

Accounting for reflexivity enhances quality and increases researcher sensitivity to informants' concerns. Reflexivity, then, is a matter of both quality and ethics. Researchers are reflexive when they are aware of the multiple influences they have on research processes and on how research processes affect them.

There are many reasons to account for researchers' reflexivity. Besides the promise of deepening and broadening understanding of the topical area to be researched, accounting for reflexivity can add to the integrity of the research. We researchers are subjective, fallible human beings who are full of biases and favourite theories.

Ongoing scrutiny of ourselves is a way for us to 'come clean' so that we are less likely to unwittingly

impose our perspectives on research participants and more likely to provide an open venue for the perspectives of informants to blossom. Indeed, through engagement in such processes, the dependability and authenticity of our findings will be greatly enhanced.

We can account for our own reflexivity in a several ways and at different points in the research process:

- Before and during the design processes
- During implementation processes
- While conducting the analysis
- During the write-up
- In the course of dissemination
- While applying findings to practice, teaching and other research.

I have found that both writing out relevant thoughts, experiences and emotions and talking to others

about them engages researchers in processes of reflexivity. In team meetings, researchers can share not only their scholarly interpretations of what they are learning from informants, but also their personal and professional interpretations.

Because qualitative research often focuses on sensitive areas, researchers' own personal experiences and traumas may be triggered. I do not believe that researchers are obligated to share sensitive personal information in team meetings, but they can keep reflective journals for more private considerations and have private dialogues with significant others if personal issues arise.

How much of our own accounts of reflexivity do we put into research reports? We as researchers should

include only those bits of reflexivity that add to understanding research processes, findings and applications. After all, the research is about informants. Anything about researcher perspectives must advance the purposes of the report (Gilgun, 2005).

We often are unaware of what we think and feel until we write about them and discuss them. Thus, survey researchers and others who are more quantitatively oriented would enhance their work by engaging in these processes as well.

Jane F Gilgun

*Professor, School of Social Work
University of Minnesota
St Paul MN 55108
USA*

Gilgun JF (2005) 'Grab' and good science: writing up the results of qualitative research. *Qual Health Res* 15(2): 256-62

Reflexivity, in its basic form, is simply the process of turning something back on itself. Freshwater and Rolfe (2001) point out that for researchers, this can mean one of two things.

On the one hand, reflexivity can mean turning thought back on itself; for example, when we reflect on the thinking, planning and decisions that we make as part of the research process. On the other hand, it can mean turning action back on itself; for example, when we modify what we do as researchers as a direct result of observing the outcomes of our prior actions.

The author of this article focuses almost entirely on the former of these two processes, and in particular on the 'confessional tale', the reflexive and necessarily subjective writing up of her reflections on the research journey. Her conclusion, which is echoed by a number of other writers (Mantzoukas, 2005; Rolfe, 2006), is that such a 'confessional tale' should accompany the more traditional 'realist tale' as part of the research report.

I wish to focus on the other, perhaps more contested, meaning of reflexive research as the turning

back of our actions on themselves. This reflexive approach regards research as praxis, or what Schön (1987) referred to as reflection-in-action, in which the researcher is continuously modifying the research process in response to the ongoing and unfolding situation.

For example, the researcher might take the decision to modify her questioning technique in the middle of an interview, based on her evaluation that her current approach is not generating useful data.

In Schön's words, the reflexive researcher is operating in the 'swampy lowlands' of practice where nothing is certain and rigid, predetermined 'technical' solutions rarely resolve the complexities of the real-life practice of research.

If, as the reflexive researcher argues, predetermined, rigorous (in the sense of being inflexible) rules for the 'best practice' of research cannot guarantee a successful outcome, then the usual notion of valid research is called into question.

Whereas traditional approaches to research measure validity by the extent to which the researcher conforms to a predetermined

and previously validated method, the reflexive researcher develops and changes the method as she progresses. Clearly, such an approach to research can make no claim to objectivity. As Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) observe:

'There is no one-way street between the researcher and the object of study; rather, the two affect each other mutually and continually in the course of the research process.'

The reflexive researcher makes no pretence of detachment; she does not claim to objectively and unobtrusively observe the situation from a distance and collect 'pure' uncontaminated data. Rather, she recognizes that she is an integral part of the research situation in which she is participating.

Such a reflexive stance is of particular relevance for research conducted in practice disciplines such as physiotherapy, since it implies that the researcher exerts an influence over the practice she is attempting to measure or understand.

Further, this influence is far more extensive than the indirect effect

suggested by the Hawthorne effect (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939), and extends into territory that most practitioners and researchers would consider out of bounds or invalid.

If reflexive research is taken to its logical conclusion, the distinction between researcher and practitioner (and, significantly, research and practice) are blurred or even dissolved: practice becomes a form of research, and research becomes a way of doing practice.

Gary Rolfe

*Professor of Nursing
School of Health Science
University of Wales
Swansea SA2 8PP, UK*

Alvesson M, Skoldberg K (2000) *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research*. Sage, London

Freshwater D, Rolfe G (2001) Critical reflexivity: a politically and ethically engaged research method for nursing. *NT Research* 6(1): 526-37

Mantzoukas S (2005) The inclusion of bias in reflective and reflexive research. *J Res Nurs* 10(3): 279-95

Roethlisberger FJ, Dickson WJ (1939) *Management and the Worker*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA

Rolfe G (2006) Validity, trustworthiness and rigour: quality and the idea of qualitative research. *J Adv Nurs* 56(3): 304-10