

Six ways to get a grip on developing reflexivity statements

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Abstract

Qualitative researchers have underscored the value and importance of being reflexive in the research process, yet existing guidelines or checklists on how to practically address reflexivity are often scant and scattered across studies. In this scholarly perspective, we review, analyse, and present an overview of conceptions of reflexivity. Further, we offer practical guidelines for addressing and developing reflexivity statements in qualitative research. We describe reflexivity as both a concept and a deliberate ongoing process that requires a certain level of researcher consciousness, reflection, introspection, self-awareness, and an analytic attention to the researcher's role in the research process at all stages. We highlight the notion that reflexivity offers researchers an opportunity to examine potential assumptions, through the continuous process of questioning, examining, accepting, and articulating our attitudes, assumptions, perspectives, and roles. We present six recommendations to promote dialogue on the practice of reflexivity among researchers from various ontological and epistemological communities and encourage them to develop their own reflexivity practices.

Résumé

Résumé français à venir.

Introduction

Many qualitative researchers have underscored the value and importance of being reflexive in the research process, yet the problem is that there is often a lack of comprehensive guidelines on how to practically address reflexivity. Reflexivity has been portrayed as a deliberate ongoing process that requires a certain level of researcher

consciousness, reflection, self-awareness, and an analytic attention to the researcher's role in the research process at all stages.¹ When critically appraising qualitative research, some methodologists emphasize that researchers must be transparent about the research position, potential biases, and assumptions throughout the research process.² Reflexivity as a process requires reflection on how subjectivity may impact the research process.³ It involves

recognizing, examining, and understanding how researchers' social background, location, and assumptions affect their research practice and justification of their methodological approach.³ We present recommendations on how researchers can develop their own reflexivity statements and practices.

Definition of reflexivity

It is important to acknowledge that reflexivity can be conceptualized in multiple ways.³ For this paper, we define reflexivity in qualitative research as the active process whereby each team member or individual (when research is not conducted within a team) examines the dynamic and reciprocal relationships between personal experiences and positions, social and environmental contexts, conscious and unconscious biases, and the research process and outcomes.^{1,4,5} It includes a deliberate and ongoing dialogue which considers specific research contexts with all team members.⁶ This process ensures that individuals are active agents who engage in deliberate and transparent research practices.³

How reflexivity is addressed in the health sciences

Within health sciences, critical reflection is a common practice for professionals.⁷ Practitioners are encouraged to examine and challenge their own assumptions, beliefs, and power dynamics within a critically reflective practice that can lead to changes in their own practice. Within reflexivity, however, practitioners recognize "one's own position in the world both to better understand the limitations of one's own knowing and to better appreciate the social realities of others" which can lead to structural or institutional change.⁷ Tremblay and colleagues (2021) developed a tool to facilitate reflexive behaviours within the clinical context.⁸ Research in health sciences would benefit from adapting a similar framework to guide reflexivity.

Although previous research suggests that how we conceptualize reflexivity and apply it into our practice can have important implications for our research, researchers have raised concerns about the superficial use of reflexivity.⁹ Within medical journals, space is often at a premium, and limited word counts often make tables or figures attractive ways to present data. Reflexivity statements, which can be lengthy if they are to be substantive and meaningful rather than simply a

'checkbox,' may be the first thing sacrificed in an article to meet journal requirements.

Six ways to get a grip on reflexivity statements

As evidenced by the literature reviewed above, reflexivity statements can differ according to the domain and experience of the authors. Despite these differences, there are some common elements that should be included. Additionally, your reflexivity statement should be tailored to your research question thus impacting what information you disclose. We recommend six ways to get a grip on developing and writing reflexivity statements. These guidelines are outlined in Table 1. Reflexivity is an ongoing process and should not be reduced to a checklist. The guidelines below are designed to encourage internal dialogue as a researcher and dialogue within your team to guide both personal and team reflexivity in a systematic manner. An overview of each guideline in the table is explained below.

To help illustrate how these guidelines may be applied in practice. We have included an example phenomenological study examining educators' and learners' experiences in an educational program.

1. Connect to the phenomena of interest

One of the aims of engaging in reflexivity is to acknowledge the importance of researcher subjectivity. We recommend reflecting on how your personal (e.g., gender, age, values) and professional experiences (e.g., role, education, research expertise) influence the research process. This can include your lived experiences related to the phenomena of interest and other previous experiences that relate to your research topic. If your research is conducted in a team setting, all team members should reflect upon their experiences with the phenomena of interest and how these experiences may have influenced the research process. To share these experiences in your reflexivity statement, we recommend including a description of key experiences of all team members related to the phenomena of interest. Within the context of our example, you could reflect on your experiences as a learner and/or as an educator, your values and beliefs regarding education, or your relationships to the program content.

2. Connect to the research process

As a reflexive researcher, it is important to rigorously examine, question, and address your personal assumptions throughout the research process. You must be able to

clearly state and confront your assumptions regarding the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of your research and address the potential impact of such assumptions on the research process and findings. Epistemology provides a philosophical underpinning when deciding the nature of knowledge and provides a justification on how the knowledge is gathered or constructed.¹⁰ Ontological underpinnings refer to understanding the nature of reality being studied and what there is to know about it.¹⁰ Hence, in your reflexivity statement, we suggest including a discussion of how your assumptions intersect with the philosophical underpinnings of your research, as well as a description of if, and how, your assumptions evolved over the course of the research process. In our example, it will be important to our approach to reflexivity aligns with the phenomenological tradition. This may involve an ongoing and iterative process of reflection, writing, and discussion of educators' and learners' lived experiences with this specific educational program.

3. Connect to invested partners

Research is a relational process that can involve several different partner groups (e.g., faculty members, students, research assistants, partner organizations, and participants). It is important to consider how your research (both the process and the findings) may influence all invested partners. For example, you can reflect on how the lessons learned from the research process (e.g., format of interview questions, type of data analysis) or the research findings themselves may influence your future research initiatives or your personal experiences with the topic. Further, you can consider how engagement in the research (e.g., level of involvement, positive versus negative experiences) may shape your participants' future experiences with the topic or the research process. In your reflexivity statement, we recommend discussing how the lessons learned from engaging in your research, as well as from the study findings, may shape your team, your participants, and the broader community moving forward. In our educational example, you may reflect on how the findings from the program evaluation may influence your teams' and your participants' future educational experiences, as well as engagement with future educational research.

4. Connect to ethical considerations

There are many ethical considerations to consider when conducting qualitative research. This includes power dynamics between researchers and participants, weighting

of participants' voices throughout the research process, and reciprocity. We recommend that these ethical considerations be identified and discussed at the beginning of the research process. In your reflexivity statement, include a description of the ethical considerations of your research and how they influenced your research process. In our example study, this may involve careful consideration of who conducts interviews and their relationships to the learners and educators in the program and how to balance educator and learner perspectives within the data collection and analysis.

5. Connect to the research context

Reflexive researchers recognize that their research is shaped by the broader context in which it occurs, including the geographic location of the research, the historical context, social, political, or popular culture events, as well as organizational policies or programs. It is important for you to reflect on how your research may both influence, and be influenced by, the social and environmental context. In your reflexivity statement, we suggest providing an overview of important contextual factors that shaped your research process and your findings. For our example, this may include discussion of key organizational policies that may shape learners' and educators' experiences in the program, as well as the context of the program itself.

6. Connect reflexivity and action

Reflexivity is an ongoing and iterative process.¹ It is important to ensure that your reflexivity practices be communicated, discussed, and reflected upon by all team members on an ongoing basis. For example, we recommend creating a tool for documenting your reflexivity process through a diary, log, or reflective journal. This could include providing frequent updates on the research process, establishing an open and ongoing dialogue for discussing findings, and showcasing how you are being reflexive to invested partners. In your reflexivity statement, we recommend discussing when and how you engaged in reflexivity throughout the research process, as well as how you engaged invested partners in the reflexivity process. For example, our example study may involve a reflective journal that allows for documentation of our reflections on our experiences and key research activities.

Table 1. Ways to get a grip on Reflexivity Statements

| Aspects of Reflexivity Statements | Present | | How Each Item was Addressed. If not, explain why. |
|---|---------|----|---|
| | Yes | No | |
| In your reflexivity statement, did you include a description of key experiences of all team members related to the phenomena of interest? | | | |
| In your reflexivity statement, did you discuss how your assumptions intersect with the philosophical underpinnings of your research and how (if at all) your assumptions evolved over the course of the research process? | | | |
| In your reflexivity statement, did you consider how your research may influence the perspectives and experiences of all invested partners? | | | |
| In your reflexivity statement, did you include a description of the ethical considerations of your research and how they influenced your research process? | | | |
| In your reflexivity statement did you provide an overview of important contextual factors that shaped your research process and your findings? | | | |
| In your reflexivity statement, did you discuss when and how you engaged in reflexivity throughout the research process, as well as how you engaged invested partners in the reflexivity process? | | | |

Conclusion

This paper has provided a practical guideline for addressing and developing reflexivity statements in health sciences specific to qualitative research. We hope that scholars will embrace the use of these guidelines more extensively across research methodologies. This tool may promote dialogue among researchers across ontological and epistemological communities and provide some common characteristics of quality reflexivity practices. Indeed, reflexivity can serve as an important avenue for enhancing the rigour of research across several paradigms. By engaging with this tool, we hope that researchers will reflect on, and develop their own reflexivity practices, as well as gain a deeper appreciation of the reflexivity practices of self and others.

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