

'Faking' close-up research?: the risks of strategic deception in a post-truth world

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The theme of HECU10 reflects, at least in part, current concerns about the rise of 'fake news' and challenges to the role of expert knowledge. However, the notion of trustworthiness cuts both ways. While the world of academe displays a collective sense of exasperation at declining levels of trust in professional expertise and empirical evidence, how confident can wider society be that academic research is not itself a part of the 'fake news' problem?

Academic fraud tends to be thought of in dramatic, headline-grabbing terms. The acronym 'FFP' – Falsification, Fabrication and Plagiarism – is repeatedly intoned in discussions about research misconduct in the hard sciences. These academic crimes attract a lot of attention because they are clear-cut instances of a lack of academic integrity. In reality there are considerably more subtle, ethically borderline practices that can go almost completely under the radar. Citing sources without reading them, or understanding them properly, is a commonplace enough example. Perhaps fewer of us have time to read anything anymore. Besides, who hasn't cut corners occasionally or relied simply on an abstract?

Close-up, qualitative work, often of an ethnographic nature, makes few (if any) claims to generalizability and, in a low status academic field such as education, rarely gets much public attention. Yet, the nature of this research raises a wide range of ethical issues that are extremely complex to deal with such as insiderism, negotiating the pitfalls of organisational politics, and an often wafer-thin dividing line between researcher and participant (or none at all in self-ethnography). The extent to which we are engaging authentically or merely 'doing rapport', 'faking friendship', 'faking solidarity', or even faking identity online now are relevant for any close-up researcher (see e.g. Duncombe and Jessop, 2002). Close-up research requires personal contact between the researcher and the participant and so giving an appearance of sincerity can be regarded as a work-related, investigatory skill (Alvesson, 2003). These are important ethical issues, but it is not my purpose in this think piece to focus solely on them. Others have done so already in greater depth than I can hope to cover here.

Instead I wish to raise a broader question around 'faking'. This is the increasing tendency, as I see it, for the philosophy and language of close-up qualitative research – criticality, reflexivity, statements of positionality, discussions of insiderism, and so on – to be the subject of a strategic deception. Here I am mainly, although not exclusively, thinking of doctoral students and referring to the way in which some researchers are adopting the lexicon of close-up qualitative research in a compliant, mechanical and ultimately inauthentic way. Do any of these practices look at all familiar to you?

- The production of 'ready-to-wear' positionality statements, based on self-stereotyping, relying almost wholly on identity categories that lead to what Cousin (2010:9) has called 'positionality piety' where affinity with participants is considered to invest the researcher with superior moral authority
- Discussions about insiderism based on an over-simplified dichotomy between 'insider' and 'outsider'

- Considerations about positionality or insiderism, in the methodology section but not later linked to the discussion of findings
- Claims to a ‘thick description’ that are distinctly thin (e.g. based purely on standard interview data)
- The habitual use of the word ‘participants’ to describe those who play no meaningful participatory role beyond being interviewees, for example
- Citing close-up authors in a routinized/tokenistic way without demonstrating any understanding of their ideas or (probably) reading them (e.g. Geertz, 1973)

Do any of these examples resonate with you? If they do, perhaps you can add your own examples to my list.

I feel it is too easy to suggest that this type of ‘faking’ is simply about poor scholarship. Students can feel under the pressure of what I have called ‘emotional performativity’ (Macfarlane, 2017). Valerie Hobbs’ account of the way in which she resorted to a ‘strategic deception’ in producing a reflective piece of writing to satisfy assessment requirements is a perfect illustration of this phenomenon (Hobbs, 2007:414). Reflection is an act of confession and self-disclosure – whether real or fake. In composing such statements, students are complying with what they perceive to be a performative requirement to link the ontological with the epistemological. Can we *really* distinguish between a real and a fake one?

Twenty or thirty years ago critical reflexivity was an overdue *corrective* to the apparent invisibility of the researcher in the research process. It was rare for a researcher’s positionality to be explicitly surfaced within methodological work. Today, positionality statements and references to reflexivity have become more of a stock *convention*. They are *de rigueur* in dissertations or theses involving qualitative work. Is it even any longer valid to talk about ‘traditional’ and ‘critical’ approaches to research, or has the ‘critical’ perspective become the new ‘traditional’? In other words, close-up qualitative research has entered the mainstream of educational research. At one level this is a great success story but at another there appears to be an increasing tendency to treat the practices and lexicon of close-up research as ready-to-wear garments. When ideas and concepts enter the mainstream, their meaning can quickly become over-simplified. The nuances get stripped away. We are all familiar with mantras about ‘student-centred learning’ and ‘student engagement’ in the university. They once meant something more nuanced. The word ‘reflection’ has now sadly become little more than a performance indicator for a range of professionals.

We know that in the world of the news media – and fake news – it is important to find a scapegoat. In attributing blame for the types of inauthenticity I have illustrated the obvious target as the perpetrator: normally, but not always, the research student. Is it possible though that the academic profession is responsible, at least in part, for this state of affairs? Is it in any way *our* fault? In understanding why fake practices exist we should practice what we preach by being self-critical about the potential role of our own ‘pastoral power’ (Atkinson, 2012). We need to recognise that strategic deception arises because students get to know our convictions and methodological insinuations as supervisors only too well. Someone’s whole persona, and professional identity, can be tied to a particular theoretical approach (Trowler, 2012). When this occurs, methodological guidance can lapse into methodolatry and students can feel obliged to swear their allegiance to a particular flag.

The verisimilitude of close-up research is linked to a researcher’s genuine commitment to reflexivity and self-disclosure. The presence of positionality and reflective statements in research reporting enhances the apparent trustworthiness of the work of the lone researcher. We need to be aware of the scope for disingenuous manipulation. Feeling fraudulent as an

academic – otherwise known as the ‘imposter syndrome’ – is a common enough condition. When academics reflect on their feelings of inadequacy this tends to focus almost exclusively on their lives as teachers rather than researchers (e.g. Overall, 1997). Are we open enough about how much we ‘fake it’ – or perhaps cause others to do so – as researchers and supervisors?

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