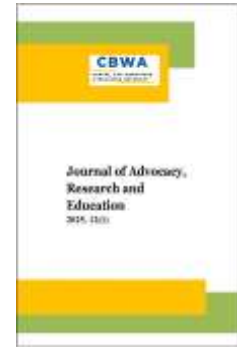






Publisher: Centre for Behaviour and Wellness Advocacy, Ghana
Co-publisher: Cherkas Global University, USA
Has been issued since 2014
ISSN 2410-4981. E-ISSN 2508-1055
2025. 12(1): 75-81

DOI: 10.13187/jare.2025.1.75

Journal homepage:
<http://kadint.net/our-journal.html>



Reflecting on Reflexivity and Positionality in Qualitative Research: What, Why, When, and How?

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Abstract

Reflexivity has emerged as a central concern in qualitative research, emphasising the researcher's role as an observer and an integral part of the research process. Recognising the researcher as a 'tool' highlights the importance of self-awareness, positionality, and transparency throughout the study. This paper explores the concept of reflexivity by addressing four foundational questions that qualitative researchers must consider: What is reflexivity? Why is it vital to the integrity and depth of qualitative inquiry? When should it be applied? How can it be effectively practised? Adopting a conceptual and literature-informed reflective approach, this paper examines reflexivity's theoretical underpinnings and practical applications across various qualitative methodologies. The discussion aims to clarify reflexivity's multifaceted nature and its implications for enhancing research quality, credibility, and ethical rigour. Drawing on key scholarly contributions, the paper provides insights and recommendations for researchers to critically examine their assumptions, values, and influences throughout the research process.

Keywords: Bias, Epistemology, Methodology, Qualitative Research, Reflexivity, Researcher Positionality, Self-awareness.

1. Introduction

Reflecting on our journeys as qualitative researchers, one major challenge raised by most researchers who intend to adopt the qualitative approach is the issue of reflexivity and positionality. Reflexivity is currently a commonly recognised aspect of methodological rigour and trustworthiness in qualitative research. Although often discussed as a contemporary concern, reflexivity is not a new concept. Over the years, practitioners in some social and clinical sciences have engaged in reflexivity for over a century. According to Berger (2015), reflexivity "*means turning of the researcher lens back onto oneself to recognise and take responsibility for one's own situatedness within the research and the effect that it may have on the setting and people being studied, questions being asked, data being collected and its interpretation*" (p. 220). Thus, in qualitative research, it is vital to understand that the researchers who are not detached observers

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Received: 08 November 2024 Revised: 15 March 2025 Accepted: 18 March 2025

Published: 30 April 2025

but active participants pose some levels of positionality, values, and interactions that shape every stage of the research process (Haynes, 2012; Mauthner, Doucet, 2003). As such, reflexivity – the practice of critically examining one’s role and influence in the research – has become an essential component of qualitative inquiry.

For qualitative researchers, reflexive practice entails a self-examination of their assumptions, biases, and social positions, including other personal factors such as age, gender, race, socioeconomic status, educational level, professional experience, and cultural background, especially concerning their participants (Berger, 2015). Making these positionalities explicit enhances the credibility and depth of qualitative research. Furthermore, scholars such as Buetow (2019) stress the importance of recognising and mitigating unconscious cognitive biases, which may often lead researchers to favour interpretations that align with pre-existing beliefs. This issue is particularly pressing when theoretical frameworks are rigidly applied, potentially narrowing the lens through which data are interpreted.

This paper seeks to explore reflexivity in qualitative research by addressing four key questions: What is reflexivity? When should it be practised? How can it be effectively implemented? Why is it essential to do rigorous research? Through a conceptual and literature-informed reflection, the paper outlines the role of reflexivity in enhancing the integrity, credibility, and depth of qualitative inquiry.

2. Methods and Materials

This paper takes a reflective, literature-based approach. This approach offered a thoughtful and critical exploration of reflexivity – what it is, when it comes into play, how it can be practised, and why it matters. Although this paper benefited from established scholarship, it also presents personal interpretations on how reflexivity can be meaningfully integrated into qualitative research.

The following research questions guided this paper:

1. What is reflexivity?
2. Why is it essential to qualitative research?
3. When should it be practised?
4. How is it enacted throughout the research process?

In this approach, the focus is not on seeking generalisable conclusions. Instead, the paper aims to engage qualitative researchers, especially those newer to the field, in navigating the often complex practice of reflexivity.

3. Understanding Reflexivity: The “What”

Reflexivity, a long-standing concept in Qualitative research, is associated with many definitions. One attempt to accommodate the variety of definitions is that of Olmos-Vega (2022), who defines reflexivity as an ongoing, conscious, collaborative, and multidimensional effort to appraise one’s subjectivity in relation to the research process. It involves introspection and reflection, resulting in the researcher’s conscious awareness of their influence on the research process (Braund et al., 2024). These definitions emphasise that reflexivity is not an event, but rather a process that spans the entire research process and reflects the researcher’s acknowledgement of the various ways they can influence different stages of the research (Jamieson et al., 2023). Reflexivity further requires conscious effort, as its absence does not negate its influence on the proposed study. While Bright et al. (2024) agree with the dynamic nature of, they argue that the traditional notion of reflexivity dichotomises the researcher’s positionality as that of an “outsider” or “insider,” which, in their view, is overly simplistic. They contend that beyond the traditional role of reflexivity in developing the researcher’s self-awareness of their subjectivity, reflexivity contributes to the transformation of the researcher. They draw on the Foucauldian concept of the “care of self” to argue that engaging in reflexivity, particularly for doctoral researchers, alongside self-discovery, facilitates identity formation (Bright et al., 2024).

Reflexivity can take different dimensions. Personal reflexivity involves examining one’s own beliefs, values, and experiences to understand how they influence the interaction and interpretation of data (Olmos-Vega, 2022). Relational or interpersonal reflexivity refers to the reciprocal influence of interactions between the researcher and the researched and vice versa (Olmos-Vega, 2022). Epistemological reflexivity, on the other hand, critically examines the chosen paradigms and their relative assumptions, as well as how these inform the research design and the

type of knowledge that can be generated. Closely related is methodological reflexivity, which examines the choice of research design and methods used in the research, as well as the restrictions they impose on knowledge creation (Olmos-Vega, 2022). Embedded within reflexivity are closely related concepts, including positionality, subjectivity, and reflectivity.

Positionality, subjectivity, and reflection are closely related to reflexivity and are sometimes used interchangeably in literature, but they are distinct from each other. Positionality encompasses the researcher's worldview and personal characteristics that influence the research process. (Darwin Holmes, 2020). Just like reflexivity, positionality affects various stages in the research process. The reflexive process shapes the discovery of one's positionality. In effect, positionality is informed through the reflexive process. Researchers typically reject the binary "insider" or "outsider" view of the researcher's position in relation to the research (Bright et al., 2024; Yip, 2024). Instead, the researcher is situated on a positional continuum with an insider and an outsider stance at opposite ends of the spectrum. Subjectivity is a core component of positionality. Subjectivities refer to the distinct understandings, views, and experiences often rooted in the researcher's philosophical stance, which should be communicated and used to strengthen the rigour of the research (Tomlinson, Medlinskiene, 2024). Finally, reflection is also distinct from reflexivity in terms of timing. While reflexivity spans the entire research process, which potentially shapes it, reflection, on the other hand, is done retrospectively to examine omissions in the process, thereby promoting learning (Jamieson et al., 2023).

4. Timing Reflexivity: The "When"

Reflexivity, rather than being considered an event, goes beyond the entire research process (Barrett et al., 2020) right from the research questions to research dissemination. As qualitative researchers, it is essential to consider the following critical phases in a qualitative study.

Pre-research stage

Researchers' choices of research questions and gaps are motivated by their biases (Jamieson et al., 2023). For instance, the researcher's subjectivities guide the choice of research questions, gaps, and population rather than others (Jamieson et al., 2023; Larzard, McAvoy, 2020). These choices involve complex cognitive processes; in effect, our subjectivities cannot be entirely detached. Similarly, the availability of multiple methodologies presents the researcher with a range of choices. These Methodological choices closely align with the philosophical stance adopted by the researcher, which further gives credence to the role of subjectivities in the conceptualisation of the research. Consequently, the researcher's adoption of a reflexive approach brings into conscious awareness some of these inherent biases and the potential influence on the conceptualisation of the research. The researcher critically appraises the assumptions and choices made in the preliminary research phase to make the positionality explicit.

During data collection

The outcome of the research hinges on the data collection process. Within the qualitative domain, the researcher is considered an instrument in data collection (Wa-Mbaleka, 202). This perspective is a result of the nature of qualitative data collection tools, which are heavily reliant on the researcher's subjective understandings and interpretations (Yoon, Uliassi, 2022). The research outcome may, therefore, lean towards the researcher's subjectivities. Additionally, the researchers' positionality, as determined by the research, influences the degree of willingness of the participants to share information (Holloway, Galvin, 2023). Developing a reflexive approach enables the researcher to acknowledge potential biases and their positionalities, thereby generating valid knowledge.

During data analysis and interpretation

Reflexivity enables researchers to critically evaluate the potential influence of their subjectivities on selecting relevant information and interpreting it (Jamieson et al., 2023). During qualitative research analysis, as participants bring their existing knowledge and perspectives to bear on knowledge creation, there is a risk that power may be skewed in favour of the researcher, allowing them to determine what counts as valid information (Jamieson et al., 2023). The theoretical stance of the researcher can reveal meanings while obscuring others, and reflexivity can help the researcher become self-aware of the limitations imposed by a theoretical lens.

During writing and dissemination

The use of reflexivity by the researcher acknowledges the role of the researcher's context in interpretations (Jamieson et al., 2023). It further upholds ethical reporting of findings by ensuring

transparency in the process of knowledge construction (Vučković Juroš, 2022). The reader is thereby guided through the researcher's explicit documentation of the thought processes involved in the decision-making process across studies. Researchers often document their reflexive process using reflexive journals and memos, which can serve as a form of reference for reflection (Olmos Vega et al., 2023).

5. Practicing Reflexivity: The "How"

Reflexivity is crucial in achieving methodological rigour. Therefore, it requires a conscious engagement with the process and a willingness to engage in self-inquiry (Barrett et al., 2020). A question about the "how" demands a range of tools and strategies. Some essential tools to support this process include the following:

Reflexive journaling

Keeping a reflexive journal helps document thought processes and emotions. This tool is beneficial in supporting both the researcher's reflective process and emotional regulation (Karcher et al., 2024). Additionally, reflexive journals help researchers understand their positionality and navigate the challenges that emerge during the research process (Meyer, Willis, 2019).

- **Field notes and memos:** In addition to documenting observations in the field, field memos are well-suited for capturing the researcher's subjective experiences and interpersonal tensions that may arise during the research process (Olmos Vega et al., 2023; Ozoguz, 2025).

- **Peer debriefing and supervision:** Engaging with peers, who are typically knowledgeable outsiders, is a helpful way to promote transparency and receive valuable feedback. Peers can serve as sounding boards for the researcher, allowing the researcher to benefit from alternative perspectives (Maritz, Jooste, 2011).

- **Positionality statements:** The documentation of the researcher's situatedness within the research enhances transparency, providing the reader with context to understand the study's findings (Darwin Holmes, 2020).

- **Dialogic interviews:** Encouraging mutual dialogue rather than one-sided questioning can shift power dynamics and make the co-construction of meaning more explicit (Nardon et al., 2021; Way et al., 2015).

Developing reflexive capacity also involves critical self-questioning, such as asking, "Why am I drawn to this topic?" *What assumptions am I making? How might my background influence this interaction?* Additionally, cultivating emotional awareness helps researchers recognise when feelings such as discomfort, defensiveness, or empathy are shaping their responses and choices.

5. Justifying Reflexivity: The "Why"

The goal of the research process is to maximise validity of findings. Reflexivity becomes relevant throughout the research process in ensuring rigour (Olmos-Vega, 2022; Johnson et al., 2020) by upholding the principles of trustworthiness, credibility and transparency. Foregrounding the researcher's influence on the study provides additional benefits, encouraging a balanced view of communication.

Furthermore, while reflexivity does not eliminate subjectivity, it encourages transparency in making methodological decisions. Reflexive practice also enforces professional and improves self-awareness and personal growth (Deshpande, Rao, 2024).

6. Challenges and Critiques of Reflexivity

The benefits of reflexivity in qualitative research are well documented (Vučković Juroš, 2022). Too much emphasis on introspection may result in the researchers' experiences gaining dominance over that of the participants' (Olmos-Vega, 2022). Similarly, performative reflexivity, where self-disclosure is superficial or scripted – can compromise authenticity. The researcher's involvement in emotionally charged research can blur the researcher's reflexive stance (Janzen, 2016). Similarly, communicating the researcher's subjectivities is sometimes misconstrued especially by positivists as admitting the bias hence questioning validity of findings (Jamieson et al., 2023; Savolainen et al., 2023). In effect, striking a balance between honestly communicating subjectivities and maintaining an analytic distance can be problematic. Institutional constraints such as word limits, rigid structure and disciplinary norms may limit documenting reflexive

practices (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). The researcher in engaging in reflexive practice must adapt such practices to suit diverse cultural and geopolitical contexts (Von Unger, 2021).

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has addressed reflexivity using a questioning-based approach: what it is, when it is used, how it is applied and why it is essential. The interpersonal nature of qualitative data collection and active involvement of the researcher. Reflexivity fosters transparency, and accountability while promoting ethical application of the research process.

Researchers, supervisors and educators can draw lessons from this. Reflexivity should be included in the research process right from conceptualisation to dissemination. A variety of reflexive tools such as journals, memos and positionality statements can be adopted for this purpose. Creation of an environment such as supervisor or peer support to engage in critical discussion of researcher's positionality. Educators and supervisors should teach and support their students to imbibe the skill of being a reflexive researcher.

Future research should focus on interdisciplinary and intercultural application of reflexivity and the practice in different institutional settings. A continuous engagement in reflexive practice improves the validity of our research as well as strengthening our engagement with the human experiences at its heart.

8. Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Availability of data and materials

Not applicable.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

Funding

This research received no external funding. However, the authors sincerely thank the Centre for Behaviour and Wellness Advocacy, Ghana, for providing financial support through the Institutional Open Access Publication Fund.

Authors' contributions


All authors (JOS and DKA) conceptualised, designed the methodology, synthesised evidence, wrote the original draft, reviewed and edited, and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

Acknowledgements

We express our gratitude to the Centre for Behaviour and Wellness Advocacy, Ghana, for their editing support.

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