

Embarking on a Journey of Reflexivity: Insights from Research Practice

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ABSTRACT

The primary aim of this article is to provide an analysis of the notion of reflexivity within the context of qualitative research. This concept serves to enhance researchers' self-awareness regarding the underlying reasons for their decisions and contributes to the development of knowledge. This paper provides insights derived from the author's personal experience of composing a doctoral thesis, with respect to the reflexive practices that were duly considered. Concurrently, the objective of this article is to examine reflexivity from a pragmatic standpoint and as a means of attaining a more profound comprehension of "what you do and why you do, what you do." This paper examines the concept from both theoretical and practical perspectives for a comprehensive view. This paper points out that researchers do use reflexivity, but the key question is how much they are aware of this important practice. All in all, the concepts and reflexive practices that are discussed in this paper will serve as the impetus for one's own personal voyage of reflexivity.

KEYWORDS: Reflexivity, Qualitative Research, Knowledge Development

1.0 INTRODUCTION

According to Fayomi et al. (2018), applied research plays a pivotal role in addressing real-life problems and advancing progress towards the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by informing policy decisions and fostering growth through quality insights. Reflexivity is crucial in research, especially in the context of addressing real-life problems and advancing towards SDGs, as it encourages researchers to critically reflect on their own biases, assumptions, and positions, thus enhancing the validity, reliability, and ethical integrity of their findings and contributing to more nuanced and socially responsible solutions. Thus, this paper is beneficial to the research community because it can improve their research practices.

There is much that researchers ought to understand regarding reflexivity and its potential to aid in the expansion of knowledge. By the end of my PhD journey, I realised it was crucial to understand *what you do and why you do what you do*. This paper is curated for postgraduate students, academicians, and anyone interested in understanding reflexivity in research practice. In this paper, I share the research works of authors who have championed reflexivity and, at the same time, share my personal journey. It is hoped that this reflective piece will help others who are struggling to identify their reflexivity practice. I wish to inspire my fellow researchers by stating that, inherently, they engage in reflexivity whenever they conduct research; however, the degree to which this awareness has been established remains to be seen. I hope this paper sparks your reflexivity.

Reflexivity refers to the capacity of the researchers to intentionally analyse their own knowledge construction (Roulston, 2010). Engaging in this process requires introspection regarding the ways in which social context, preconceived notions, positioning, and conduct impact research (Finlay & Gough, 2003). Gibson (2021) mentioned that reflexivity is a process of "critically exploring the relationship between the writer and the words they are writing or claims they are making with the context, people, problems being researched" (p. 243)

In contrast to reflection, which merely involves contemplating the action itself, reflexivity involves contemplating the action's framework or foundation. While composing this paper, I could not help but consider how beneficial it would be to introduce our undergraduate students to this thought process (*refer to the recommendations of this paper*). This is because reflexivity heightens self-awareness. May and Perry (2017) highlighted the aspects that are illuminated through reflexivity:

“First, an awareness of oneself is necessary for the exercise of any rule or sense of obligation of the expectations that are made and reside within us. Second, our traditional or habitual practices require monitoring as we meet unexpected circumstances and interact with other people who have different practices. Third, guidelines for action may be in conflict with each other thereby requiring deliberation and action.” (p. 4)

Finlay (2002, p.532) also points out that although reflexivity is a challenging process, confronting these challenges benefits the researchers in the following ways:

- i. examine the impact of the position, perspective, and presence of the researcher;
- ii. promote rich insight through examining personal responses and interpersonal dynamics;
- iii. empower others by opening up a more radical consciousness;
- iv. evaluate the research process, method, and outcomes; and
- v. enable public scrutiny of the integrity of the research through offering a methodological log of research decisions.

Roulston (2010) urged qualitative researchers to know who they are in connection to research projects and how that relates to their epistemological and theoretical ideas about knowledge generation. Understanding the worldview of others and examining the subjectivity researchers bring into the research helps enhance researchers' critical awareness, eventually heightening the reflexive moments. Ravitch and Carl (2020, p. 107) highlighted four areas to cultivate reflexivity in data collection – composing researcher memos, keeping a researcher journal, engaging in a dialogic engagement, and conducting researcher interviewer. To enhance reflexivity as a researcher, Ravitch and Carl (2020) also have provided the questions one can ask (Table 1). This set of questions helps one to understand why they do what they do. The idea of reflexivity is to go in-depth and understand the decisions we make in our research choices.

Table 1. Reflexive Data Collection Questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2020)

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- How do I present myself? The research topic and goals? What informs these choices?
 - What is my communication style?
 - What influences the choices I make around communication with participants within and beyond the interviews and other forms of data collection (e.g., focus groups, email exchanges)?
 - What influences the kinds of communication I value from and with research participants?
 - What are the kinds of knowledge or information I tend to value and gravitate toward more than other kinds (e.g., verbal vs. nonverbal, written vs. spoken, topics that capture my attention)? And what might I be missing as a result?
 - Do I listen carefully? How might I improve my listening skills?
 - Do I have strategies for paying careful attention and watching/tracking how my own subjectivities and biases play out in my research?
 - How are these strategies working, and how might I improve on them over time?
 - Do I impose—either explicitly or implicitly—my opinions or value judgments during data collection and broader interactions with participants? If so, in what ways?
 - What assumptions lie underneath my data collection instruments (e.g., the content and wording of questions, their sequence)? The ways that I implement them?
 - Am I seeing connections between my research questions and my instrument questions as responses come in?
 - Am I probing for context and specifics adequately? How can I improve on this?
 - Do I cut people off or talk over them? If so, are there patterns related to when I seem to do this?
 - Do I allow for generative pauses and silences, or am I anxious around silence?
 - Am I uncomfortable with people sharing private things or things that I may find problematic, uncomfortable, or even offensive? If so, do I show that during interactions?
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Am I overly confident in my appeal or my interviewing or focus group facilitation skills? If so, in what ways? How can I improve on them?

- How do my social location and positionality influence data collection and broader interactions with participants? What are some specific examples of this?
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There is so much more that I believe one can learn from the research works when reflexivity comes into the picture. It makes research practice more alive and engaging, primarily in writing a doctoral thesis, which can be lonely and emotional. This paper aims to encourage researchers to practice reflexivity, which helps one understand the decisions made at every step of the journey. The following section provides insight into the reflexivity practice I have considered in my research practice.

2.0 REFLEXIVITY IN RESEARCH

Gibson (2021) provides an alternative to express the academic writing style through fictional representation. Using fiction in doctoral theses allows for deconstructing traditional knowledge structures and opens up possibilities for reflexivity in the research process. Reflexivity enhances the construction of new knowledge through the deconstruction of conventional knowledge structure by self-reflection and critical engagement with one's research. An example is Kamler and Thomson (2008), who associated reflexivity with the metaphor of hosting a dinner party:

“The party occurs in one’s own home, in the familiar territory where one belongs (not the ocean, or the swamp, or the dark tunnel). The candidate invites to her table the scholars with whom she wishes to engage in dialogue. The emphasis is on the company and the conversation. The candidate has selected the menu, bought the food, cooked the dishes which she offers her guests. As host to this party, she makes space for the guests to talk about their work, but in relation to her own work. Her own research/thesis is never disconnected from the conversation, for after all it lies on her table. It is part of the food the guests eat, chew and digest.” (p. 6)

Writing or linking in this manner merely facilitates the investigation of researchers' experiences and obstacles, ultimately fostering critical engagement. I linked the reflexive practice of my doctoral thesis to the wooden nesting dolls. When I began my PhD research, I had to view my beliefs, position, culture, and context on the subject matter in relation to the world and the wider perspective. My reflection became reflexive when I started questioning assessment practices that support students' learning for the research context I carried out for my doctoral studies. Being a teacher for the past 15 years (at the point of writing my doctoral thesis) in a higher education setting has brought subjectivity that I had to view separately. The analogy of matryoshka dolls, the wooden nesting dolls that reduce in size, as shown in Figure 1, is the illustration I used to explain my reflexivity practice.

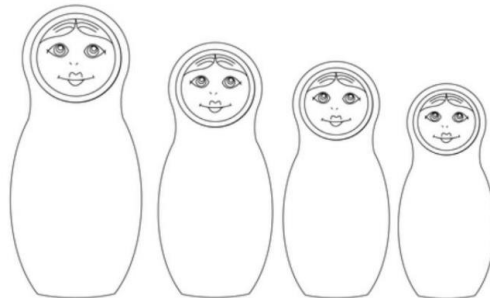


Figure 1. Connecting Reflexive Practice to Matryoshka Dolls (Arthur, 2024)

In my doctoral journey, I realised that I always had to question my thought process before making every decision. Like this nesting doll, I sometimes had to remove the hidden thoughts, concerns, or beliefs

to evaluate if my subjectivity affected my decision-making. The following sub-sections provide two main areas in which reflexivity is displayed to a great extent, which fellow researchers may also be able to identify.

2.1 Understanding the Worldview of Participants

In my doctoral study (*refer to Arthur, 2024*), I interviewed a large group of participants. I engaged in semi-structured interviews. Firstly, while creating the list of questions for the semi-structured interview, I had to be careful not to influence the interviewees with my beliefs. Having read many journal articles and book chapters on the subject matter, I already had preconceived thoughts on some areas. However, I was also eager to discover my participants' viewpoints because I firmly believe I must be prepared to receive various worldviews instead of expecting a single answer to every problem. Hence, when I find contradiction or agreement with my belief, I write comments on the transcription of the interviews. Later, these notes helped me while working on the data analysis, where I added more notes.

This act can be related to writing memos. Ravitch and Carl (2020) emphasise that writing memos increases focused engagement, and the duo calls this method structured reflexivity. As a practical tool, reflexivity, when approached systematically, has the potential to enable researchers from a wide variety of backgrounds to examine the nature of their work critically and to identify how their underlying values, assumptions, and beliefs affect the synthesis, dissemination, exchange, and application of their research findings (Lockyer et al., 2004).

Writing additional notes is not only referred to as writing memos (Ravitch & Carl, 2020) but also journaling (Grbich, 2013) or even a research diary (Nigel et al., 2018). These reflexive practices after each interview help to understand each participant's worldview. In fact, being involved in the transcription process also helped me practice reflexivity, although this process was time-consuming. Slowing down and engaging (Hammersley, 2010) in the text let me reflect on my position as a teacher regarding the replies shared to co-construct the meaning that might otherwise be lost in the hurry of interviews (Shelton & Flint, 2019).

I became more aware of the differences between the participants' beliefs and mine. I could see the similarities and differences and wanted to know why they thought this way. The shared understanding between the participants and the researcher becomes increasingly obvious as the reflexivity practices increase. As May and Perry (2014) highlight, "reflexivity involves turning back on oneself in order that processes of knowledge production become the subject of investigation" (p. 118). Hence, on top of the subject matter being investigated, the beauty of qualitative study is that knowledge production becomes the researcher's matter of investigation.

While trying to understand the worldview of my participants, I also understood that reflexivity is not a method but a way of thinking that aids my interpretation of my knowledge construction. It does not stop at one point but is an iterative process. From data collection to data analysis to the writing phase, researchers frequently engage in iterative cycles of writing, feedback, revision, and reflection in order to improve their arguments, concepts, and writing style. Reflexive moments are produced by the self-awareness and critical engagement lens that researchers adopt throughout this process of pursuing interpretation.

2.2 Enhancing Critical Engagement

Pillow (2010) highlights the significance of understanding how the researcher's identity and experiences impact all aspects of the research process. He also adds that by delving into subjectivity, researchers can become more aware of these influences and consider their implications for the research outcomes. This is evident in my research practice as well. Finlay (2002, p.531) aptly mentions, "Through the use of reflexivity, subjectivity in research can be transformed from a problem to an opportunity". Pillow (2003) delves into the complexities of subjectivity in qualitative research, particularly in relation to power dynamics, cultural intuition, and the potential pitfalls of self-reflexivity that may lead to researchers seeking similarities between themselves and the research subjects. Pillow challenges traditional notions of subjectivity by critiquing how self-reflexivity can sometimes reinforce researcher biases and fail to fully account for the complexities of power dynamics and representation in research. By cautioning against this,

Pillow emphasises maintaining critical distance and engaging with diverse perspectives for rigorous research.

In my doctoral study, I realised reflexivity does not only happen when I am writing but also begins at the data collection stage. Once I become aware of it, I am aware of my subjectivity. One example is that I constantly remember to maintain the ethical dimension of the research by not making assumptions about the participants' viewpoints but clarifying them accordingly whenever necessary. This helped to make unbiased judgments. Applying one's prior understanding is a question of moving from closeness to distance and back again (Nielsen and Repstad, 1993). This is where my reflexive practice was put to good use. I had to re-construct what I knew by giving a voice to the participants to make the knowledge production more meaningful. I realised the importance of maintaining critical distance, as Pillow (2003) emphasised. Here is a short description of my experience of critical distance: I felt like I almost had to withdraw for the moment from the shore (tide recedes) during the data collection and data analysis and make a comeback to shore (high tide) later on. I realise I am not researching to identify similarities but rather to be objective. In other words, through inductive-deductive reasoning, in which I see myself zooming in and zooming out to view the findings, viewing the perspective from the bottom-up and top-down approaches, I realise I am able to provide a broader perspective that takes advantage of the uniqueness of conducting case study research the insights from the participants.

I also realised that reflexivity is not a checklist that I tick; it is a process I have to engage in continuously. Reflexivity requires researchers to outline "what I know" and "how I know it" throughout the study process (Hertz, 1997). Hence, this evidence in my research practice shows that reflexivity is a continuous process that researchers have to engage in.

3.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

I aim to investigate further and establish connections regarding reflexivity in the context of teaching and learning. Enhancing academics' comprehension of the rationale underlying their teaching practices will facilitate their ability to elucidate to students the specific implementation of each class practice. Brownlee et al. (2017) discuss the importance of epistemic cognition in teaching and learning, emphasising the need for teachers to reflect on their beliefs and practices, suggesting that changes in epistemic cognition can occur through reflexivity, not just reflection about teaching practice. Brownlee et al. (2017) proposed the 3R-EC framework, which stands for Reflection, Reflexivity, and Resolved Action for Epistemic Cognition. Cramer et al. (2023) focus on a meta-reflexive approach to teacher professionalism, emphasising the importance of multiparadigmatic perspectives and reflective practices in teacher education. The authors relate reflexivity to teaching by emphasising the importance of critical self-awareness in academic life and teaching practice. They discuss how bringing reflexivity into teaching can help educators better understand the impact of their management practices on themselves and those they work with. Hibbert (2012) suggests that teaching reflexivity involves a shift towards dialectic reasoning and nurturing an attitude of outward and inward inquiry. An effective catalyst for students to acquire 21st-century skills could be the incorporation of reflexivity into classroom practice.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Theoretical and practical insights into reflexivity are presented in this paper. However, it is essential to note that the notion of reflexivity is complex and involves both self-awareness and critical engagement. This transcends the self-reflexive process at hand. Through this method, researchers appreciate the variations in the participants' worldviews. This procedure isolates the researcher from the subjects under investigation. The researcher eventually perceives themselves as an independent entity engaged in the co-construction of knowledge. When reflexivity is in operation, the researcher's personal biases, which may be associated with power dynamics, cultural differences, or any other form of inclination, must be identified. More research is needed to view and recognise teaching and learning in relation to reflexivity.

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