Critical reflexivity: A politically and ethically engaged research method for nursing

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What is This?
Critical reflexivity: A politically and ethically engaged research method for nursing

Traditional interpretations of research tend to bifurcate research knowledge and practice knowledge, with knowledge derived from practice and direct interaction with patients being perceived as knowledge that is not formally admissible by the traditional scientific model. This paper proposes a research methodology that legitimises practice as a source of knowledge. Building upon the concepts of situational understanding and contingent knowledge, we advocate an integral research methodology, one which draws on the notion of the researcher-practitioner.

Beginning with an analysis of knowledge and power we explore the contribution of reflexivity to the development of a politically and ethically engaged research process in nursing. In discussing critical reflexivity as a research method, we will outline the focus of reflexive research and the role of the reflexive researcher.

Arguing against the superiority of theoretical research over practitioner research, we present a challenge to technical rationality, suggesting not only a new approach to research but also a new approach to practice.

'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.' (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000)

INTRODUCTION

Schön (1987) reminds us that 'in the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground overlooking a swamp'. On the high, hard ground, research is conceptualised as a straightforward linear process with a coherent and logical plot, and even though it is rarely conducted in such a clean and simple fashion, it is almost always presented in this way in the 'write up'. In this sterile world, the findings of research are simply and unproblematically translated into best practice, in what Schön disparagingly referred to as 'technical rationality'.

One of the consequences of technical rationality is that a hierarchy is established between research and practice and also between the researcher and the practitioner. The underlying assumption is that the research ends when the paper is published, and that practice will be magically transformed simply by the reporting of the findings. Just as in the cycle of evidence-based practice, where there appears to be a seamless movement from research project to findings to review, the application of the research findings is seen as simple and non-problematic, and many researchers appear to be genuinely mystified when their findings are not implemented by practitioners as a matter of course. To borrow Alvesson and Skoldberg's analogy (2000), technical rationality is a one-way street in which the findings of research are delivered to the practitioner through the medium of journal papers, but with no formal route by which the practitioners can communicate back to the researchers whether or not those findings are useful, relevant or workable in practice.

In contrast to technical rationality, Schön regarded practice-based disciplines such as nursing as complex, context-dependent, and not amenable to simple research-based prescriptions. As the recent Department of Health NHS Research and Development Strategy (DoH, 2000) reminds us, research has to take account of locally situated practices, and practitioners need to buy...
into research if it is to make any difference to their practice. In this sense, contextualisation of research findings to the practitioners’ own practice is essential (Wood et al., 1998). Researchers cannot remain aloof from the world of practice but must convince practitioners of the value of their findings to the unique and individual situations in which practice is taking place. We are suggesting, then, that despite attempts by many academics to present research as objective and decontextualised, it has a political agenda that is concerned as much with power and influence as it is with knowledge generation.

Knowledge/power
The long-standing preference of awarding bodies for quantitative research studies as opposed to qualitative work is embedded in the tradition of scientific measurement, and brings with it historic limitations — those of measuring only what can most easily be measured. Foucault (1980) has observed that knowledge and power are, in fact, two sides of the same coin: that those with knowledge tend to assume positions of power and those with power define and regulate what is to count as valid knowledge in a self-perpetuating cycle. This explains the current imbalance between quantitative methodologies and their concurrent funding, and qualitative methodologies which explore issues where variables cannot be so strongly governed, but must, nonetheless, be researched if progress is to be achieved in disciplines other than those which may rely on laboratory conditions. The challenge for researchers is to push forward the barriers in research, and to devise, test and consolidate methods of investigation which are appropriate to the needs of the funding bodies, to add to the body of professional knowledge and, most importantly, in healthcare provision, to meet the needs of practitioners.

To achieve this it is essential to leave the high, hard ground inhabited by academics and go down into the swamp where practitioners go about their daily work, to enter a milieu where it is inappropriate to follow the formally agreed method of writing up research as a logical, linear process; that is, by writing out the mess and confusion and presenting the research process as objective and uncontaminated by the real world of practice. However, we need only to read some of the unpublished research journals which doctoral students are now being encouraged to keep in order to realise that research is a practice similar to the practice of nursing, which takes place mainly in Schön’s ‘swampy lowlands’, where ‘messy, confusing problems defy technical solution’ (Schön, 1987). The fear of academic researchers is that if this view of research is accepted, research-based knowledge loses its epistemological superiority over practitioners’ own ‘intuitive’ expertise (Benner, 1984), the ‘gold standard’ status of the randomised controlled trial is challenged, and the hierarchy of technical rationality begins to falter. Knowledge is clearly a valuable commodity, and while it has been observed that the focus of nursing is on practice and the delivery of care, the aim of nursing research is usually considered to be the generation of knowledge (Rolfe, 1998a).

The purpose of this paper is to question the inequity of technical rationality and the research-practice dualism and, by extension, the perceived superiority of theoretical research over practitioner research. Our belief is that research is an interactive and iterative process with particular emphasis on change, which therefore relies heavily on dynamic communicative partnerships between researchers and practitioners and, indeed, between the perpetrators and subjects of the research process. This clearly has far-reaching and profound methodological implications. But there is a need to be careful not to fall into the very trap that we are trying to spring — turning research into a technical and academic exercise that alienates the majority of practitioners. As
Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) warn: ‘To avoid methodology being perceived as peripheral to research practice as a result of being “intellectualised” is certainly a challenge’, and it is one which we intend to address here.

TOWARDS A NEW METHODOLOGY
Reflection and reflective research

This challenge to technical rationality suggests not only a new approach to research, but also a new approach to practice; indeed a new professional — the practitioner-researcher. This would not be a nurse who also undertakes a little research, nor a researcher who undertakes a little nursing, but a fully integrated practitioner who is immersed in both nursing and research as two aspects of the same role. This requires an insider perspective in which the practitioner-researcher reflectively explores their own practice, in contrast to the technical rationality model in which the researcher comes in from outside, ‘does’ so-called ‘objective’ research on the practitioner and the practice setting, and then writes an unbiased report for the practitioner to implement.

It could be argued that this reflective practitioner-researcher already exists, since in nursing, along with other professions, there has recently been an increasing interest in the potential of reflection as a learning tool and as a means of integrating theory and practice. However, while a number of authors have attempted to describe and define reflective practice, much of the literature remains deliberative and inconclusive (Schön, 1983; Atkins and Murphy, 1993; Johns, 1998). Atkins and Murphy (1993), for example, undertook a review of the literature on reflection and concluded that the available literature was complex and abstract. This has resulted in a certain reticence towards reflection, based on the legacy of the traditional positivist paradigm that drives us to know exactly what something is and how it works before it can be employed (MacKintosh, 1998). Nevertheless, there has been, and continues to be, a considerable amount of literature produced on the subject, and narrating the development of reflective practice would appear to be a worthwhile and important endeavour.

Reflective practice is no longer viewed as merely a tool for learning or simply the process of discovering the understanding that is embedded in experience (Schon, 1987). It has been advocated not only in the more ‘private’ realms of life to help people understand more about themselves (Wright, 1998), but as an adjunct to professional and organisational development (Winter, 1989). The recent Department of Health strategy for nursing and midwifery, Making a Difference (DoH, 1999), for example, makes reference to reflective practice as a method for continuing professional development. It has also been linked with the broader national agendas such as clinical governance (Freshwater and Broughton, 2000) and evidence-based practice (Rolfe, 1999). Fox (1999) reports that ‘reflective practitioners undertake critical evaluation, are accountable and make results public’, somewhat echoing the sentiments (and words) of the Department of Health (1998) quality agenda.

Our focus in this paper, while inextricably linked to the aforementioned areas, is specifically on the way that reflection is being developed as a research method, and it is to this that we will now turn our attention. On the surface, this may not seem novel; after all, reflective inquiry has been used for decades as a method for investigating and resolving problems, enabling practitioners to direct their observations and thoughts to improving practice rather than approaching practice in a haphazard way (Dewey, 1933). However, it is only very recently that nursing has begun to consider the extent to which reflective processes might influence the research-practice gap. In further developing the concept of reflective inquiry, we will also be discussing the notion of reflexivity,
used by some researchers synonymously with the term reflection. However, it is important for our project that we distinguish not only between reflection and reflexivity, but also between the different forms that reflexivity has taken in the literature, each of which has its own specific aims and agenda.

According to Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000), ‘reflective research has two basic characteristics: careful interpretation and reflection’, such that attention is turned inwards towards the personhood of the researcher, the research participants, the research context and society as a whole. These, of course, are the very issues that traditional scientific research labels as ‘extraneous variables’ and seeks to negate, in the belief that the person of the researcher, the characteristics of the individual participants (or subjects) and the specific context of the research setting all compromise the generalisability of the findings to other settings with other people. However, the trade-off against generalisability is that this systematic reflection allows for an interpretation of the research field, resulting in new insights, knowledge and theories of practice. Rolfe (1998b) captures these thoughts in his definition of reflective research, which, he says:

‘generates personal and experiential knowledge and theories from the practitioner-researcher’s own practice. The aim is “to create new knowledge and theory through a formalised approach to reflection-on-action”’.

Reflective research is therefore the first step towards uniting the academic researcher and the practising nurse. However, for the roles to merge fully, a further step is required.

Reflexivity
As with reflection, definitions of reflexivity are neither unanimous nor harmonious, arguably mirroring the concept of reflexivity itself. And, as with reflection, there are a number of reductionist views of reflexivity (Beck et al., 1994) in addition to those that are culturally linked. Delanty (2000) takes issue with this, arguing that reflexivity is ‘reducible neither to agency nor to structure’. Nevertheless, it is important that we attempt to gain some kind of intellectual handle on this elusive and contested concept if we are to employ it as a guiding principle in our research.

On a very basic level, reflexivity simply suggests a turning back on itself. This meaning can be seen in, for example, the ‘knee-jerk’ reflex arc, where the nerve impulses from a blow to the tendon reach the spinal cord before turning back to produce the characteristic jerk of the knee. When we attempt to apply this simple notion to the social sciences, we immediately notice that reflexivity is interpreted in two different ways. By some writers, reflexivity is taken to mean the process of turning thought or reflection back on itself, and by others it is taken to mean the process of turning action or practice back on itself. It is important that we explore each of these approaches in turn, since they have very different consequences for our understanding of reflexivity.

The notion that reflexivity is a turning back of reflection on itself, a kind of meta-reflection, itself has two different interpretations that arise from the two different meanings of the prefix ‘meta’- (from the Greek for ‘after’). On the one hand, meta- is taken to mean ‘of a higher order’ (as in meta-analysis), so that meta-reflection would entail a reflection on the process of reflection. This meaning can be seen in Fox’s description of reflexivity as:

‘analysis which interrogates the process by which interpretation has been fabricated: reflexivity requires any effort to describe or represent experience to consider how that process of description was achieved’ (Fox, 1993).
Thus, whereas reflection gives a central place to communication, reflexivity provides an extension of communication into the deeper domains of human experience.

On the other hand, ‘meta’ is sometimes taken to mean ‘beyond’, so that reflexivity would entail a going beyond the usual introspective focus of reflection to consider the wider social and political context. When applied to research, this approach to reflexivity entails recognising the ambivalent relationship between a researcher’s text and the reality studied (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000), and therefore questioning and exploring the assumptions and understandings implicit within practice (and research practices) that have previously been taken for granted. This is the way that the critical theorists employ the term (Habermas, 1972), arguing that whereas the practice of reflection can lead to isolation and ‘navel gazing’, reflexive practice within a self-reflective (reflexive) community can result in the recognition of ‘false consciousness’, thereby spurring the community on to politically-informed action or ‘praxis’ (Carr and Kemmis, 1986).

We can see, then, how reflexive thought can lead to action, and this is even more apparent in the second way in which the term ‘reflexivity’ is used; that is, as the turning back of practice on itself. Clearly, this type of reflexivity can occur only in the midst of practice, and entails a process of what Schön labelled ‘reflection-in-action’, in contrast to ‘reflection-on-action’, which occurs after and away from practice. One way of envisioning the difference between these two modes of reflection is to imagine being followed around during your working day by a photographer. In the case of reflection-on-action, the photographer would take a series of still photographs which they would later develop and share with you, allowing you to view your practice in ‘an enhanced reconstructive activity in which personal experiences can be brought to bear on questions of method’ (Delanty, 2000).

Reflection-on-action, or what nurses usually refer to as reflective practice, therefore enables us to utilise past experiences in order to improve the future, and prompts the question: ‘How could I do it better the next time I find myself in a similar situation?’ In the case of reflection-in-action, or what we are referring to as ‘reflexivity’, the photographer would carry a video camera, allowing you to see your practice on a monitor screen, and thus respond to it as it happened. Reflexive practice, the immediate turning of practice back on itself, enables us to utilise present experiences in order to improve our ongoing practice, and prompts the question: ‘How can I do it better now in this current situation?’ This meaning can be seen in Rolfe’s definition of reflexive research, which:

‘attempts to bring about an integration of practice and research in a single act. The aim here is not about generation of knowledge, which might nevertheless occur as a by-product of the research, but the implementation of clinical change directly through the research process itself’ (Rolfe, 1998b).

We have identified three very different and distinct ways in which the term ‘reflexivity’ is used, and there are certainly many more. In the interest of clarity, but at the risk of appearing reductionist, we might term these Type I, Type II and Type III reflexivity, where:

- Type I reflexivity is a reflection on the process of reflection, or simply a deeper level and largely introspective meta-reflection
Type II reflexivity is a reflection which goes beyond the usual introspective confines to consider the social and political context in which practice takes place, and prompts us to consider the ways in which these might be overcome through praxis.

Type III reflexivity is practical reflection, or reflection-in-action, in which practice is reflected on and modified as it is happening.

The common aspect to all of these manifestations is that reflexivity requires that we are always critical about practice and open to new ways of thinking and doing. Hence, while self-awareness and understanding are central to reflection, reflexive consciousness prompts an understanding of self in context (situational understanding) (Elliott, 1993). Reflexivity therefore bears some resemblance to the post-modern concept of situated understanding and contingent knowledge (Lather, 1993; Reid et al., 1996), to which we will now briefly turn.

**Reflexivity and post-modernism**

Post-modern thought encourages us to think about research and reality in a reflexive way by attempting to unveil the complex ideological and political agendas hidden in writing and practice (Richardson, 1994). When exploring the contribution of reflexivity to the research process, we might also refer to its cousin, intertextuality, which is a central concept of post-modernism that offers the means to challenge and resist the limits of a particular system of thought. Intertextuality suggests that it is impossible to write (in Derrida’s meaning of the term, which includes practices of all kinds) in isolation, that every text (and every practice) has meaning only in relation to other texts (and practices), and that ultimately, ‘there is nothing outside the text’ (Derrida, 1976).

Reflexivity, then, does not merely entail the turning back of a text on itself, but on all other texts. To be reflexive is to consider writing and practice in relation to all other writings and practices. Furthermore, from a post-modernist vantage point, all texts, including research texts, are fabrications of truth (which is not to say that they are untrue, only that truth is a social construct) and as such are subject to deconstructive rewriting and rereading. Fox (1999) explains this when he states that:

> ‘Research texts like any others, are to be read and re-read, not as representations (accurate or flawed) of the world, but as contested claims to speak “the truth” about the world, constituted in the play of disciplines of the social. Research writing, in this model, becomes narrative work.’

This statement has two implications. First, it challenges the traditional view of scientific research as providing an accurate (and some would argue, uniquely accurate) window on an external reality, seeing it rather as one truth claim among many (Lyotard, 1979). And second, it suggests that the function of research is not to present an analysed or synthesised general view or theory about the world, but rather to offer an opportunity for the research respondents/participants to tell their stories (Parsons, 1995).

That is not to suggest, however, that research is simply a process of writing similar to fiction (although it can be), but rather that the elements of the research process, including method, methodology, researchers and respondents and findings, cannot be neatly separated out and ‘controlled for’ in the ways suggested by the scientific paradigm. We might therefore expect reflexive methodologies to look somewhat different from their more traditional scientific counterparts.
REFLEXIVE METHODOLOGY
We have attempted to show that reflexive research entails a far closer relationship between theory and practice, thought and action, and indeed, between the different elements of the research process itself. Reflexive research is not viewed as a unified process which, if carried out correctly, guarantees the production of truth, but rather as a local practice with local rules that produces local and contingent knowledge. Rather than taking the research process for granted as an externally imposed ‘given’, methodology itself becomes a focus of the reflexive researcher. As Cheek (2000) notes: ‘Apparent “givens” such as understandings of reliability and validity, or what does or does not constitute research, are opened up to scrutiny.’ Reflexivity, then, is a meta-methodology; a methodology which has itself as the focus of its inquiry, and which constantly scrutinises and critiques itself as it is progressing.

Validity and reliability
Traditionally, validity depends on an evaluation of research against some standard, and in the kind of localised and contingent post-modern perspective suggested here, no such standards may be sustained (Lyotard, 1979; Fox, 1999). The appropriation of criteria of judgement from the scientific paradigm to the qualitative paradigm is problematic, and as Koch and Harrington (1998) point out, criteria such as validity and reliability ‘persist as a legacy of the scientific method’. Many authors have argued for an expanded comprehension of rigour in qualitative research that goes beyond its narrow scientific use (Schwandt, 1994; Porter, 1993). Koch and Harrington (1998), for example, suggest that member validation is itself problematic, and challenge the researcher to ‘reconceptualise’ rigour. They go on to argue that evaluation criteria ‘can be generated within the research product itself through detailed and contextual writing and a reflexive account of the actual research process’.

Usher and Bryant (1989) go even further to suggest that in ‘self-referential’ or reflexive research, ‘conventionalist requirements of validity, which are regarded as objective and trans-personal, will not be satisfied’, such that ‘validity thus becomes a matter of the authenticity of shared knowledge among a community of sense-making, reflective practitioners’. In other words, validity does not lie in the application of objective criteria by researchers and academics, but is rather a matter for the reflective users of the research.

The same objections have been raised against the issue of bias, with Fox (1999) pointing out that:

‘There is a requirement for a degree of reflexivity within the nomadic research process which would mean that the process of data collection would be prone to both inter- and intra-observer biases.’

Bias is therefore seen as something positive. Indeed, Stenhouse (1981) has argued that the term ‘bias’ should be replaced by ‘interest’, with Schön (1983) observing that the researcher ‘has an interest in transforming the situation from what it is to something he likes better’. Gadamer (1976) suggests that we should use the term ‘prejudice’ instead of ‘bias’, such that ‘prejudice is our situatedness in history and time — is the pre-condition of truth, not an obstacle to it’. Bias is therefore transformed from something to be designed out of the research into an essential pre-requisite for situated understanding and positive action.

The focus of reflexive research
We have seen that reflexive research turns attention inwards towards the person of the researcher, the relevant research community, intellectual and cul-
tural traditions, and the importance of language and narrative. The reflexive researcher is therefore committed to unravelling and making explicit the interpretation of interpretation, and the critical gaze is turned towards the self and the constituting of the research which is transparently deconstructed. When using this scenic method, the researcher will be reporting the research as in process — as an act of personal discovery in which journalising or keeping a research diary helps to situate the researcher in the research process. However, this is not a simple descriptive activity, but requires analytical skills which are an essential part of any interpretative research endeavour.

Reflexive research is therefore a meta-methodology; a methodology whose object of study is itself. This suggests an engagement with Type I reflexivity; that is, with a deeper or meta-level of reflection and an inward gaze. However, if used in isolation, such an approach is ultimately sterile and does nothing to fulfil the promise of social change. For this, we need to move to consider a methodology based on the Type II reflexivity proposed by the critical theorists, in which the focus of the research is turned outwards towards the social and political world.

The post-modern move away from grand theories to local narratives is often seen as a move away from political activism towards quietism and even apathy (Eagleton, 1983). The feminist movement in particular has risen to this challenge and attempted to develop a ‘resistance post-modernism’ (Lather, 1994) that:

‘Refuses to abandon the project of emancipation and, indeed, positions feminism as much of the impetus for the articulation of a post-modernism that both problematizes and advances emancipatory work’.

Resistance is often viewed as a negative attribute, linked with rigidity, avoidance of change and maintenance of tradition. However, reflexive research encourages and, to some extent, demands a level of resistance, specifically in relation to dominant discourses and ideologies. In this ‘resistance’ approach, the researcher is a construction, and the validity of research is a function of its capacity to transgress, challenge or subvert existing conceptions (Stonach and MacLure, 1997). Resistance therefore leads to empowerment, what Fox (1999) refers to as ‘a living, speaking, reflexive subjectivity [that] implies the capacity to resist’. He continues by pointing out that ‘reflexivity challenges the old status barriers of class and control of wealth, creating new opportunities for coalition and organisation’. In this sense, reflexivity (and in particular, Type II reflexivity) is a political and ethically engaged research process.

We have already alluded to our belief that research itself is not free of oppression, and Richer (1988) gives clear examples of the power relationships that are inherent in research, where the research findings can become a commodity that is published and exchanged for a professional reputation and a research assessment exercise rating. For the researcher, the benefits of the research are usually clear, but this is not always the case for the participant.

The role of the reflexive researcher
Rather than attempt to eliminate the effects of the researcher, the reflexive researcher tries to understand and utilise them; hence (Type I) reflexive research is characterised by ongoing self-critique and self-appraisal. Such intertextual approaches break down the distinction between researcher and researched, so that the researcher becomes part of the world which is being explored and translated into text (Fox, 1999). The researcher is invited to
incorporate their social self into the research project and, in the extreme case, researcher and researched merge into a single person. This reflexive notion of the researcher also being the subject of their own research was first suggested by Heron (1981), who referred to it as experiential research, and was later developed by a number of action researchers (Stenhouse, 1985; Elliott, 1991; McNiff, 1993). In addition, the relationship with the research subjects must be acknowledged and explored as part of a wider social and political engagement that goes beyond the traditional researcher/participant relationship. The researcher has to adopt an ethical stance and a political position — one that is concerned with resistance and change.

The underpinning ontology and epistemology of the researcher/participant relationship is thus based on collaboration and the notion of cooperative inquiry (Reason and Rowan, 1981), and (Type II) reflexivity also presumes a commitment to challenge dominant norms and assumptions, to resist power and constraint, and to open up new theoretical and practical possibilities. A significant element of the reflexive research methodology is its rejection of the dualism of researcher and researched, of theory and practice and of research and practice, and a privileging of the subjective judgements and active engagement of the researcher over the ‘objective’ and decontextualised findings of traditional research.

Anderson (1991) attempted to address this very issue of the extent to which the researcher should become involved in and influence the ‘field’ that he or she is investigating. As she reflected upon the fieldwork data in her study, it became clear that the issues went beyond a negotiated version of the informants’ accounts to ‘a further aspect of normative assessment of the process of doing research’. The researcher becomes part of the setting they are exploring, the process of doing research becomes blurred with that of normal activity, and it becomes impossible to see where one ends and the other begins (Fox, 1999). Ultimately, the research has no clear end point, and the researcher becomes sucked into a reflexive cycle in which data analysis is part of the ongoing reflection and evaluation of the research, the research findings influence practice, which in turn determines the course of the research. Thus, the notion of a ‘research field’ is brought into question when viewed with reflexivity rather than the field of any particular research endeavour being out there waiting to be described by the researcher; it is a construction of the researcher himself or herself. In this sense the field is dynamic, unstable and in constant process and, as we have seen, challenges the traditional notion of validity and reliability. Similarly, the participant that we try to understand is not just another person who just happens to be waiting to be described; the experience of the other is transformed and shaped by the encounter with the researcher. As Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) observed, if it is necessary to place a text in its context in order to understand it, then the context should naturally also include the author of the work.

**Reflexive data collection methods**

Reflexivity in one or other of its forms occupies a central place in action research, case studies, ethnography, hermeneutics, and feminist research. Most of these approaches are idiographic (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000); that is, they involve intensive study of unique phenomena in particular cases rather than large-scale studies which seek to discover general laws. Furthermore, they tend to utilise multiple methods to answer fully the research question, which is developed and clarified in the process of engaging in the field. In general, qualitative methods are preferred, not for any ideological reasons, but simply because they facilitate participation in the research process in ways that, for example, postal questionnaires do not. When structured question-
naires are employed in reflexive research, it is usual practice to develop them in conjunction with the participants to whom they will be administered. This approach would, of course, be frowned upon by many traditional researchers as introducing an element of subjectivity or respondent bias into the process but, as we have already argued, bias in reflexive research is seen as a virtue. When interviewing, an open listening style is preferred, according to Anderson (1991), since:

'If we subscribe to the notion that the interview constitutes a dialectical process between researcher and informant and that knowledge is socially constructed, then we could see fieldwork as an occasion for informants to reconstruct their notions about illness.'

Reflexive researchers particularly favour action research, since it emphasises engagement with the setting, collaboration, and personal, professional and political commitment. In particular, critical emancipatory action research focuses on change and transformation of the research setting, whereas certain forms of participatory action research promote the (Type III) reflexive notion of the practitioner-as-researcher.

Representing the data
In reflexive research, the writing of the research report and the representation of the data are concerned not with persuading the reader to accept the findings, but with a reflection upon the relationship between the text and other texts. Furthermore, reflexive researchers consider the idea of a text in its widest sense as any cultural representation, including painting, music, choreography, and so on (Derrida, 1976), and, as Fox (1999) points out, 'texts in the form of direct engagement (teaching, therapy, protest, worship) may be considered more appropriate than traditional forms of reporting research findings'. Reflexive research reports are therefore not restricted to written papers, but can take many diverse forms, including multimedia performance. But even when we do employ written forms for our research reports, we should remember that texts are open to deconstructive readings by the recipient, and that there is no single authoritative reading of any text. Reflexive research reports should therefore be written in a way that encourage the reader to challenge, dispute and deconstruct them rather than in the impersonal and authoritatively superior style that is traditionally employed. In particular, the use of the first person can facilitate the reader to regard the report as one interpretation out of many, whereas the third person or the passive case suggests a single correct reading of the findings. The key issue in writing up reflexive research is therefore to produce what Barthes (1995) referred to as a 'writerly' text which is open to deconstruction and multiple readings. The ultimate aim of the reflexive research report, then, is to spur the reader into rewriting it for himself or herself, thus completing the reflexive cycle.

CONCLUSIONS
The implementation of research findings in nursing is known to be problematic, not least because much of the research is conducted by people removed from practice. Academe has done little to foster the integration of the kind of thought that informs science and practice, emphasising instead the divisions across the ways of knowing. What has been presented here is a reflexive research method which aims to challenge the traditional hierarchy established between research and practice with the purpose of legitimising practice as a locale for generation of knowledge. We contend that contextualisation of
research findings through reflexive research methods is not only a step towards integral practice, but is also essential for the expedition of current and future research and development strategies. Moreover, it is central to the success of clinical governance, as the researcher-practitioner committed to critical reflexivity is someone who is politically and ethically engaged with their practice, challenging the dominant ideologies, texts and discourses and making their own practice available for scrutiny.

We have attempted in this paper to engage readers reflexively in the discussion, which is open to multiple interpretation, and we would like to encourage readers to rewrite and contextualise the contents accordingly (Rosenau, 1992). If it is true that a theory can be replaced only by another theory, we do not ask you to consider this theory to be true or false; rather, in line with the underpinning ontology and epistemology, we ask you to consider under what circumstances it can work, referring instead to the application of the theory.

**KEY POINTS**

- One of the consequences of technical rationality is that a hierarchy is established between research and practice and between researcher and practitioner
- Reflective research is the first step towards unifying the academic researcher and the practising nurse
- Distinctions need to be made not only between reflection and reflexivity, but also between the different forms of reflexivity
- Reflexive research presents a challenge to technical rationality and a new approach to research and practice
- The reflexive researcher is a fully integrated practitioner who is immersed in nursing and research.

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