admiration toward an action. Foucault (1996), expanding the cultural frame, was more poetic and asked,

What is Passion? . . . Passion arrives like that, a state that is always mobile, but never moves toward a given point. There are strong and weak moments, moments when it becomes incandescent. It floats, it evens out. It is a kind of unstable time that is pursued for obscure reasons, perhaps through inertia. In the extreme, it tries to maintain itself and to disappear. Passion gives itself all the conditions necessary to continue, and, at the same time, it destroys itself. In a state of Passion one is not blind. One is simply not oneself. To be oneself no longer makes sense. (p. 313)

For Hume (2001) and Foucault (2001b), reason is inert without the passions. Reason alone can never motivate social subjects toward moral action; the passions or emotions motivate us but “benevolence” cannot be reduced to self-interest. Therefore, practitioner-researchers might be motivated by our own gratification in the first instance (to secure a research grant), but these emotions are only the preconditions for “benevolence” (Hume, 2001). Reason is not behind the morality of our actions. Using this epistemic frame, we can critically reflect on the “emotion” of working with research subjects, as coresearchers, to show how this might motivate us toward subjective moral action. The *care of the self* metaphor is a productive way of conceptualizing this practice. While I problematize providing normative models of critical reflexivity below, at this point I will offer a broad definition of the methodological *technology of the self* put forward in this article. I have defined it in two parts: (a) *Know thyself*; (b) *I know that I know nothing*⁹ (Cross & Woolley, 1989; Foucault, 2001b; Plato, 1993).

Know thyself is a call on the practitioner-researcher for prudence within the research site and in association with social subjects.

I know that I know nothing is an epistemological pursuit of questioning the *self* about the limits of your knowledge (*connaissance*), the confines of your discipline and the research site, and the disciplining effects of your academy or profession.

Know Thyself: I Know That I Know Nothing

I deployed the *care of the self* metaphor to investigate “moments of crisis” (Fairclough, 2003) and to find my own subjective and ethical way. My ethical horizon was embedded within the relationships I held at the research site and the dynamics of these relationships contributed to my motivation for ethical action (Luxon, 2008, pp. 383-398). However, by undertaking this process of self-examination I unsettled the norms and values operating at the neoliberalized research site. Especially within the partner institutions I operated within and between, by exposing how these organizations subjugated tenants and researchers. *Caring for the self* made visible the processes of subjectivation, what

Foucault would call “critique”—both a political and ethical attitude that Foucault calls “the art of not being governed.” Thus, the ethics of passion involve simultaneously an art of not being moral (which does not make Foucault either immoral or amoral) and an art of not being governed (which does not make Foucault either apolitical or an anarchist). It amounts to a kind of unique experimentation in ethics and in life where, with the help of others, one loses oneself in modes of existence . . . that enable us to confront the line of the Outside, delivering us over to the passions and pleasures of new “possibilities of life.” (Robinson, 2003, p. 123)

When I engaged in participatory research on the public housing estate, it involved embedded exposure to social subjects within the research site and a range of emotional, physiological, and cognitive responses to this embedded period manifested in “aha moments” (Cunliffe, 2004). The first “aha moment” occurred while I was a consultant for the state housing authority managing a series of community consultations as part of the public housing estate redevelopment.

The state housing authority had announced their state’s first public housing estate redevelopment by public-private partnership (PPP) in December 2004 and was now managing the development project (Project) while selecting a private sector “partner.” The Project involves a 30-year contract between the state government and a private-sector consortium company managed under a performance based fee structure (NSW Department of Housing, 2004). In 2004, the 81-hectare estate had a population of around 3,300 people with 833 publicly owned dwellings. The PPP contract covers the delivery of physical infrastructure and a suite of social objectives, including tenancy management, “community building” and “community consultation.” Over the contract term, the net housing stock across the estate will be increased from about 950 to over 2,330 dwellings. A non-profit housing manager, under contract to the private sector “partner,” is to manage the public tenancies for 30 years (Rogers, 2010a).

By July 2006, I had been working as a consultant for the state housing authority for over a year on a number of community consultation projects. In a self-reflexive research project focused on my consultancy work, a partnership between the university and the state housing authority, I began to question *myself* about the limits of my knowledge and the disciplining effects of my consultancy profession and host organization (Foucault, 2001b, 2011). With tenants as coresearchers, I attempted to show how these limitations and disciplining effects had informed and shaped my consultation practice. During this time, tenants and other residents had become increasingly concerned about the redevelopment project, as key milestones within the PPP procurement schedule were not realized. Two typical comments from tenants included

to reduce stress, the project has to speed up the process, and the community should be kept informed all the times.

It just seems to be going on, and on, and on. What we knew then is exactly what we know now. (Rogers, 2006, p. 58)

In response to these concerns, the state housing authority created a colorful timeline brochure that, due to the unpredictability of the PPP bidding processes, did not contain any dates. The *timeless* timeline became a discursive tool to reduce tenant concerns and was issued to tenants in June 2006 through the community consultations I was delivering. In my work role and armed with the *timeless* timeline, I set out to appease workshop after workshop of public housing tenants who held concerns about the protracted timing of the PPP. But no amount of discursive maneuvering could have challenged the raw and powerful questioning tenants directed toward me in these community consultations. When I facilitated these sessions, armed with a redevelopment factsheet and a *timeless* timeline ready for delivery, tenants had their own agenda and questioned me and other staff directly and with authority. The questions below were typical of their challenges:

Will the private company talk and listen to the community?

Why can’t I talk to the private company?

When will I see the Master Plan?

When will I have to move?

What guarantee do we have that the private company will listen to the community’s views? (Rogers, 2006, p. 58)

I responded to questions about the private-sector contractor by informing tenants that the successful private-sector contractor would be required, by contract, to take tenants’ views onboard (Rogers, 2006, p. 58). I managed the question and answer sessions in community consultations by referring back to the briefing sessions provided by the

state housing authority. But my tenant coresearchers had become the ethical and moral thorn in my side¹⁰ (Foucault, 2001b; Plato, 1993). In our parallel research space they problematized my consultancy work and “aha,” they showed me the power of neoliberalized spaces (Peck & Tickell, 2002). What tenants showed me was in these spaces power is most effective when it is hidden from view behind our daily work roles; we self-regulate our actions toward ends that we may not conceive and with which we may not agree (Foucault, 1969; Lemke, 2001; Peck, 2010).

For practitioner-researchers who operate within the space between research and practice, these “aha moments” constitute the realities of each research project in spontaneous and intuitive ways. Each study is unique and creative and our “socially shared moments” are not easy to anticipate or plan (Cunliffe, 2004, p. 415). Even within similar qualitative research spaces or geographic locations, our actions, conversations and interactions with social subjects will always present unique peculiarities that offer new insights (Cunliffe, 2004). It is important for researcher-practitioners to engage with these “aha moments” otherwise “critical reflexivity becomes just another technique rather than a philosophy-driven practice in which we take responsibility for creating our social and organizational realities” (Cunliffe, 2004, pp. 408-409).

Certainly this commitment to *care of the self* challenges the tradition of analytic philosophy and logic that informs a neoliberal instrumental rationality. It criticizes positivist paradigms for their claims to truth and their failure to acknowledge underlying epistemological assumptions (Foucault, 1994; Lincoln & Cannella, 2004; van Woerkom, 2010, p. 344). I found that this intuitive or *in-the-moment* knowledge was hard to describe and justify, especially “rationally” within the dominant “evidence-based” paradigm, to research partners (Denzin, 2011; Korthagen, 2005). I caught myself devising instrumentally “rational” arguments for my actions and research after the consultation and research processes, while I was writing up the studies (van Woerkom, 2010, p. 349). Indeed, practitioner-researchers are often obligated to make retrospective justifications and instrumental rationalizations of the research process to suit the epistemic position of the audience or funding body (Cannella & Lincoln, 2011; van Woerkom, 2010), and these can rule out the role of intuitive insights. A technocratic and instrumental rationality means neoliberalized spaces are especially adverse to research findings informed by participatory methodologies and intuitive knowledge (Denzin, 2011; Peck, 2010; Ratcliff, Wood, & Higginson, 2010).

van Woerkom (2010) argues researchers or practitioners, who are located in the field, base their actions on intuitions that have developed over a long period of time through exposure to the research site. Therefore, practitioner-researchers’ long-term experience at the research site possibly creates intuitive practitioners-researchers, and this

might be a starting point from which to develop a reflexive ethical pedagogy (van Woerkom, 2010).

Reflex interaction refers to the instantaneous, unself-conscious, reacting in-the-moment dialogue and action that characterizes much of our experience. We respond to other people on the basis of instinct, habit, and/or memory (reflex), and in doing so, we draw intuitively on our tacit knowing and on who we are. (Cunliffe, 2004, p. 410; drawing on the work of Polanyi, 1996)

All too often, instrumental rationality and the disciplining effects of knowledge (*connaissance*) create a power dynamic impervious to the intuitive practitioner-researcher. These devalue our “aha moments” and limit our access to the knowledge (*savoir*)¹¹ held by the social subjects with whom we seek to develop research alliances at the research site (Foucault, 1986). Practitioner-researchers should feel uncomfortable at the research site; what gives us the right as researchers, in my case with no experience of being a public housing tenant, to define research problems or to set research agendas? (Cannella & Lincoln, 2007) I can only bring research skills and knowledge (*connaissance*) that are, although informed by extended engagement at the research site and guided by formal research qualifications, constrained by my subjectivity and the disciplining affects of my academy and profession (Foucault, 1969).

Care of the self must therefore give access to knowledge about good research governance, participant informed research questions or alternative forms of research and practice. This methodological *technology of the self* asks the question: what is it about myself I must reflect on to be better able to conduct research in this geographical location and with these social subjects?

By turning rational thought onto the *self* as a reflexive ethical pursuit, the practitioner-researchers may find not only their own voice but also the voice of others and voices silenced by our research projects and findings (Beauregard, 1993; Cunliffe, 2004). Practitioner-researchers cannot turn privilege—our privileged status as practitioner-researchers—into political action without reflecting on the very mechanics required to realize this power and the limitations and disciplining effects of our knowledge (*connaissance*; Foucault, 2001b, p. 38).

This brings into focus an important, albeit subtle, difference between my contemporary *care of the self* metaphor and other research methods conceived of as reflexive exercise. In Burnier’s (2006, p. 412) autoethnography for instance, written expressions—memoir, personal narrative, personal criticism, autobiography, autoethnography—are conceived of as reflexive struggle. This view positions autoethnography as an endeavor focused on, to some extent, creative writing that engages with philosophy and what

Newton (1998) has termed the “psychologicalization of the self.” By contrast, my *care of the self* metaphor is a philosophical endeavor that might manifest in writing creatively, as in this article, or equally the reflections of the *self* might remain internal to the researcher. There is a difference here between the *self* as narrative and the *self* as subject, a difference perhaps only in methodological weight (Burnier, 2006; Foucault, 2001a, 2011). Nonetheless, my metaphor of ethical self-governance is explicitly directed toward the better design and management of research projects, “the idea that one must put a technology of the self to work in order to have access to the truth” (Foucault, 2001b, pp. 46-47).

Foucault (2001b, p. 38) asks whether disciplines in their own terms, and therefore based on the “conditions of possibility” that define the discipline or body of knowledge (*connaissance*), can pose questions about the relations between subject and truth. Like Foucault, I do not seek to answer this question, but instead pose it as a point of reflection for practitioner-researchers. It is an epistemological question that makes providing typologies or models of reflexive ethics, located within any research discipline, problematic. Therefore, I have purposely avoided constructs that are normative or categorical—such as typological models borrowed from psychoanalysis—as researchers can construct these models within an epistemology of instrumental rationality that will subjugate reflexivity. In light of this, the remainder of this article presents one final *technology of the self* to highlight how I drew on intuitive insights from the study site, questioned the *self* about the limits of my knowledge (*connaissance*) and examined the disciplining effects of my neoliberalized academy and profession.

Questioning the Self as a Practitioner-Researcher

I conducted two research projects on the estate between 2006-2010, both investigating public housing tenant participation. The first study included the state housing authority as a research partner in an insider research project conducted in 2006 (Braithwaite, Cockwell, O’Neill, & Rebane, 2007; Taylor, 2011). The second study included the private-sector company as an informal research partner in an action research project conducted between 2007 and 2010 (Humphrey, 2007). Public housing tenants were constructed as coresearchers through participatory research methodologies in both studies (Coghlan & Holian, 2001; Darcy & Gwyther, 2011; Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

Like Fine, Denzin, and Lincoln (1994), Fine and Weis (1998), and others (Dimitriadis, 2001; Humphrey, 2007) have shown, transitioning from a practitioner to a researcher, through the important ethical, moral, and social spaces between, is fraught with hazards (Lefebvre, 1991; Marinetto, 2003). So following Virillio (2008, pp. 28-29), I set out in

search of the “intervals,” to discover “the *space between* (*l’entredeux*) . . . [and to] contemplate my environment in all its facets, reality had become abruptly kaleidoscopic.” Transitions through these spaces are certainly not marked by a chronological moment, and in my case it was a slow slide into unknown territory. A drifting between practitioner subjectivity constructed through my consultancy contracts and work roles with the state housing authority, and researcher subjectivity constructed by human geography and the academy (Christians, 2011; Cunliffe, 2004; Miehl & Moffatt, 2000; van Woerkom, 2010). The research/practice site was tricky because it was changing (Tuhiwai Smith, 2005); it was tricky because of my multiple role identities and the space between. It was impossible to separate these roles into demarcated employment, research or social roles in the field. Therefore, being a practitioner-researcher presented significant challenges, but it also provided unique empirical insights.

Between 2005 and 2007, I designed and facilitated community consultation programs with public housing tenants as a consultant to the state while also conducting an insider research study. Then, from 2007 to 2010 I attended formal public housing tenant group meetings and was assisting public housing tenants to self-organize, as part of my doctoral action research study. I also participated informally in community life during this time by attending street meetings and barbecues, and by dropping into the knitting group for a coffee or visiting local residents in their homes for a chat. Occupying these multiple role identities meant I was constructed as colleague, academic, friend or foe, or any combination of these, at different moments in time and in the context of different social settings (Caldwell, 2007; Dimitriadis, 2001; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

Both the capacity for action research to generate role conflicts and the inability of formal ethics reviews to deal with these issues are well documented (Cannella & Lincoln, 2004; Carmody, 2001; Dentith, Measor, & O’Malley, 2009; Lincoln & Cannella, 2004, 2009). Indeed, my research projects showcase many examples. In this section, however, I recount only two vignettes that exemplify the way a reflexive methodological *technology of the self* can be deployed to evaluate the research site and study. Public housing tenants continued to be the moral thorn in my side (Foucault, 2001b; Plato, 1993) by problematizing my work and research tasks, while my relationships with former colleagues from the state housing authority, who were now employed with the private-sector company, began to crumble.

The Space Between

The ground was shifting and I started to slide between identity roles. In my academic role, conducting research as an insider, I began to critically reflect on the redevelopment project and the information I was providing tenants. In my

consultancy role, I continued to develop and deliver workshops for the state housing authority. In the space between these life-worlds I went about my daily work and research functions on the Estate known to colleagues and tenants as a practitioner-researcher (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Dimitriadis, 2001).

However, this quickly changed with the completion of the first study and the delivery of my final confidential report to the public-sector research partner. The report offered, in part, critical reflections of my consultation practice and did not served me well within my consultancy role. The research questions had been developed in the field through my interactions with public housing tenants, and the report called into question aspects of the PPP as well as the work of the community consultation team. Although I remained a community consultation practitioner under contract to the state, I had also become a researcher insofar as I was undertaking an insider research project through a university. I resolved to critically reflect on the subjective morality of my actions within this bifurcation of social roles and I asked myself *how can I rationalize and bring these two very different life-worlds together?*

By attending to the *self* as a researcher, I had found voices silenced by my actions as a practitioner (Beauregard, 1993; Cunliffe, 2004; Lincoln & Cannella, 2004). However, on discovering this, I was not finally liberated from the shackles of my own naivety. Instead, I was exposed to a complex diffusion of power, action, and resistance operating within the neoliberalized research site (Foucault, 1997; Peck, 2010). I found no single social subject or entity is ever solely responsible for action or inaction. It was only by taking note of my different subject positions, as a researcher and as a practitioner, and the tasks required of these roles, that a more nuanced picture of the subtle ways in which social subjects are drawn into various technologies of power became clearer (Foucault, 1997). As a practitioner, I had been working toward an end to which I was not aware and to which I did not agree. The *care of the self* metaphor helped me work through the paradox that I had unwittingly become an intricate social actor to a neoliberal cause I could not condone.

Like me, another staff member, Mary,¹² had also engaged in critical reflection of her community consultation actions within the community consultation team in 2006 in another university partnership project. By late 2006, Mary had also challenged many of the subjugating effects of her practitioner role (Foucault, 1997). We can use this as a subjectivity baseline, a *moment* from which to track the changes in our researcher/practitioner subjectivities over time. In late 2006, we were both employees of the state and university researchers, and roughly occupied a similar subjectivity constructed from colocating at the research site practitioner-researchers.

Therefore, the job roles that we occupied after late 2006 become important. From early 2007, I no longer undertook

contract work for the state housing authority. Instead, I began my action research study as a university researcher, without any formal relationship to the state housing authority or the private-sector company. By contrast, from early 2007, Mary no longer undertook research functions and continued working on the redevelopment project before securing full-time employment with the private-sector company undertaking the PPP. In retrospect, it seems the clue was in the title for it is no coincidence that we have ascribed the term discipline—in my case the discipline of human geography—to describe the way a body of knowledge has a disciplining effect on how we think about social subjects, define social space or how we seek to acquire knowledge (Burchell, Gordon, & Miller, 1991). So too, professions have disciplining effects and becoming a private-sector employee in a neoliberalized space would also come to shape Mary's subjectivity in the redevelopment project.

I developed a doctoral research proposal to investigate how the actions of public- and private-sector employees, through the PPP contract, were being shaped by neoliberal ideology and internationally mobile discourses of urban and social pathology. The methodology included a semiautobiographical account of the 5-year study to date, and participant observations of current project staff from within the company. I planned to take up an office space within the private-sector company to observe their daily operations. This included attending various public meetings and events where tenants or private-sector employees were present. I kept a research diary¹³ to record the outcomes of these meetings and events (Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

Throughout 2007, my university research office and the private-sector company attempted to negotiate and finalize a research agreement between the two parties. Mary understood the study, the proposed methodology and was very supportive, even advocating for my proposed study at a senior level within the private-sector company. However, no research agreement was ever signed between the private-sector company and the university, and the action research project continued with public housing tenants as core-researchers. In any case, Mary provided support and was pivotal to me securing access to private-sector contractor and subcontractor staff for interviews in 2009 and, despite no formal research agreement, providing me with an office space for 2 days per week within the community center, located on the Estate, for the term of my fieldwork.

In the first instance, *care of the self* directed me to analyze the behind-the-scenes action by reflecting on the mechanics of researching a sensitive topic, the negotiation of relationships and the politics of possible negative findings (Carmody, 2001, p. 177). Then, in March 2010, the "community relations" department within the private-sector company requested a research report for my study on behalf of Mary. A community relationships manager emailed,

Hi Dallas,

Hope all is going well . . . Anyway, just seeing if you've got anything to report on your work, I'll be doing my monthly report soon. Can you also cc me in on any correspondence with Mary regarding your PhD? As I'll be back on board four days a week shortly, so will be the contact for all research projects.

While there was no research agreement between the university and the private-sector company, I had informally agreed to give Mary a discussion paper for the study in late 2009. The discussions with Mary and my commitment to provide a discussion paper were framed within the negotiations that had taken place in late 2008 between the university, and the private-sector company such that, had a research agreement been signed, it would have stated,

The candidate will produce a report of the findings [report name removed] and/or other aspects of the study as deemed beneficial by [the private-sector company] co-researchers. While the exact study outputs will require further negotiation between the candidate and [the private-sector company], these outputs may include: writing up the results in a format that is most beneficial to [the private-sector company] for future projects; co-presenting the results at academic conferences; or the co-publication of findings in industry or academic journals. (Unsigned research agreement)

I felt, given the informal support given to the study by Mary, that I would provide a discussion paper for review and comment in early 2010. Additionally, this fitted well with the ethos of action research and my original research plan of collaborative learning. Therefore, I responded by email, moving further toward the subject position of a "researcher."

I've got a Discussion Paper for [the private-sector company] . . . Then the next step will be to meet with Mary to discuss the paper—after Mary has read it of course—so we can decide on the next steps for the paper for [the private-sector company]. My proposal at this point in time is to send the paper to Mary first for review and thoughts. This of course will be a confidential [private-sector company] document.

This discussion paper had clear aims:

This discussion paper sets out the emerging themes from the University of Western Sydney (UWS) tenant participation study . . . This confidential discussion

paper has been prepared to facilitate discussion between the researcher and [the private-sector company] about emerging themes from the study . . . An important part of the PhD research methodology includes "reporting" emerging themes back to "research participants" for verification, discussion and if applicable review of current practice . . . The emerging themes are presented as a starting point for discussion. As noted above, some of the themes are retrospective observations and may have more relevance to future projects, however some might be considered within the context of the current project. (Rogers, 2010b, p. 3)

The report concluded, in general terms:

while participation *practice* [on the Estate] was increasingly linked to contractual arrangements between [the private-sector company] and [the state housing authority], residents were generally positive about the redevelopment project . . . [the private-sector company] has been working closely with tenants to implement a complex set of community development and partnership projects to meet the requirements of the [contract]. (Rogers, 2010b, p. 3)

In terms of improvements to current service, the report

explore[d] the complexity of involving tenants in urban renewal projects with public and private stakeholders and set out some conceptual and practical issues that should be addressed. (Rogers, 2010b, p. 3)

As noted above, *care of the self* is about good research governance and alternative forms of research and practice, and I had decided to "own up" to the political nature of my research and to draw on my "aha moments"—insights developed by working closely with tenants—when I prepared the 2010 discussion paper. The redevelopment project was now under private-sector management and was an ideological and moral space in which I had played an active part, both in constructing and now resisting, through numerous work/research roles (Foucault, 2001a; Peck, 2010). Foucault (1969) rejects the idea of a self-governing subject, and I used the construct of power/knowledge to help me understand the limits and arbitrariness of knowledge creation in this PPP: the "limits, exclusions and constraints" placed on the production of knowledge, and the relationship between knowledge creation and power.

However, it seems that Mary and I had become more ideologically dislocated from each other than I had allowed myself to realize over the passing 3 years. I was no longer an insider-outsider, researcher-practitioner, but an outsider researcher in a neoliberalized space (Peck & Tickell, 2002).

Further, my colleague was no longer connected to the academy, but was a senior employee of a private-sector company. The initial response by Mary to the 2010 Discussion Paper was a short email questioning the methodology and objectivity of the study. The email stated, “You say that this is PAR [Participatory Action Research] but it does not reflect our understanding at all. Our voice is not heard . . .” and it concluded with the following questions:

Do you feel that you understand the constraints of both [the state housing authority] and [the private sector company]?

When can we get together? When are you expecting to publish?

We met soon after and discussed the study at length. We went over the discussion paper and reflected on the PPP. However, it seemed that our diverse subjectivities were preventing us from seeing each other’s assessment of tenant participation in the project. I was being asked to “acknowledge constraints” and to “incorporate understandings of triple bottom line processes” into my analysis, while the report was pointing to these processes as some of the key constituents that led to the subjugation of public housing tenants (email communication). However, I conceded that the action research processes with the private-sector contractor and subcontractors had been fraught and had failed—although the action research process with tenants had been successful. We had not engaged in regular cycles of reflection and review, and we had not changed practice. Following this meeting, we both slid back into the space *between* research and practice, and the staff member emailed:

Dear Dallas,

A bit of self-reflection from me. I’d like to acknowledge that I’m also on a learning journey with all this. I know that I got a bit intoxicated at the idea of you opening up to other possibilities but, to be really honest, I know that I have to do likewise. I’m an idealist at the best of times and can be blinkered by my unbridled positivity . . . Thanks for the opportunity of exploring this space with you.

On reflection, we attempted to chain together two different subjective *habitus* experiences—private-sector and academia—by means of an action research project that was purposely designed to challenge the subjugating effects of the market and a PPP (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). We underestimated the power of the neoliberalized spaces within which we were operating. It seems that the power and subjugating effects of these neoliberalized spaces are even more effective when they are hidden from view behind the daily tasks undertaken by different social subjects (Foucault, 1994).

Conclusion

The neoliberalization of state and nongovernment institutions is being facilitated by a discourse of instrumental rationality that subverts the extensive philosophical history of rationalism. Constructing theories of critical reflection within such discourses renders important intuitive insights—“aha moments”—especially those available to “engaged” practitioner-researchers in the field, invisible. These intuitive insights can be used methodologically, and as part of a reflexive ethical pedagogy, to constitute a practice of ethical self-governance within critical qualitative research paradigms. Far from encouraging egocentrism or solipsism, facilitating a process of truth telling about the *self* can reintroduce rational thought to theories of critical reflexivity with the aim of increasing research rigor. In the vignettes outlined in this article, I undertook this process of critical self-reflexivity by using the *care of the self* precept as a metaphorical *technology of the self*.

Care of the self was a way of thinking about the politics of knowledge creation that focused my attention on how I was acting at the research and practice site, and how this shaped the way I related to other social subjects. It pointed to the limitations of my knowledge (*connaissance*), and it unsettled and exposed—but certainly did not rebalanced—the power structures operating at the neoliberalized research site. *Care of the self* was deployed to redraw my ethical horizon, and it can be a productive way of rigorously analyzing how we find our own subjective and ethical way in the field, while undertaking critical qualitative research.

In my studies, I found that normative models of research practice and ethical review, that are based on a technocratic instrumental rationality, provided little scope for challenging the neoliberal power structures operating at the research-practice site. Participatory research methodologies were better suited to this task. *Care of the self*, however, is no panacea. Instead, it allows the researcher to “own up” to the problems we experience while constructing an ethical subjectivity in the field, when we occupy more than one social role. While we must continue to educate *ourselves* about our own, and others, unique vantage points, we must also accept the norms that compose these vantage points will also discipline and regulate our actions and knowledge.

The analysis demonstrates that the way we make use of individual agency is complicated by the multiple role identities we find ourselves located within, so we should look for the space between. While operating between two neoliberalized institutional spaces, in the space between I created a *performative* research ethic to mount a challenge against the politics of evidence within neoliberalized institutions. The empirical examples bring to the surface, in subtle ways, the subjugating effects of these social and institutional sites. Part of Foucault’s ethics of the self is located in a move to not be oneself, or to lose oneself, at these moments of crisis; when we are most constrained and subjugated by knowledge

(*connaissance*). By turning a *technology of the self* onto our research and practice roles, to find the space between, we will no doubt unsettle the *self* and the established order. Therefore, it will be both uncomfortable and an unfulfilled project in practice. Nonetheless, it is a useful and necessary project as researchers should not exercise power over others, without reflecting on the very mechanics required to realize this power and the limitations and disciplining effects of one's knowledge (*connaissance*).

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Notes

1. This is a somewhat misappropriated use of Bertrand Russell's citation. Russell argues the obfuscations of philosophers have blurred the questions surrounding skepticism and rationalism. He argues psycho-analysis shows our emotions and passions are often contrary to "fact," "the theoretical part of rationality, then, will consist in basing our beliefs as regards matters of fact on evidence rather than on wishes, prejudices, or traditions" (Russell, 2008, p. 35).
2. Foucault's (2001a) work generally follows two analytical trajectories; a formal ontology of truth and a historical ontology of ourselves.
3. Foucault uses the term the *Cartesian moment* to highlight not a chronological moment in time, but instead, a moment over time in the history of thought. Foucault remarks, "It seemed to me that modern philosophy—for reasons which I tried to identify in what I called, as a bit of a joke although it is not funny, the "Cartesian moment"—was led to put all the emphasis on the *gnothi seauton* and so to forget, leave in the dark, and to marginalize somewhat, this question of the *care of the self*" Foucault (2001a, p. 68).
4. Through this exposition, Foucault was interested in two ancient precepts: *care of the self (epimeleia heautou)* and *know yourself (gnothi seauton)*.
5. Nancy Luxon (2008) provides an ontological and epistemological theorization of Foucault's *care of the self* precept that is useful in deploying the precept as a practice of self-governance.
6. The quest for transformation or salvation of the classical *soul* through the pursuit of knowledge brings to the surface important differences between contemporary and Graeco-Roman subjectivities.
7. Knowledge (*connaissance*)—is a particular corpus of knowledge, a particular demarcation of knowledge on a given topic or within a given discipline. "By [*connaissance*] I mean the relation of the subject to the object and the formal rules that govern it" (Foucault, 1969, p. 16).
8. While psychology comes from the Greek words *psukhe* (soul) and *logos* (theory or account), contemporary understandings of psychology focus on the study of the mind and not the classical *soul*.
9. *I know that I know nothing* is, of course, the famous Socratic idiom from the *Apology* (Plato, 1993).
10. I have used the famous gadfly metaphor here; borrowed from Socrates (Plato, 1993).
11. Knowledge (*saviour*)—is knowledge in general, the totality of all *connaissance*. "[*Saviour*] refers to the conditions that are necessary in a particular period for this or that type of object to be given to [*connaissance*] and for this or that enunciation to be formulated" (Foucault, 1969, p. 16).
12. Not the participant's name.
13. I had informed consent from the private-sector employees to participate in the study and to record notes in a research diary.

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Bio

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