Writing as Social Practice: From Researchers' to Readers' Reflexivity

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Abstract

A stimulating body of literature has developed methodological tools for reflexivity in practice. However, it focuses on the reflexivity of the researchers, leaving the conditions in which researchers can help readers become reflexive unaddressed. This article addresses this gap by taking decentring as a starting point. It approaches writing as a practice to foster readers' reflexivity and introduces "writing for reflexivity" as a way for the social sciences to achieve their full potential. More specifically, it provides the conceptual foundations to tackle this problem, positions the initiatives of the authors of the running theme "Decentring Agency in World Politics: Writing for Reflexivity as a Collective Experiment" into existing literature, and offers practical guidance for researchers and teachers interested in writing for reflexivity. In all, the article builds a bridge between the methodology of writing and the methodology of reflexivity through the issues of Eurocentrism and its denial of "non-Western" agency.

Keywords

1   Introduction

For social science knowledge to become something more than just words in a document, researchers need to give readers the means to change the way they perceive the world. As such, the practice of academic writing mediates the capacity for research to produce social change and innovation. Understandably, then, writing is considered a core activity of our profession, as illustrated by the time dedicated to practising it during academic training and the amount of specialised material on this question.[1]

However, this challenge, at the core of social science emancipatory ambition, does not represent a core objective of learning academic writing. While a growing body of literature demonstrates that logical exposition of facts and information does not suffice to change the perception of something once this perception is acquired,[2] evidence of this problem does not seem to have affected the way we engage in academic writing or familiarise the next generation with this practice.

Manuals introducing students to writing up research offer a window into how we socialise students into norms related to academic writing. In such materials, the objectives of academic writing are commonly defined as "clarity and directness"[3] and to "communicate clearly and convincingly an argument".[4] Some detail further the ideals that academic writers should aim to achieve:

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1   See, for example, Becker, Howard, and Pamela Richards. Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Brause, Rita. Writing Your Doctoral Dissertation. (New York: Routledge, 1999); Joyner, Randy L., William A., Jr. Rouse, and Allan A. Glatthorn. Writing the Winning Thesis or Dissertation: A Step-By-Step Guide. (Corwin Press. 2018); Lewkowicz, Jo, and Linda Cooley. Dissertation Writing in Practice: Turning Ideas into Text. (Hong Kong University Press, 2003); Newsome, Bruce. An Introduction to Research, Analysis, and Writing: Practical Skills for Social Science Students. (SAGE, 2016); O'Gorman, Kevin D, and Robert Macintosh. Research Methods for Business and Management: A Guide to Writing Your Dissertation. (Goodfellow Publishers, 2015); Swetnam, Derek. Writing Your Dissertation: How to Plan, Prepare and Present Successful Work. (How to Books, 2004).

2   For a seminal experiment in this domain see Ross, Lee, Lepper, Mark., & Hubbard, Michael. "Perseverance in self-perception and social perception: Biased attributional processes in the debriefing paradigm." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *32*(5) (1975), 880–892. For a review of literature about the question see Friedman, Hershey H. 2017. "Cognitive Biases That Interfere with Critical Thinking and Scientific Reasoning: A Course Module." *SSRN Electronic Journal*.

3   Becker and Richards, *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article*, 9.

4   Newsome, *An Introduction to Research, Analysis, and Writing: Practical Skills for Social Science Students*, 1.

"communication (respect for one's audience); craft (respect for language); creativity (respect for academic endeavour); concreteness (a verbal technique); choice (an intellectual right); and courage (a frame of mind)".[5]

This literature also defines its own purpose to the students along the following lines: "planning, strategy and keeping your sanity while producing good work"[6] to raise "consciousness of issues related to academic writing at dissertation level that many native speakers are unaware of";[7] to make "explicit the invisible culture of dissertation writing and thereby increases the likelihood of your success";[8] or "providing guidance to produce a quality study that will reflect well on you and help you advance in your career".[9]

As we can see, helping readers become more reflexive, shift their perception, or challenge their socialisation is not promoted as a core objective – or challenge – of academic writing. This is further illustrated by the ways in which this literature introduces the figure of the reader and socialises students to relate to them. The reader is defined as "the one who attends to a text to process its information",[10] such that they should be told "the story of the data"[11] and will then "feel compelled to accept the author's argument [when] the barrage of detailed knowledge overwhelms [them]"[12] Mentions of how readers experience a text or how writers should cultivate their relationship with them are marginal.[13]

Despite our training as social scientists, academic writing is largely desociologised. Rather than framed as a social practice that can potentially re-socialise the readers we interact with, we see that writing is largely introduced as a set of argumentative techniques that aims to convince readers.

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5   Sword, *Stylish Academic Writing*, 174.

6   Swetnam, Derek. Writing Your Dissertation: How to Plan, Prepare and Present Successful Work, 2.

7   Lewkowicz and Cooley, *Dissertation Writing in Practice: Turning Ideas into Text*, 2.

8   Brause, *Writing Your Doctoral Dissertation*, xiv.

9   Joyner, Rouse, and Glatthorn, *Writing the Winning Thesis or Dissertation: A Step-By-Step Guide*, xxii.

10   Newsome, *An Introduction to Research, Analysis, and Writing: Practical Skills for Social Science Students*, 548.

11   O'Gorman and Macintosh, *Research Methods for Business and Management: A Guide to Writing Your Dissertation*, 146.

12   Becker and Richards, *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article*, 34.

13   Exceptions include Taylor, Gordon. A Student's Writing Guide: How to Plan and Write Successful Essays. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), who mentions that the reader is "grateful" if the writer conveys the subject with "enthusiasm", and Sword, Helen. Stylish Academic Writing. (Harvard University Press, 2012). Sword who puts forward that "a simple way to establish a bond with readers is to employ the second-person pronoun you".

Readers themselves are often described as unidimensional recipients of information rather than social agents for which reading can represent a multi-dimensional – aesthetic, emotional, and social – experience.

In recent decades, however, scholars have problematised the type of writing norms encountered in such manuals, promoting creative writing and fostering institutional spaces for the diversification of academic writing practices in a context where the politics of writing and the accumulation of different forms of capital go hand in hand.[14] Yet, while this literature has been essential in setting up and legitimising a new agenda for writing social sciences, it did not directly engage with the specific problem set up above.

I argue that addressing this problem requires further building the bridge between the methodology of writing and the methodology of reflexivity by expanding the conversation about reflexivity in practice beyond its current focus on knowledge producers to those for whom they write. Namely, it requires displacing the focus of reflexivity from researchers to the readers with whom they communicate. I call this practice "writing for reflexivity" – a specific type of reflexive writing that goes beyond the researcher-writer's reflexivity to develop strategies aimed to help readers' own reflexive journey.

Moreover, I argue that writing – the practice of communicating via the production of text – is largely an untapped resource for social change and innovation when it comes to the academic study of world politics. Social science writers communicate their knowledge through discourse which contributes to the production of social organisation and institutions. Discourses are not a neutral medium of communication; they are constitutive of communicative interactions through which we continuously contribute to socialising each other.[15] While many might theoretically agree with this statement, few practise writing as such. How many researchers are experiencing academic writing as producing an experience of resocialisation aimed at their readers? What kind of experience do we aim to foster through our writing? Is the objective of writing to help readers become more reflexive? Is reading as a reflexive experience something we consciously aim to craft within our text for others?

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14   PARISS-Collective, "The Art of Writing Social Sciences: Disrupting the Current Politics of Style," *Political Anthropological Research on International Social Sciences (PARISS)* 1 (2020): 9–38; Laurel Richardson, "Writing: A Method of Inquiry," in *Turning Points in Qualitative Research: Tying Knots in a Handkerchief*, ed. Yvonna S. Lincoln and Norman K. Denzin (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2003), 923–48; Nancy Dafoe, *Breaking Open the Box: A Guide for Creative Techniques to Improve Academic Writing and Generate Critical Thinking* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).

15   Audrey Alejandro, "Reflexive Discourse Analysis: A Methodology for the Practice of Reflexivity," *European Journal of International Relations* 27, no. 1 (2021): 150–74.

Using what kind of strategies? I suggest approaching academic writing as a deliberate practice between social agents involved in communicative interaction: *writing as a social practice*. The overarching aim of this practice should be to foster reflexivity for readers through their reading experience – be they other researchers, students, or non-academic audiences.

I started this project in 2019 to illustrate what writing for reflexivity may look like. I set up an informal team (of initially six researchers including myself) that I selected based on the promising case studies they had respectively been working on. After sending them a draft of this article, we met collectively four times to discuss different stages of their writing. This initiative led to the publication of the P.A.R.I.S.S. running theme "Decentring Agency in World Politics: Writing for Reflexivity as a Collective Experiment" (which also includes an introduction[16] two case studies[17] and a conclusion.[18] To bring coherence to our initiative and make it more feasible, our collective experiment focuses on one field of study (world politics), one reflexive process we aim to foster (decentring), and one thing we aim to foster reflexivity about (the denial of "non-Western" agency). Here, we do not aim to demonstrate how existing writing styles are harmful, nor push forward a specific set of writing techniques. Rather, we aim to achieve an expansion of the norms regarding the objectives of academic writing and how we relate to our readers. As we will see, the same genres, writing styles, and strategies used in writings that do not aim for reflexivity can also be mobilised when writing for reflexivity.

As a stepping stone to set up this new research agenda, I first develop the conceptual foundations at the core of this initiative: writing, reflexivity, decentring, denial of agency and Eurocentrism. In doing so, I position our project in the existing literature to show how it connects and contributes to existing conversations. In the final section, I offer practical guidance for researchers and teachers interested in implementing such an initiative so they can continue the experiment beyond our team. I also share my experience in experimenting with writing for reflexivity and the guidelines I provided to the other contributors to set up the collective project, highlighting the diversity of ways one can write for reflexivity.

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16   Audrey Alejandro, "Writing as Social Practice, Decentring and Denial of Agency: From Researchers' to Readers' Reflexivity," *Political Anthropological Research on International Social Sciences* (*PARISS*) 5, no. 2 (2024).

17   Felix Anderl, "Decentering Agency in North-South Solidarity: Arguing with My Past Self," *Political Anthropological Research on International Social Sciences* 5, no. 1 (2024); Carmina Yu Untalan, "After Empire: Constituting the Outside of American Military Base Politics in Japan" 5, no. 1 (2024).

18   Paul Beaumont, "Conclusion: Writing for Reflexivity and Breaking Writing Rules," *Political Anthropological Research on International Social Sciences* 5, no. 2 (2024).

2   Writing

What is it that we actually want to achieve through our writing? Is our objective merely to write in a way that enables us to get accepted by journals, move forward with our career and collect citations … or is there something else? Fifteen years ago, Doty lamented that reflections about writing "ha[ve] not been actively pursued" in IR despite "critical' or "radical' constructivism" "opening up spaces for discussing our own writing".[19] Since then, writing has become a growing topic of interest in the field. Scholars have, for example, investigated writing styles and their potential effects empirically, showing how they may reproduce inequalities within the discipline and world politics.[20] Others have problematised traditional uses of writing,[21] promoted writing as a creative exercise and defined it as an "aesthetic political practice",[22] and argued that the "practice of writing can be reappropriated […] to facilitate alternative practices of scholarship and modes of being in discourse".[23]

More specifically, the need to pay attention to writing as an integral methodological and epistemological component of research has been insightfully demonstrated by Mahé.[24] In line with Araudau and Huysmans',[25] she suggests that writing has "been misleadingly conceptualized as technical devices that are disconnected from the broader question of philosophy of science".[26] In her review of literature, she shows that scholarship in IR and

19   Roxanne Lynn Doty, "Maladies of Our Souls: Identity and Voice in the Writing of Academic International Relations," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 17, no. 2 (July 21, 2004): 377–92.

20   Henrik Ø. Breitenbauch, *International Relations in France: Writing between Discipline and State* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013); Kathryn Starnes, *Fairy Tales and International Relations* (London & New York: Routledge, 2017); Audrey Alejandro, *Western Dominance in International Relations? The Internationalisation of IR in Brazil and India* (London & New York: Routledge, 2018).

21   Michael Barr, "Autoethnography as Pedagogy: Writing the 'I' in IR," *Qualitative Inquiry*, 2018, 40–42; Rosemary E. Shinko, "Thinking, Doing, and Writing International Relations Theory," *International Studies Perspectives* 7, no. 1 (February 2006): 43–50.

22   Jenny Edkins, "Novel Writing in International Relations: Openings for a Creative Practice," *Security Dialogue* 44, no. 4 (2013): 281.

23   Erzsebet Strausz, *Writing the Self and Transforming Knowledge in International Relations Towards a Politics of Liminality*, 2018.

24   Mahé, Anne-Laure. "Aligning Epistemology and Writing: A Literary Analysis of Qualitative Research." *International Studies Perspectives* 20 (3) (2019), 226–45.

25   Aradau, Claudia, and Jef Huysmans. 2014. "Critical Methods in International Relations: The Politics of Techniques, Devices and Acts." *European Journal of International Relations* 20 (3): 596–619.

26   Mahé, "Aligning Epistemology and Writing: A Literary Analysis of Qualitative Research," 227.

beyond mostly approaches writing through "stating disciplinary conventions" and focusing on "which" information should be included rather than "how" it should be included.[27] In contrast with this position, she argues that writing "should be placed at the centre of reflections on the logic of scientific inquiry" and is the missing link in the "epistemology-theory-methodology alignment".[28]

Without engaging with this problem in such detail, other scholars have also engaged writing as a way to align written communication with other dimensions of research. For example, Dauphinee develops narrative writing as an answer to the question of "what social science does, for whom, and for what purposes",[29] while Katsanidou et al. emphasise "writing with clarity" as a condition for "monitoring quality, challenging findings, and promoting good scientific practices".[30] Others explore writing as an answer to methodological-ethical problems, as illustrated for example by Daigle's "attempt (sometimes futile) to mitigate and interrogate the relationship between researcher and informant across the unequal relations of power, economic disparities, and cultural divides – factors that create a partial and committed position for the author".[31] To sum up, there is an emerging, albeit scattered, conversation in IR that legitimises diversifying approaches to writing to achieve different methodological, epistemological, ethical and socio-political objectives in research.

Building upon these initiatives, this project aims to further expand writing norms, and investigate more specifically what writing for reflexivity might look like. Rather than promoting a specific model of writing (e.g. narrative, ethnographic) or rejecting existing models (e.g. IMRAD), we hope to expand horizons and stir conversations regarding the type of norms and objectives into which we socialise the next generations of researchers when it comes to writing. More precisely, I argue for the problematisation of academic writing as a technique aimed at a standardised universal objective and defend the idea that writing would be better conceptualised as a social practice whose finality depends on value systems and professional goals that deserve to be consciously identified by the writer. By social practice, I mean an activity

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27   Mahé, "Aligning Epistemology and Writing: A Literary Analysis of Qualitative Research," 227.

28   Mahé, "Aligning Epistemology and Writing: A Literary Analysis of Qualitative Research," 231.

29   Elizabeth Dauphinee, "Writing as Hope: Reflections on The Politics of Exile," *Security Dialogue* 44, no. 4 (2013): 347–61.

30   Alexia Katsanidou, Laurence Horton, and Uwe Jensen, "Data Policies, Data Management, and the Quality of Academic Writing," *International Studies Perspectives*, 25, 2016.

31   Megan Daigle, "Writing the Lives of Others: Storytelling and International Politics," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 45, no. 1 (2016): 25–42.

constitutive of social interactions and productive of socialisation, whose objectives may vary and which therefore needs to be consciously chosen as with any other dimension of the research design.[32] The practice of writing structures the relationship between writers and readers. It conditions whether texts hold the potential to go beyond informing readers of the existence of prejudice to enable them to socialise the readers into alternative perceptions of the world. Thus, adding to the list of objectives other authors have explored in their pursuit to align their writing to other dimensions of their research, we explore ways in which we can prompt readers' reflexivity. So far, fostering readers' reflexivity has not been promoted as a primary objective of academic writing. Out of the nine books focusing on teaching students academic writing mentioned above, only one discusses reflexivity, and it is in relation to thinking rather than writing per se[33] Moreover, even if certain individual initiatives may have achieved this purpose, they have not been structured into an explicit and collective conversation. Accordingly, it is not surprising that academic writing only accidentally and marginally achieves this goal as a whole. As a starting point for this conversation, I unpack what I mean by reflexivity and how this initiative positions itself regarding this question.

3 Reflexivity

The question of reflexivity emerged in IR as an epistemological/professional answer to concerns regarding how IR as a field of knowledge was reproducing the biases and inequalities existing in the world it studied – from racism to Eurocentrism, gender discrimination and Americanism.[34] At a macro level, reflexivity has been interpreted as a historical societal movement associated

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32   Alejandro, Audrey. "How to Problematise Categories: Building the Methodological Toolbox for Linguistic Reflexivity." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 20 (2021b) https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211055572.

33   O'Gorman and Macintosh. *Research Methods for Business and Management: A Guide to Writing Your Dissertation*, 54.

34   Xavier Guillaume, "Reflexivity and Subjectivity: A Dialogical Perspective for and on International Relations Theory," *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 3, no. 3 (2002); Brooke Ackerly and Jacqui True, "Reflexivity in Practice: Power and Ethics in Feminist Research on International Relations," *International Studies Review* 10, no. 4 (December 2008): 693–707; Mark Neufeld, "Reflexivity and International Relations Theory," *Millennium – Journal of International Studies* 22, no. 1 (March 1, 1993): 53–76; Audrey Alejandro, "Reflexive Discourse Analysis: A Methodology for the Practice of Reflexivity," *European Journal of International Relations* 27, no. 1 (2021): 150–74, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066120969789.

with modernity.[35] At a micro level, reflexivity is better understood as a practice and epistemic posture that we naturally possess, but which can be fostered through dedicated initiatives.[36] It is in this latter sense that we approach reflexivity in this running theme. Namely, I define reflexivity as the practice of making conscious and explicit our perceptions, assumptions, beliefs, and positions, and using these dimensions of our socialisation recursively to inform our knowledge production. As such, reflexivity gives rise to a "double knowledge" – using the self as a resource to produce more refined and ethical analytical and empirical knowledge about the world, and using the world as a mirroring object of enquiry to better understand the researcher's self.[37] In doing so, "reflexivity leads us to recognize alternative ways of viewing 'reality', and prompts us to make explicit some of the world views which we and others bring to our research endeavour".[38]

Despite the growing interest in reflexivity across the social sciences, the literature has highlighted the "general lack of sufficient detail given over to the "how' in relation to this process".[39] To address this gap, scholars have developed a stimulating research program turning informal practices for reflexivity into explicit approaches that can be collectively debated so others can learn from and teach them.[40] I, for example, have worked towards developing

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35   Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization* (Stanford University Press, 1994).

36   Audrey Alejandro, "Walking the Reflexive Talk," e-International Relations, 2016, http://www.e-ir.info/2016/09/17/walking-the-reflexive-talk/.

37   Audrey Alejandro, *Western Dominance in International Relations? The Internationalisation of IR in Brazil and India* (London & New York: Routledge, 2018), 191.

38   Joan Eakin et al., "Towards a Critical Social Science Perspective on Health Promotion Research," *Health Promotion International* 11, no. 2 (1996): 158.

39   Clare Maxwell et al., "Examining Researchers' Pre-Understandings as a Part of the Reflexive Journey in Hermeneutic Research," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 19 (2020): 1–9.

40   Lia Bryant and Mona Livholts, "Exploring the Gendering of Space by Using Memory Work as a Reflexive Research Method," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 6, no. 3 (September 29, 2007): 29–44; Celina Carter et al., "Explicating Positionality: A Journey of Dialogical and Reflexive Storytelling," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 13, no. 1 (2014): 362–76; Ilana Finefter-Rosenbluh, "Incorporating Perspective Taking in Reflexivity," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16, no. 1 (December 13, 2017); Danielle Jacobson and Nida Mustafa, "Social Identity Map: A Reflexivity Tool for Practicing Explicit Positionality in Critical Qualitative Research," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 18 (2019): 1–12; Kathleen A. Hare, "Collecting Sensorial Litter: Ethnographic Reflexive Grappling With Corporeal Complexity," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 19 (2020); See also Alejandro and Stoffel, n.d. for a review of the literature).

methods to become more reflexive about our use of language in academic research.[41]

While these endeavours are a welcome development showing the benefits of turning informal and private reflexive initiatives into explicit endeavours that can be cumulatively shared with the rest of the academic community, they do not fully address the problem at stake in this collective project. Indeed, these initiatives have focused solely on helping researchers become more reflexive about different aspects of their socialisation rather than reflecting on how researchers can help readers become more reflexive through their writing. The fact that researchers have become more reflexive about something through their research process does not mean that their research will naturally produce the same effect on their readers. Strategies need to be put into place to translate the experience of the researcher into an experience for the reader, harnessing this potential and fostering readers' reflexivity. This running theme aims to illustrate what such approaches might look like by exploring the practice at the core of the relationship that connects researchers and their readers: writing.

This intervention is therefore an attempt to build the bridge between the methodology of reflexivity and the methodology of writing. In and beyond IR, questions of reflexivity have been interrelated to the development of a diversity of writing styles. Researchers have, for example, published edited fieldnotes,[42] biographical novels,[43] stories from the ground,[44] interviews[45] and works mixing theoretical elements with the biographical context of their emergence.[46] The emergence of auto-ethnographic writing in IR follows the same lines (see[47]). While this literature mainly explores different writing genres, some authors have advocated a more conscious reflexion on the

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41   Audrey Alejandro, "How to Problematise Categories: Building the Methodological Toolbox for Linguistic Reflexivity," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 20 (2021), https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211055572; Audrey Alejandro and Ellie Knott, "How to Pay Attention to the Words We Use: The Reflexive Review as a Method for Linguistic Reflexivity," *International Studies Review* 24, no. 3 (2022), https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viac025; Audrey Alejandro, "Reflexive Discourse Analysis: A Methodology for the Practice of Reflexivity," *European Journal of International Relations* 27, no. 1 (2021): 150–74.

42   Philip R. Devita, ed., *Stumbling toward Truth: Anthropologists at Work* (Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Pr Inc, 2000).

43   Lévi-Strauss, *A World on the Wane* (London: Huntchinson, 1961).

44   Sophie Caratini, *Les Non-Dits de l'Anthropologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004).

45   Naeem Inayatullah, *Autobiographical International Relations: I, IR* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011).

46   Pierre Bourdieu, *Méditations Pascaliennes* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1997).

47   Neumann 2010; Brigg and Bleiker 2010.

feelings involved in writing reflexively, such as tenderness and respect.[48] In this literature, engagements with reflexivity deal with the researcher, for example through challenging its absence in "dominant modes of research and writing" ([49]). As such, these important initiatives have so far focused on writing about researchers' reflexive processes and only indirectly addressed ways in which writing can promote readers' reflexivity.

This collective initiative aims to address this gap. To do so, I suggest approaching the relationship between writers and their anticipated readers as a social practice to conscientize the socio-epistemic effects we aim to achieve through writing. While interest in the relationship between authors and readers is not uncommon, for example in literary studies where it is a longstanding focus of interest, the nature and effects of this interaction are rarely a priority when conversations arise regarding social science writing, let alone in relation to reflexivity. With this objective in mind, I invited the contributors to focus on a specific process that holds potential for writing for reflexivity but that has been relatively neglected regarding its operationalisation: decentring.

4   Decentring

Prior to its diffusion across the social sciences, the concept of decentring emerged in relation to cognition and social behaviour at the crossroads of epistemology and psychology. Notably, the concept was popularised by the epistemologist Jean Piaget in the mid-20th century, as a capacity that children learn to develop by age 7–12. In that sense, decentring accounts for the process through which a conscious subject goes beyond thinking of an object from the initial perspective of the self – e.g. in which the self is at the centre of the structure of knowledge – to thinking of this object from a system of relations that takes the object of perception as the centre. This process enables the production of abstract thoughts, connecting different objects together both independently and to the subject experiencing these thoughts, and enables the subject to consider multiple aspects of a situation. According to Piaget's epistemology:

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48   Iga Maria Lehman et al., "Forum: The Case for Reflexive Writing Practices in Management Communication and Organization Studies," *Management Communication Quarterly*, January 26, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1177/08933189241227943.

49   Roxanne Lynn Doty, "Autoethnography – Making Human Connections," *Review of International Studies* 36 (2010): 1047.

> [Decentring] is not merely adding other actions to the initial act and connecting them afterwards through a process of pure cumulative extension. Decentring is inversing these very relations and constructing a system of reciprocity, that is qualitatively new in regard to the initial action. It therefore consists of detaching the object from the immediate action to situate it within a system of relations between things, corresponding point by point to the system of potential operations the subject might perform on them from all possible points of view and in reciprocal relations with all the other subjects.[50]

Since this initial coining, the conceptualisation of decentring was further refined in different directions. Derrida, for example, defined decentring as "thinking of the structurality of the structure" and "the stated abandonment of all reference to a centre, to a subject, to a privileged reference, to an origin, or to an absolute archia".[51] In that sense, decentring is interpreted as something done to objects constituted through language that subverts what is taken for granted as the centre of reference (for example, man as the centre of humanity and what this centring does to the other side of the binary constituting it: woman). In another domain such as social psychology, "social decentring" has been theorised as a "multidimensional social cognitive process that involves taking into account another person's feelings, thoughts, perspectives, and other dispositions in a given situation".[52] Through this "other-oriented process" that encompasses empathy and perspective-taking, it is rather the subjects of perception that are perceived to be decentred, or able to decentre themselves[53]

In intercultural communication studies, for example, decentring involves shifting the focus away from one's own cultural perspective and biases when engaging in intercultural communication. It is defined as "a process where the central concepts and propositions in the research do not originate in, or privilege, a single culture, but are derived from, and are relevant to, multiple cultures",[54] that is aimed at "bypass[ing] the knowledge and hegemonic

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50 Jean Piaget, *Introduction a l'epistemologie Genetique – Vol II: La Pensee Physique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950).

51 Jacques Derrida, "La Structure, Le Signe et Le Jeu Dans Le Discourse Des Sciences Humaines," in *Les Langages Critiques et Les Sciences de l'homme* (Baltimore, 1966).

52 Mark Redmond, *Social Decentering: A Theory of Other-Orientation Encompassing Empathy and Perspective-Taking* (De Gruyter, 2018), 5.

53 Redmond, *Social Decentering: A Theory of Other-Orientation Encompassing Empathy and Perspective-Taking*.

54 Nancy K. Rivenburgh and Valerie Manusov, "Decentering as a Research Design Strategy for International and Intercultural Research," *Journal of International Communication* 16, no. 1 (2010), https://doi.org/10.1080/13216597.2010.9674757.

structures emanating from the Global North".[55] Properly implemented, decentring enables the fostering of an interpersonal space where cultural understanding can emerge through dialogue and negotiation, rather than simply the transmission of cultural information. As such, decentring is perceived as crucial for developing intercultural competence and decolonizing social science knowledge.[56]

More broadly, decentring has gained traction across the social sciences as a synonym for "destabilising", "subverting", or "disrupting" common ways of thinking about a research topic by bringing alternative perspectives to the conversation.[57] In International Relations, "decentring" is often used as a title hook along these lines.[58] The term is also commonly mobilised in the context of the denunciation of Western dominance in the field, for which a few authors have unpacked what they aim to achieve through this endeavour. For example, Nayak and Selbin[59] interpret decentring as a way to "challenge the politics, concepts, and practices that enable certain narratives of IR to be central, [...] a way to put forth and participate in other kinds of narratives", while Marquez[60] defines his approach as "increasing the voices in the field, and incorporating explanations based on a multitude of empirical realities". In their article "The decentring agenda: Europe as a post-colonial power", meanwhile, Fisher-Onar and Nicolaïdis[61] argue that decentring is "necessary both to make sense of

55   Prue Holmes and Beatriz Peña Dix, "A Research Trajectory for Difficult Times: Decentring Language and Intercultural Communication," *Language and Intercultural Communication* 22, no. 3 (2022): 339, https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2022.2068563.

56   Giuliana Ferri, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House: Decolonising Intercultural Communication," *Language and Intercultural Communication* 22, no. 3 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2022.2046019.

57   U Narayan and Sandra Harding, *Decentering the Center: Philosophy for a Multicultural, Postcolonial, and Feminist World*, 2000; Ramona Faith Oswald, Libby Balter Blume, and Stephen R. Marks, "Decentering Heteronormativity: A Model for Family Studies," in *Sourcebook of Family Theory and Research*, ed. Peggye Dilworth-Anderson & David M. Klein Vern L. Bengtson, Alan C. Acock, Katherine R. Allen (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2005), 143–65.

58   R Guy Emerson, "Decentering Responsibilization: Towards a Nomos of Governmentality in Mexico," *International Political Sociology* 14, no. 2 (June 1, 2020): 156–74; Carmina Yu Untalan, "Decentering the Self, Seeing Like the Other: Toward a Postcolonial Approach to Ontological Security," *International Political Sociology* 14, no. 2 (September 3, 2020): 40–56.

59   Meghana Nayak and Eric Selbin, *Decentering International Relations* (London; New York: Zed Books, 2010).

60   Diego Miguel Zambrano Márquez, "Decentering International Relations: The Continued Wisdom of Latin American Dependency," *International Studies Perspectives* 21, no. 4 (2020): 405, https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekaa007.

61   Nora Fisher Onar and Kalypso Nicolaïdis, "The Decentring Agenda: Europe as a Post-Colonial Power," *Cooperation and Conflict* 48, no. 2 (2013): 283.

our multipolar order and to reconstitute European agency in a non-European world."

Based on these elements, decentring offers a promising route to expand and increase the precision of reflexive endeavours. On the one hand, decentring can be considered as a process that falls under the scope of reflexivity – i.e., reflexivity is a social practice that encompasses many processes, including decentring. On the other hand, reflexivity can be considered an outcome of decentring – i.e. decentring helps us become more reflexive. In relation to writing, decentring is a process that involves knowledge produced by both the writers and the readers: the writers produce knowledge about the object of their discourse that enables the readers to produce reflexive knowledge about themselves and their perception of the world. This conceptualisation aims to operationalise decentring and turn this process into a practical approach that writers can bring into their writing to help readers become more reflexive about their perception of the world. I identify three main reasons for using decentring as a process for writing for reflexivity, as well as a few challenges.

Firstly, reflexivity is an abstract concept that is hard to operationalise. Decentring as an approach to writing for reflexivity enables us to focus our attention. Having identified a discourse/perception that we aim to decentre, one formulates a decentred discourse that represents an alternative to readers' perceptions and constructs their text around it to help denaturalise and problematise the perceptions they might have been socialised into. As such, the decentred discourse aims to provide a cognitive space for readers that they can use to put their original standpoint into perspective.

Secondly, decentring enables us to explore conditions of writing critical work that go beyond denunciation. It hints at ways through which we can deconstruct and re-construct alternative ways of seeing the world through writing, in the relationship we have with our readers. For example, I was inspired to develop the project of writing for reflexivity by the book *Stumbling Toward Truth: Anthropologists at Work* (Devita 2000) which I read during my studies. In this book, anthropologists share fieldwork anecdotes that shed light on their ethnocentrism and doing so, help readers acknowledge their own. Everyday reflexive realisations of this situation often lead to moments that can make us laugh at ourselves, which the book uses as an entry point to trigger reflexivity in the readers. Indeed, there is something quite ridiculous in the fact that we all tend to think that our ideas, norms, values – everything attached to our identities and resulting from our socialisation – are the good ones or right ones, or at least better and more right than somebody else's, and that we all think that simultaneously. This book gave me a taste as a reader of looking for experiences of reflexive discomfort, and a desire as a writer to

explore ways to produce such effects. A subtle mix of a reading experience that was reflexively challenging, uncomfortable and pleasant was quite unusual. Overall, this experience inspired me to turn writing for reflexivity into a critical methodology for social change and demonstrate how to integrate criticality methodologically into writing.

Thirdly, decentring can help embody a certain commitment to relationality and human relations in academic research. Decentring is a process necessary for sociality and living together, as it supports emotional and cognitive understanding of others. It is therefore conducive to empathy as well as imagining what others may perceive, know, or need. Situations where all parties all not willing nor capable of decentring result in the unequal distribution of the conditions of understanding and communication that bears upon those participating in the interaction. The same goes for academic interactions, whether they happen synchronously or asynchronously, such as is the case in the relationship we create with people whom we cite or people who read us.

However, while focusing on decentring as a strategy for writing for reflexivity seems promising, its operationalisation raises several challenges. Firstly, the centre that is to be decentred is not universal as things become centred for certain social groups as a result of processes of socialisation. Decentring as a process for writing for reflexivity requires some knowledge about the reader. Writers need to identify target audiences and investigate which elements of their socialisation they will focus their decentring strategies upon. As such, decentring initiatives need to be specifically designed with some social groups in mind in order to be successful. In addition, decentring is a historically sensitive process as discourses in which social groups are socialised may quickly change. As a result, the discourse we produce is only relevant as long as the discourses we aim to challenge are part of our target audience's socialisation. Discourses evolve and writing for reflexivity is a project that can only ever be constantly catching up with the moving frontier of what we aim to decentre. For example, in fifteen years, maybe the social sciences will have problematised some of their underlying ideological and structural issues, and the focus on the denial of non-Western agency at the core of this running theme will be outdated. This initiative would then become a snapshot of the Eurocentric manifestation of the past and some of the attempts to resist it.

A second challenge results from the fact that asking questions such as "reflexivity for whom?" and "where are our readers located?" is not neutral. Indeed, these questions have political and ethical implications that we need to be reflexive about. Picking an audience is not neutral. It is a social and political choice to decide who we are writing for: who matters, who is deserving and who will end up being included or excluded from our decentring strategies.

Likewise, decentring implies a recentring as the decentring operates through the production of a discourse that enables the conscientization of an alternative. While the recentring discourse might only represent a means to an end – a strategy that enables the creation of a space for reflexivity – its ethical and socio-political implications should not be disregarded. If decentring seems a promising route, the question remains of "recentring into what"?

Finally, the third main challenge I identified arises from the fact that different conceptualisations of decentring focus on either the object or subject of decentring, and that literature focusing on decentring does not demonstrate how to decentre as part of a methodological practice. As Smith comments, it "is not self-evident that one can question in the same way the centrality of a subject of consciousness, or that of an ethnic group – or of logos, traditional ontology, the phallus, or the voice.[62] Such a challenge opens a programme of research that still needs to be investigated, which requires theorising decentring more practically and disentangling how different conceptualisations of decentring may require different methodological strategies.

To sum up, in this initiative, we interpret writing for reflexivity as an effort for writers to foster readers' capacity to decentre themselves from their socialisation to reconsider the beliefs, perceptions, and dispositions they have internalised. As I will detail below, I first aimed to emulate this process in my research about Eurocentrism, which subsequently led to the topic I invited the contributors to focus on. Before talking about what I asked the contributors to do, however, I must still define what I mean by denial of agency and how it connects to Eurocentrism.

5   Denial of Agency and Eurocentrism

Eurocentrism has been identified as a long-lasting problem in IR; and scholars aiming to tackle it have attempted to better understand the diversity of world politics situations and contexts, as well as to challenge rather than reproduce the unequal and discriminative world orders reflected and performed by this phenomenon.[63] These concerns join a broader interdisciplinary reflection

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62   Claude Smith, "Around Derrida's Intervention in Baltimore: 'Decentering' as a Marker of Poststructural Displacement?," *MLN* 134, no. 5 (2019): 982–91.

63   Sanjay Seth, "Historical Sociology and Postcolonial Theory: Two Strategies for Challenging Eurocentrism," *International Political Sociology* 3, no. 3 (2009): 334–38; Turan Kayaoglu, "Westphalian Eurocentrism in International Relations Theory," *International Studies Review* 12, no. 2 (2010): 193–217; Eren Duzgun, "Against Eurocentric Anti-Eurocentrism: International Relations, Historical Sociology and Political Marxism," *Journal of*

cutting across the social sciences and humanities, foregrounded by decolonial and anti-imperialist literature.[64] Amin, for example, defines Eurocentrism as the progressive Westernisation of the world based on the principle that "the West knows best".[65] Focusing more on the experience and violence of colonialism, Fanon denounces the objectification of the colonized, denied of subjectivity and interiority following the idea that Eurocentric thought leads to the internalization of European culture by Africans at the expense of their own cultural identity.[66]

More precisely, Eurocentric discourses are characterised by the following three main dimensions:[67]

A. First, the denial of "non-Western" agency. Here, "the West" is described as an active subject while the rest of the world is represented as a passive object of world politics. These identities and roles are assigned a priori in a decontextualised and dehistoricised process of essentialisation.[68]

B. Second, is teleological self-centredness. Here, "the West" is represented as the unipolar core of human transformation towards which global centripetal forces are naturally directed. "The West" is perceived as the leading edge of world politics and the inevitable future of history.

International Relations and Development 23, no. 2 (June 13, 2020): 285–307; Audrey Alejandro, "Eurocentrism, Ethnocentrism and Misery of Position: International Relations in Europe, a Problematic Oversight," *European Review of International Studies* 4, no. 1 (2017): 5–20; Siba N'Zatioula Grovogui, *Beyond Eurocentrism and Anarchy: Memories of International Order and Institutions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

64   Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America," *International Sociology* 15, no. 2 (2000): 215–32; Edgardo Leander, ed., *La Colonialidad Del Saber: Eurocentrismo y Ciencias Sociales* (Buenos Aires: CLASCO, 2000).

65   Samir Amin, *L'eurocentrisme. Critique d'une Idéologie* (Paris: Anthropos/Economica).

66   Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963).

67   John M. Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760–2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Audrey Alejandro, *Western Dominance in International Relations? The Internationalisation of IR in Brazil and India* (London & New York: Routledge, 2018); John M. Hobson, "Is Critical Theory Always for the White West and for Western Imperialism? Beyond Westphilian towards a Post-Racist Critical IR," in *Critical International Relations Theory after 25 Years*, ed. Nicholas John Rengger and Tristram Benedict Thirkell-White (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 91–116.

68   The "West" is a category used to describe "Europe and its derivative entities" including, for example, former colonies like the United States, Australia and Canada (Siba N'Zatioula Grovogui, *Beyond Eurocentrism and Anarchy: Memories of International Order and Institutions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). The "non-West" refers to the rest of the world. Both categories are vague and contested. Nonetheless, Eurocentrism as an ideology is organised around binary polarisation between these categories and it is from this angle specifically that we use the category in this article.

C.   Third, is universalisation with "the West". Here, "Western" practices and values are established as universal standards, negating the diversity of the world's histories and experiences, and bypassing any need for comparison.

Of the three, I chose to focus this decentring experiment on denial of agency for two reasons: pragmatism and impact. On the first hand, I wanted to give the contributors something quite tangible to work on, and denial of agency is relatively easy to observe in language. On the other hand, denial of agency is a discursive device that performs disempowerment not only through but also outside of Eurocentrism. As such, taking it as an object of exploration makes this project relevant for audiences beyond those interested in Eurocentrism or studying world politics. While agency has been a long-standing topic of interest in IR (see, for instance, Braun et al. 2019, Epstein et al.), denial of agency, and more particularly denial of "non-Western" agency rather than agency per se, is the object of focus here.[69]

Literature across the social sciences has highlighted the problematic character of denial of agency in regard to different domains. For example, the early problematization of the gendered way agency was framed in research about poverty[70] raised the need to address the problem of women's denial of agency in development policies.[71] Scholars also emphasized the importance of questioning the relationship between denial of agency and unempirical and/or potentially harmful moral arguments. This is, for example, the case regarding the "moral crusade" of literature denying the agency of sex workers and conflating prostitution with trafficking,[72] or the widespread classification of suicides as "bad death" in the specialised literature.[73] Denial of agency is also challenged on ethical grounds, for instance as an ageist device when academic discourses assume a preference for certain activities on the part of elder individuals and deny the possibility of them having other goals.[74]

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69   Here, I adopt a broad definition of agency – as the "capacity to make a difference' (Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press., 1984), 14.).

70   Naila Kabeer, "Agency, Well-Being & Inequality: Reflections on the Gender Dimensions of Poverty," *IDS Bulletin* 27, no. 1 (January 1996): 11–21.

71   Lucia Hanmer and Jeni Klugman, "Exploring Women's Agency and Empowerment in Developing Countries: Where Do We Stand?," *Feminist Economics* 22, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 237–63.

72   Tracey Sagar and Debbie Jones, "Off-Street Sex Workers and Victim-Orientated Policymaking at the Local Level: Denial of Agency and Consequences of Victimhood," *Crime Prevention and Community Safety* 16, no. 4 (November 28, 2014): 230–52.

73   Daniel Münster and Ludek Broz, *Suicide and Agency: Anthropological Perspectives on Self-Destruction, Personhood, and Power* (Taylor & Francis, 2016).

74   L. Pfaller and M. Schweda, "Excluded from the Good Life? An Ethical Approach to Conceptions of Active Ageing," *Social Inclusion* 7, no. 3 (2019): 44–53.

Overall, denial of agency is explored both from a micro and macro perspective, for example when scholars study the lived experiences of agency denial in the context of British Muslim encounters with airport authorities,[75] or how denial of agency is involved in processes of dehumanisation and infrahumanisation in both individual and large-scale conflict and violence.[76]

Across case studies, denial of agency manifests as different groups of actors being a priori framed and essentialised as endowed with less agency than others. Agency seems to be automatically taken as a given for some actors and denied to others through the decontextualised categorisation of "agents" vs "less agents", of active/passive actors, of actors who make a difference and those who cannot contribute to social change. In the case of Eurocentrism, binary categorisation of who is unempirically and decontextually endowed with or denied agency goes along a myriad of pairs commonly used in the study of world politics, such as North/South, West/non-West, international/local, in line with existing literature about denial of agency in IR.[77]

Scholars working within critical theories, however, highlight the performative challenge raised by working on denial of agency.[78] Namely, how can we write about a disempowering process such as denial of agency without running the risk that our writing reproduces rather than challenges this very phenomenon – for example, because social groups may internalise discourses that deny their agency and develop self-censoring strategies as a result. Another challenge raised by this endeavour stems from the relationship between agency and responsibility. By choosing as the target audience social groups that deny others' agency, rather than those whose agency is denied,

75   Leda Blackwood, Nick Hopkins, and Steve Reicher, "I Know Who I Am, but Who Do They Think I Am? Muslim Perspectives on Encounters with Airport Authorities," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36, no. 6 (June 2013): 1090–1108.

76   N. Waytz, A., Schroeder, J., and Epley, "The Lesser Minds Problem," in *Are We All Human? Advances in Understanding Humanness and Dehumanization*, ed. P. Bain, J. Vaes, and J. P. Leyens (New York: Are We all Human? Advances in Understanding Humanness and Dehumanization, 2014), 49–67; Nick Haslam, "Dehumanization: An Integrative Review," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 10, no. 3 (August 21, 2006): 252–64.

77   Zeynep Gülşah Çapan, "Decolonising International Relations?," *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (2017): 1–15; Meera Sabaratnam, "Avatars of Eurocentrism and the Critique of the Liberal Peace," *Security Dialogue* 44, no. 3 (2013): 259–78; Alina Sajed and John Hobson, "Navigating Beyond the Eurofetishist Frontier of Critical IR Theory: Exploring the Complex Landscapes of Non-Western Agency," *International Studies Review*, 2017.

78   Joseph Benjamin, "Challenges before Social Science in India," *Loyola Journal of Social Science* XXVIII, no. 1 (2014): 83–96; Sue Clegg, "The Problem of Agency in Feminism: A Critical Realist Approach," *Gender and Education* 18, no. 3 (May 2006): 309–24; Michael L. Fitzhugh and William H. Leckie, Jr., "Agency, Postmodernism, and the Causes of Change," *History and Theory* 40, no. 4 (December 2001): 59–81.

we reproduce the very subject/object binary of agency denial in the choice of who we talk to and whom we talk about. In an intervention that aims to focus on writing for reflexivity, these arguments represent sensitive points that contributors to the running theme have to navigate ethically and practically.

I identified recursivity as the concept closest to the experience I aimed to achieve. I wanted to operationalise this concept by building a bridge between its epistemological dimensions and the architecture of the text. I started looking for writing strategies that would trigger this experience within myself. One inspirational text was *The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude* by La Boetie, whose writing for reflexivity strategies I have commented upon elsewhere.[79] Other notable examples are *Discipline and Punish*[80] and *The Civilizing Process*,[81] which I hope I will be able to write about one day. Notably, these texts managed to make me experience myself as part of the research problem they raised while being written differently than what people usually associate with reflexivity (e.g. auto-ethnographic writing). I was inspired to expand and subvert expectations regarding what writing for reflexivity might look like. Rather than merely breaking with established conventions about writing styles (e.g. use of the first person, in contrast with depersonalised writing influenced by the natural sciences), I realised that my objective was rather to question norms about the purpose of academic writing, via the development of concepts capable of expanding writers' imaginations and sociologising the relationship between writers and readers, in order to help them experience writing as a socio-discursive practice.

I tried to achieve this goal through different publications. For example, in *Western dominance in International Relations*? I use problematisation as a strategy for writing for reflexivity. I studied the different discourses that were naturalised for my target audience and wrote the book as a denaturalising process, by starting the different chapters with a simple question that each time challenges deeper the assumptions of the common sense of my target readers in a spiral movement.[82] A few years later I wrote "Reflexive discourse analysis: a methodology for the practice of reflexivity" as a recursive performance. Namely, "I sought to design a methodology that would not only be a means towards transformation but also a discourse that demonstrates the transformation

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79   Audrey Alejandro, "Reflexive Discourse Analysis: A Methodology for the Practice of Reflexivity," *European Journal of International Relations* 27, no. 1 (2021): 162–64.

80   Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Peregrine, 1979).

81   Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners and State Formation and Civilization* (London: Blackwell, 1939).

82   Audrey Alejandro, *Western Dominance in International Relations? The Internationalisation of IR in Brazil and India* (London & New York: Routledge, 2018), 13–16.

produced by this methodology".[83] In the final section, I reveal via a recursive "twist" that the choices behind who is cited and who the method is based on are, in fact, the product of the method I created as a strategy to make my readers "experience the process I myself went through".[84] Via these experiments, I tried to provide an experience that one could go through as something else than solely an intellectual or aesthetical one: a social experience. There is little literature about how to do reflexivity in practice, let alone about writing for reflexivity. I felt isolated in this project. So, I decided to bring more people on board to create momentum and launch a more collective conversation.

6 From Individual to Collective Experiments

Now that we have defined the concepts at the core of this initiative, how do we operationalise them to put writing for reflexivity into practice? First, I share the individual strategies for writing for reflexivity that I developed in previous works, which are the background of this collective project. Second, I introduce two guidance materials that I developed for the contributors to support them in their work: a list of "handrail" questions to help them do the decentring agency groundwork in their case study, and a commentary making explicit the writing for reflexivity strategies I undertook in a previous publication to illustrate some of the things they could do. I hope sharing this preparatory material can make this experiment collective beyond our team and include other researchers and teachers interested in decentring agency and writing for reflexivity. Finally, based on these examples I clarify our commitment to the diversity of writing styles behind this initiative. I then illustrate this diversity by showing examples from my own writing practice and the type of editorial instructions I gave to the contributors of the running theme.

6.1 *Individual Experiments*

I started my career as a PhD student thinking that being a social science researcher was about being a thinker; and that my job was to produce knowledge. I realised that producing knowledge that made sense for me and could change the way I thought was only half of the job. The other half was to communicate it in a way that could have the same effect on others. Even

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83   Audrey Alejandro, "Reflexive Discourse Analysis: A Methodology for the Practice of Reflexivity," *European Journal of International Relations* 27, no. 1 (2021): 164.

84   Alejandro, "Reflexive Discourse Analysis: A Methodology for the Practice of Reflexivity," 167.

though I was working within discourse theories, and I knew that academic knowledge was largely discursive, it never occurred to me that unless I made myself into a writer capable of sharing the transformative experience my knowledge was taking me through, I would not be able to achieve what I consider to be the goal of social science. I started asking questions I could not find answers to. Despite curiosity and interest, writing to help readers become reflexive about elements of their socialisation was not something that methodology journals or my networks were actively pursuing. In a sense, it had not yet become a site for methodological interest; it was not an academic "thing".

My previous initiatives aimed to go beyond approaching reflexivity as a meta-philosophical topic, or a statement about positionality, to turn it into a methodology: reflexivity in practice. Within this project, I wanted to be able to make readers with whom I share aspects of my socialisation experience the reflexive process I experienced as a result of the reflexive practices I put in place, rather than just telling them about it or reflecting on it. I was disappointed with the type of writing that academics commonly identify as associated with reflexivity – reflections in the first person and commentaries on situatedness – because these, in general, were not helping me to become more reflexive at all. The "Choose Your Own Adventure" or "Choose Your Path" novels I had read as a child made me want to find a way to include the readers in the academic texts I was writing. Rather than readers reading about something outside themselves, I wanted to create the experience that the world I was talking about was something we had internalised. If, theoretically, it is accepted that we internalise that world, I wanted readers to experience both themselves and myself within that world in practice through my writing. While this theoretical position is quite common among theories that use concepts such as socialisation, naturalisation, and embodiment, discussion about strategies to enable people to shift their perception as to experience the structuring and construction of the world within themselves via writing is hard to find. I had to identify strategies that enabled me to match the reading experience with the theoretical and empirical elements I was talking about. The "Choose Your Own Adventure" writing model was rigid and could not provide this experience. What was this experience about exactly?

6.2   *Guiding the Contributors*
To support the contributors in leaving their comfort zones and experimenting with writing, I tried to provide guidance that could help them analytically

disentangle different dimensions of the project. Overall, contributors shared that they found writing for reflexivity difficult because it is not something that they had been used to doing in academia and because it does not replace usual writing tasks but rather adds more layers and therefore complexity to the act of writing. I selected two types of guidance material that I had developed for the contributors to help them structure their work.

6.2.1   A Collective Handrail to Decentring Agency

Here, we approach processes of knowledge production beyond traditional methodological justification of data collection and interpretation. I compiled a list of questions to help contributors rethink their empirical material and reinterpret it according to writing for reflexivity. Based on my experience in decentring naturalised academic discourses and trying to legitimise alternative discourses, resistances often come up when a field is presented with a discourse that challenges its commonsensical assumptions. As such, strong foundations are needed to enable an article to decentre the readers from their initial perspectives. The questions aimed to "leave no stone unturned". I share them with the readers here as they may be useful for scholars wanting to emulate our initiative or teachers wanting to use them in seminar activities. We organised two workshops to discuss and give feedback on the answers the contributors had prepared for these questions. As such, the team acted as test subjects to identify whether the focus chosen by the authors was heading in the right direction, i.e. whether it had any (decentring or challenging) effects on us.

– **Your case**

What is your case a case of?

Who are the agents in your case (i.e. agents that are usually denied agency)?

What are the research questions scholars/students often ask that your case enables decentring?

– **The discourse you challenge**

What is the commonsensical view/discourse/framing your contribution enables decentring of? Summarise it in one sentence.

What are the consequences of not decentring agency regarding your case, academically and socio-politically?

– **The decentred discourse you produce**

What is the alternative discourse you produce? Summarise it in one sentence.

What are the arguments that enable you to support this alternative interpretation?

Why is decentring agency relevant for your case study? What is the "so what?" of the story you tell?

– **Your empirical contribution**
What data supports your interpretation?
How did you produce/collect this data?
How did you analyse this data?

– **Agency**
Who are the traditional agents in the discourse you aim to challenge? Are these agents explicitly referred to in the literature?
What type of discourses/beliefs/socio-political structures does the identification of these agents as sole/main agents enable the legitimisation and reproduction of in the social sciences and world politics?
How has the literature traditionally framed/defined agency and "non-Western" agency (explicitly or implicitly) regarding your case?

– **Your journey of decentring and reflexivity**
What is your interpretation of decentring and reflexivity? How would you make sense of the project in your own words?
How did you end up perceiving the world differently than the dominant discourses that your contribution challenges?
Did you take conscious steps to try to decentre agency or did decentring emerge within the research process (as something that "happened to you")?
Did you encounter challenges related to decentring (psycho-emotional, regarding your own socialisation, lack of secondary data, relation to the peers etc)?
What did you learn about yourself through this journey?

– **Writing and communicating academic knowledge**
This project is an opportunity to think about writing as a relationship and a social practice of resocialisation. Think about yourself as a writer and a social agent engaged in a relationship with other social agents through the medium that is the written discourse that you produce and they read.
What are the writing strategies you could adopt to help readers in decentring their perspective?
How do you experience writing this article? Are you telling a story? Are you sharing a journey?
What do you find the most difficult? How does this writing work differ from the type of writing work you usually do?

6.2.2 Examples of Writing Strategies

As contributors asked me to provide examples of writing strategies for decentring agency and writing for reflexivity, I wrote a commentary on an excerpt from one of my publications that engages the denial of "non-Western" agency – "Do international relations scholars not care about Central and

Eastern Europe or do they just take the region for granted? A conclusion to the special issue" pp. 1005–1006.[85] I copy the excerpt with its commentary below as an example of what can be done, and how it looks and feels. It also addresses the need for spaces where we can make explicit such writing strategies to learn from each other. I numbered the paragraph in the original text to help organise the commentary.

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1.   In contrast to Mälskoo, I do not believe that "zoom[ing] in on CEE under-standings about and scholarship on "the international" would hardly strike many as a particularly bold normative move in making the study of world politics less Eurocentric' (Mälksoo 2021b). On the contrary, I sug-gest that CEE might have been relatively neglected in the "worlding IR' debate precisely *because* it challenges the *postcolonial Eurocentrism* at the core of this conversation.[Footnote1] I argue that the region does not fit neatly the decontextualised macro-categories – "West/non-West', "North/ South', "core/periphery' – that structure this conversation as well as the discourses and representations associated with these binaries. As a result, the study of CEE is likely to have been avoided altogether in the "worlding IR' conversation to evade questioning the terms of the debate. Indeed, the history of CEE subverts the simplistic narrative that essentialises the "West' as the sole agent of world politics and non-European agents as their passive victims through a denial of their agency, and de-historicises and decontextualises the relationship between Europeans and the rest of the world (e.g. as unilateral colonisation and enslavement of the former by the latter).

2.   In the Middle Ages, South and Eastern Europe acted as human pools of eunuchs and slave-soldiers to Arab Califates in colonised Sicily, Spain, and Morocco, as well as East of the Mediterranean Sea (Rodriguez 1997; Vaissière 2007). Under the Ottoman rule, the enslavement of Southern and Eastern Europeans represented a key component of the empire's functioning and success as slave-soldiers in the military divisions of Mamluks and Janissaries, as part of the imperial harem and in other roles

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85   Audrey Alejandro, "Do International Relations Scholars Not Care about Central and Eastern Europe or Do They Just Take the Region for Granted? A Conclusion to the Special Issue," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 24, no. 4 (December 28, 2021): 1001–13.

in a context where "white slaves' also occupied dedicated administrative functions (Freely 2000).

3. Such a rendering of CEE's history might appear simplistic and essentialising. Yet, simplistic and homogenising renderings of world history form part of the function and success of categories such as "West/non-West', "North/South', "core/periphery." The abovementioned narratives might more easily *appear* simplistic than the ones dominating the discipline, precisely because they are not naturalised. On the contrary, they tend to challenge the essentialising foundations on which the contemporary IR categorisation of the world is based. The question becomes of *who* has the luxury of imposing a global essentialising and simplistic vision of history and performing identities accordingly; and we can imagine that if the Ottoman Empire had not lost World War I, the current "alternative' narratives might be the ones organising collective representations.

4. Going beyond this play of imagination, one can use the abundant historiographical work about the politics of the Ottoman Empire in Eastern Europe to decentre and challenge the essentialisation processes resulting from the current dominant narratives. For instance, the history of the region is considered an exemplary case of colonisation through deportation, as forced migrations between South and Eastern Europe and Anatolia represented a tenet of the empire's demographic engineering (Şeker 2013). Mass deportation and resettlement policy included moving Turkish and Muslim populations to areas perceived as 'hostile' to the empire and moving Christian populations away from conquered territories (Barkan 1951/1952; İnalcık 1954). Such policies had lasting effects on both the construction of the subsequent Turkish state (that continued to implement forced migration within Anatolia), as well as in the previously occupied territories. This is, for instance, the case in Bulgaria where Muslim populations settled as a result of the Ottomans' forced migration policy and were subsequently expelled from Bulgaria-owned lands in the 1870s and 1880s, setting a precedent to what some have considered a "recurrent feature of Bulgaria's ethno-demographic development until the end of the 20th century' (Kalionski 2002 cited in Şeker 2013).

5. Despite the explosion of IR works relating to the politics of empire and their legacy, as well as the establishment of post-colonial studies in IR, the politics and impact of Turkish imperialism in colonised Eastern Europe have not raised major interest within IR post-colonial, decolonial and anti-colonial scholarship (see Türesay (2013) for an overview of what a postcolonial take on the Ottoman empire can look like). It is interesting

to notice how easily the Eastern and Southern European colonial experience is forgotten, despite Bulgarians and Greeks having been colonised for 500 and 400 years respectively, while other populations seem to be only apprehended through the lens of their colonial past.

6.   In the 20th century, the region became either occupied at the territorial margins of the Euro-Asian U.S.S.R. federation or under its influence. In the current context, part of CEE's population benefits from white privilege in a globalised world while being simultaneously stigmatised as undesirable immigrants by xenophobic movements in countries to which they emigrated. Roma populations, settled in CEE in the 11th century alongside the latest stages of Turkic migrations to Europe, can be in many regards considered one of the most discriminated groups in Europe (Buchanan 2015). Again, this complexity challenges the simplistic binaries organising IR ways of thinking and requires nuanced and contextualised analysis, a step that not everyone might be willing to take.

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This excerpt deals with the idea that, despite the explosion of IR literature about empires and post-colonial contexts, Southern and Eastern Europe is barely mentioned in this body of work, similar to the Ottoman Empire, despite the rich historical tradition dealing with Ottoman imperial policies that could be used by IR scholars. In this one-page argument, I developed different strategies to help readers decentre their perspective and question their potential denial of agency. I picked this excerpt as an example because the writing mechanisms are quite simple and condensed, so are easier to share than what I have written in my book, for example.

–   In the opening §1, I provided a quotation that I think many readers would agree with and I presented an analytical argument problematising Eurocentric binaries that I think they would also be sympathetic with.

–   In § 2, I wrote a simplistic discourse about the history of slavery that exists within Turkish nationalist discourses, as I thought this interpretation of history would "trigger" many IR readers and require them to position themselves in relation to it, therefore bringing to the surface the naturalised discourses they might have been socialised into.

–   In the following §3, I accompanied them in decentring the discourse(s) that my text may have brought to the surface. I introduced the idea that

the "triggering" does not come from the fact that this interpretation might be less "true" than the current discourses dominating the conversation but because it is less common and less naturalised, thus inviting them to reflect on the double standards that may mediate their perception.

– In §4, I wrote a decentring discourse closer to something that I expect readers would experience as more reasonable (e.g. about how imperial policies of forced migration may have influenced contemporary immigration policy in Bulgaria).

– While I do so, I also summarise in §5 my argument and introduce the information that I have identified as holding the strongest decentring potential: Bulgaria and Greece (two European Union countries largely considered as white European by part of my target audience) were colonised for 500 and 400 years by a "non-Western" power and that this story is largely erased from the discipline.

– In § 6, I concluded by showing that decentring agency and problematising simplistic and essentialist binaries might result in discourses that may not be appealing to some readers because of their complexity.

6.3   *The Many Ways of "Writing for Reflexivity"*

Beyond the example above, what does a "writing for reflexivity" text look like? How does it need to address the readers? What kind of language does it need to use? As this running theme promotes the idea that writing norms ought to be expanded, it may be expected that we wish to advocate for a new, allegedly better, writing style and to discard other writing techniques accordingly. This is not what this article aims to argue. Rather, the different contributions of this running theme put forward a diversity of strategies for writing for reflexivity.

Indeed, different audiences and different topics require different strategies to foster the desired reflexive effects and existing writing options can be repurposed. Like the diversity of genres and strategies deployed in other types of reflexive writing, writing for reflexivity does not have to be reduced to only one template. In my feedback to the contributors, I encouraged them to shake off their expectations and make their own decisions when it comes to writing strategies. Following Feyerabend's anti-prescriptive attitude towards methodology, anything goes as long as it enables us to achieve the intended effects through our work.[86]

To illustrate this argument, I outline here a few elements that need to be decided upon by writers interested in writing for reflexivity. The success of

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86   Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London: Verso Books, 1975).

their writing for reflexivity experiment relies on these decisions. Different factors may influence how they chose them, such as the writer's skill set, the anticipated expectations of our target audiences, or the norms that condition the publication. These decisions include:

– The reflexive process (e.g., decentring, deconstructing, problematising ...),
– The genre (e.g., auto-ethnography, essay, methodological article ...),
– The dispositions, ideologies, prejudices, and hidden positionality we aim for readers to become reflexive about (e.g., Eurocentrism, denial of agency ...),
– The methodological unit we may use to structure the reflexive writing (e.g., discourse, categories ...),
– The voice (e.g., whether we put forward the unique personality of the writer or not, how it sets the tone of the writing ...),
– Positionality (e.g., whether aspects of the socialisation and position of the writer are made transparent to the readers, which ones and how ...).

To illustrate this point, I will unpack more specifically what I mean by diversity of voice, genre and methodological units to give examples of the different choices we may have to make when writing for reflexivity.

For instance, in the book *Anthropologists at Work*[87] that I mentioned previously, anthropologists use the genre of anecdotal fieldwork experiences with a very strong (often humorous) *voice* to describe how they became aware of facets of their ethnocentrism. The stories are written in a way that enabled me to perceive my own ethnocentrism alongside the researchers'. Reading this book was the first time I really experienced how writing strategies could set up an experience for the readers to become more reflexive about aspects of themselves that were mirrored in the text. I admired this effect. I was also fascinated by the fact that I was deeply questioning myself without denunciation taking place. Rather than placing me in a pillory for being guilty of ethnocentrism, the book was creating a safe space for me to navigate the uncomfortable emotions and resistances arising from the reflexive acknowledgement of my biases and prejudices; a process that mere exposition of facts might not have triggered, and that polarising condemnation might have forestalled.

After experimenting with writing for reflexivity in my works (see section 6.1.), I wanted to expand the project for it to become a collective initiative where different contributors would re-interpret their case studies in their own creative ways through the lens of writing for reflexivity. This running theme aims to share this initiative with an audience, bringing it to a collective beyond our team to see whether the experiment worked in its destined environment.

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87   Philip R. Devita, ed., *Stumbling toward Truth: Anthropologists at Work* (Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Pr Inc, 2000).

I did not use the same writing style in my own writing experiments, nor did I ask the contributors to write their pieces as humorous anecdotes. Humour may foster readers' reflexivity for some topics, but may be ill-advised for others where it might be perceived as insensitive and "put off" the readers. Discomfort is a feeling commonly experienced when practising reflexivity;[88] however, making readers uncomfortable to the point they stop reading is counter-productive.

Regarding the question of *genre*, I have mentioned in this article two formats: auto-ethnography (the two illustrative cases of the running theme,[89] and a methodological piece.[90] Each genre, including these, offers pros and cons when it comes to writing for reflexivity. Auto-ethnography provides the opportunity to describe in detail one's experience and perspective from a personal point of view. This can facilitate readers with similar world visions and perspectives to follow the writer on their journey. However, where readers cannot relate to the writer's personal elements, this narrative mode may infringe rather than foster identification with the process. As such, when it comes to writing for reflexivity, auto-ethnography may be a useful strategy when it is anticipated that the target audience can relate to the writer's trajectory, positions, dispositions and socialisation. In contrast, the methodological article I wrote, with dense analytical reasoning, might appeal to readers who are more attracted by analytical problematisation rather than subjective descriptions. However, based on my experience, writing a theoretical or methodological piece in order to produce reflexivity is not the easiest route, especially considering the word limit expected by most journals. It is an equilibrist achievement that may result in a multi-dimensional recursively scaffolded publication not accessible to a broad audience because it is too dense.

Another decision writers may wish to think about is what I refer to as the *"methodological unit(s)"* that we use to identify what we wish the readers to be reflexive about. Despite the pieces mentioned above differing regarding their genre, they have in common that they take a discourse as the starting point to help prepare our manuscript for writing for reflexivity (see the handrail questions above in section 6.2.1.). I picked "discourse" as a methodological unit because I am familiar with working with this concept and I felt I could guide others to do so, in order to help readers to pay attention to the discourses we

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88   Wanda S. Pillow, "Confession, Catharsis, or Cure? Rethinking the Uses of Reflexivity as Methodological Power in Qualitative Research," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 16, no. 2 (2003), https://doi.org/10.1080/0951839032000060635.

89   (see Untalan, 2024.; Anderl, 2024).

90   Audrey Alejandro, "Reflexive Discourse Analysis: A Methodology for the Practice of Reflexivity," *European Journal of International Relations* 27, no. 1 (2021): 150–74.

implicitly normalise and to introduce them to alternative discourses to open a reflexive space. Elsewhere, I have focused on the role of categories and word use in this process of normalisation and developed methods of linguistic reflexivity to help researchers become reflexive about these.[91] Such approaches could easily be turned into methods for writing for reflexivity as categories and words represent other accessible methodological units for this exercise. For example, in the case of decentring agency, I could have added the following questions to the handrail to help the contributors: What are the categories routinely used to talk about the social agents you write about? Have scholars produced reflexive statements regarding these categories? Do they share how these words prevented them from adequately describing a phenomenon, or were associated with prejudices they became aware of? Does the literature describe these categories as potentially harmful or unethical? What alternative set of categories could you use instead? What would your argument look like without substituting these categories at all?

7   Conclusion

For all the guidance and tips on how to conduct other dimensions of research, there are far fewer guides problematising writing practices and interrogating how our writing practices may encourage or discourage reflexivity in our readers. Writing for reflexivity is not necessarily a rejection of existing writing strategies, but rather an expansion of the ways in which they are used and of the objectives of writing that add to existing objectives such as sharing empirical results. By this, I stress the need to go beyond academic writing as a process of organising knowledge with words coherently and transparently to present information and ideas to readers. Writing for reflexivity expands the conceptualisation of writing in a different direction by operationalising the common idea that discourse and knowledge are not neutral and contribute to the reproduction of socio-political configurations via socialisation. In that sense, writing for reflexivity as a social practice becomes a conscious act of structuring, formulating and plotting devices within our text with the objective of challenging readers' perceptions, shifting their experience of the world,

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91   Audrey Alejandro and Ellie Knott, "How to Pay Attention to the Words We Use: The Reflexive Review as a Method for Linguistic Reflexivity," *International Studies Review* 24, no. 3 (2022), https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viac025; Audrey Alejandro, "How to Problematise Categories: Building the Methodological Toolbox for Linguistic Reflexivity," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 20 (2021), https://doi.org /https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211055572.

and potentially, through this transformation, having a ripple effect on the interactions, relations and institutions to which they contribute. This objective is both precise and broad as many strategies can lead to these results, but they have yet to be explicitly unpacked. In that sense, our research program is not prescriptive towards any writing style. Instead, it is an applied exercise to show the challenges and potential relevance of writing for a purpose that may be outside of the current norm – writing for reflexivity – which we explored here through decentring, but could be achieved through other processes.

While we (the team of the running theme) are optimistic, excited and energised about creative initiatives, I would like to acknowledge that we do not think that a practice such as writing for reflexivity is easy. Through our experiments, we struggled. We went through phases of doubt about what we were doing and whether we could actually achieve it: "Why did I put myself in this situation?", "Is it worth it?", "Why am I not doing something more normal?". Such challenges and difficulty in doing things differently is, I believe, one reason why we ended up with such a small team. Moreover, how it feels to depart from "business as usual" is not only about personal skills or psychological resistance. Structural constraints of neo-liberal academia pressure us into forgetting that academic writing is an act of communication between human beings. We may feel incentivised to write as a means to get published and cited, and it requires a lot of energy to keep sight of the readers in that process. But, every now and then, we may read something that challenges us. We may find a type of writing like the type of writing we wish to emulate and that makes us happy!