

FOCUS ON METHODOLOGY:

Sharpening reflexive practice in health professional education research

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the methodological practice of reflexivity. It critically explores previous works within and outside the field of health professional education research that seek to guide and inform researchers about reflexivity. Using illustrative scenarios, this paper will describe what reflexivity might look like in practice and ways in which reflexivity may contribute to strengthening future work. To finish, challenges of reporting reflexivity, including achieving a balance of credibility and vulnerability with respect to researcher reflexivity will be discussed. In sum, this work seeks to provide readers who are new to reflexivity, and those with experience, with some new ways of thinking about reflexivity that they might take forward into their research.

Keywords: qualitative research; reflexivity; reflexive practice

Introduction

How do you define reflexivity? There are many ways. A recent description is that reflexivity constitutes “a set of continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted practices through which researchers self-consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate how their subjectivity and context influence the research processes” (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022, p. 2). But what does that mean? My interpretation is that reflexivity involves researchers in a process of both reflection and action. These *practices* encourage researchers to look beyond the singular focus of self and to consider their own and others’ subjectivities, relationships, approaches and contexts with respect to their research. Some critics of reflexivity argue that this can be a narcissistic exercise, a self-indulgent act that serves as a space for confession or catharsis rather than evidence of methodological rigour (Pillow, 2003). This paper presents ideas on how the confessional can be avoided and how the self-conscious critique can be emphasised in the name of improving research quality.

Readers familiar with qualitative approaches are likely to be familiar with “personal reflexivity”, which focuses on the researcher as a significant aspect of the research process

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and product, and “interpersonal reflexivity”, which privileges the interrelationship between researcher and participant. However, some scholars also propose other types of reflexivity, such as “methodological reflexivity”, an explication of the theoretical approaches and commitments made during the research process, and “contextual reflexivity”, which situates the research with respect to history, culture and systems (Walsh, 2003). Researchers who use reflexivity, in its many forms, as a methodological practice seek not to navel gaze but to bring rigour to their work and to make visible the practice and construction of knowledge through their research endeavours (Pillow, 2003).

Making visible the construction of this paper

This paper on reflexivity is situated within a methodological series in a health professional education (HPE) journal. Thus far, papers published in this series have presented a multiplicity of voices aiming to provide insights for developing educational researchers in the health professions. This context has informed the construction of this manuscript, and I hope what is presented here provides a useful entrée for those who are new to reflexivity and also offers some new ideas for those more comfortable in this space.

This is a single author paper so my own personal reflexivity is important to consider with respect to how my subjectivities may have shaped my inquiry into reflexivity in HPE research. For context, I am an early career academic working part-time in medical education at a major metropolitan university in Australia. My perspectives on reflexivity have been informed by my position as a trained health professional and someone who has completed a PhD in HPE—my 2018 thesis looked at communication skills in healthcare communication: academic, clinician and patient perspectives (Indermaur-Denniston, 2018). It was while completing my doctoral work that I began learning in earnest about reflexivity. My insider perspective across all three stakeholder groups in my PhD meant I spent a lot of meta-cognitive time exploring how my subjectivities influenced the research and vice versa. Since that time, I have explored the concept of reflexivity with others, namely my mentors, my doctoral peers, journal paper reviewers, near peers and more recently in my role as a research higher degree supervisor. These interactions have continued to reinforce to me the multiplicity of perspectives on reflexivity. As an educator, my main areas of work include curriculum development in an MD program. This curriculum focuses on reflective, professional and collaborative practices and is informed by the humanities and theories of work integrated learning. These foundations keep curriculum design attuned to a representation of voices, various ways of knowing and the influence of context. Development of professional practice in workplace and classroom settings informs my research focus and student supervision. As such, I acknowledge the situated nature of learning and the influence of individuals and contexts on the creation of knowledge. I do not declare to be a methodological expert in research reflexivity, and perhaps this admission will be a fatal blow to my credibility. What I do claim to be is a researcher and educator who values multiple interpretations of the world and acknowledges that my own context and understanding of the world is innately

wrapped up in my interactions with others (including individuals, cultures and systems). As such, my views on reflexivity are based on a social constructionist epistemology, acknowledging the situated and co-constructed nature of knowledge production; the influence of researcher, relationships, methodological choices and context; and how these shape results and outcomes (Finlay, 2002).

During my doctoral research, my own understanding of reflexivity was primarily guided by papers from disciplines *outside* the field of HPE research. The following authors—printed hard-copies of their works, tea-stained, highlighted and dog-eared—developed my conceptualisation of reflexivity in qualitative research as a doctoral candidate. Finlay (2002) highlighted the impact of the interrelations between the research, the researcher and the participants; Pillow (2003) emphasised reflexivity as a method of *critical* qualitative research that seeks to “legitimize, validate and question practices of representation” (p. 175). Both of these papers provided (and continue to provide) a comprehensive background to reflexivity, including its theoretical foundations and historical developments, too lengthy to detail here. They also problematise reflexivity and present nuanced accounts of the criticisms, pitfalls and challenges (Finlay, 2002; Pillow, 2003). Finally, Ellingson’s (2009) book *Engaging Crystallisation in Qualitative Research* introduced to me the idea of crystallisation as a framework for qualitative research. This framework privileged reflexivity and aimed to combine “multiple forms of analysis and multiple genres of representation into a coherent text ... building a rich and openly partial account of the phenomenon ... highlighting the researchers’ vulnerabilities and positionality” (Ellingson, 2009, p. 4). I sought to use crystallisation to frame my thesis and to represent a number of voices in my PhD work. With this theoretical framing, reflexivity became a significant part of my doctoral experience and my thesis itself.

What is reflexivity in HPE research?

A survey of recent literature in HPE journals identified three papers that have sought to guide researchers in the area of reflexivity in qualitative research (i.e., “how to” guides and opinion pieces). These guides, all published within the last 5 years (see Figure 1), provide researchers and scholars with foundational knowledge of reflexivity in qualitative HPE research. Common themes from these works are summarised below under four key points, and readers are encouraged to access these papers for full details.

Continuous and considered

As Olmos-Vega et al. (2022) describe in their seminal definition, the practice of reflexivity is *continuous* and *considered*. Beyond a trite paragraph simply used to meet the requirements of a methodological quality checklist, the practice of reflexivity can (and should) be utilised and intertwined *throughout* the research process (Barrett et al., 2020; Olmos-Vega et al., 2022; Ramani et al., 2018). This means that reflexivity is not left until data analysis, or the write up. Instead, the practice of “conscious self-critique” occurs throughout and questions everything from initiating the research itself and building

the research team to choosing a research question and decisions about research design, sampling and data collection (Barrett et al., 2020; Ramani et al., 2018). Pausing to consider the perspectives that are represented, or not, at each stage of the process is part of this commitment to reflexivity.

Figure 1

Reflexivity Guides in Health Professional Education

- Olmos-Vega, F. M., Stalmeijer, R. E., Varpio, L., & Kahlke, R. (2022). A practical guide to reflexivity in qualitative research: AMEE Guide No. 149. *Medical Teacher*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159X.2022.2057287>
- Barrett, A., Kajamaa, A., & Johnston, J. (2020). How to ... be reflexive when conducting qualitative research. *The Clinical Teacher*, 17(1), 9–12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tct.13133>
- Ramani, S., Könings, K. D., Mann, K., van der Vleuten, C. P. M. (2018). A guide to reflexivity for qualitative researchers in education. *Academic Medicine*, 93(8), Article 1257. <https://doi.org/10.1097/acm.0000000000002263>

Collective and contextual

Secondly, reflexivity is described as *collective* and *contextual*. Rarely is research a solo endeavour, and as such, the practice of reflexivity needs to be a collaborative effort amongst the research team (Barrett et al., 2020; Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). Different team members bring with them different perspectives, and these will no doubt influence the research process. Accessing and acknowledging these perspectives has potential to strengthen collaboration of team members as well as the depth of the research work. Similarly, rarely is research conducted in a vacuum. Attending to broader contextual, cultural and societal factors of the research and the setting also influences the research process (Barrett et al., 2020; Olmos-Vega et al., 2022; Ramani et al., 2018). Consideration of these contextual factors has potential to produce research that has more impact and translation rather than acontextual work that ignores the influence of the sociocultural.

Challenging and can challenge

Thirdly, reflexivity is *challenging* and *can challenge* novices and experts alike (Barrett et al., 2020; Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). As a concept, it may be difficult to understand, and the actual *practice* is complex and at times confusing, perhaps because of the inconsistent ways in which it is reported, particularly in HPE research. In addition, the practice of reflexivity is an active one and can act in ways that challenge. By challenging one's perspectives and questioning assumptions (i.e., Why am I thinking this way?), reflexivity has the potential to not only challenge the researcher and research team but to go beyond and to challenge systems and disrupt the status quo (Barrett et al., 2020).

Communicated

Finally, it is important that reflexivity is *communicated* (Barrett et al., 2020). If reflexivity is not described, then the influences and assumptions that have been considered are unknown to the reader. The reader is neither able to fully interpret the work nor appreciate the methodological rigour. *What* is communicated is key. Reporting on decisions and dynamics that were *most* impactful rather than direct translations of all reflexivity journals/memos shows a nuanced engagement with the process and an attention to quality work (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). This avoids the trap of reflexivity appearing as a confession and, instead, uses it as a justification for decision making, with conscious articulation of the elements that have influenced the construction of knowledge in the research process.

What might reflexivity look like?

A theoretical description of reflexivity is only half the picture; articulation of what it looks like can further our understanding of this practice. In order to provide some clarity, two topics relevant to reflexivity in HPE research have been chosen and are detailed below. These topics include paradigmatic differences within the research team and disrupting research practices.

Paradigmatic differences in the research team

Healthcare professionals are “brought up” within a certain paradigm, or academic tradition, that underpins their foundational understandings of what knowledge is, how knowledge is constructed through research and how one looks at the world (Varpio & MacLeod, 2020). This paradigm may or may not align with interpretivist approaches that characterise much qualitative HPE research. A common transition that I have seen, in higher degrees by research in HPE in any case, is the paradigmatic shift from bench to bedside, numbers to words, positivism to interpretivism (Denniston & Tai, 2020), or a postgraduate student’s growing comprehension of different paradigms and different ways in which people can engage in research (Varpio & MacLeod, 2020). This was my own experience, where in the early days of my PhD, my own positivist past, as it intersected with my interpretivist inquiry, presented a paradigmatic challenge that required me to think in ways that challenged my previous assumptions (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). For example, making decisions about research design will look very different when viewed from a positivist versus interpretivist lens. The novice researcher might find themselves reconciling this paradigmatic shift internally, or depending on the supervisory team’s epistemic stance, this might result in conflicting paradigms within the team. As the field of HPE research matures, those seeking to develop expertise in this space must straddle this paradigmatic divide and, through concerted boundary work, aspire to understand opportunities and limitations of different approaches (Martimianakis et al., 2020).

Whether individually, or interpersonally, this conflict needs to be addressed, and the practice of reflexivity can help. Conscious questioning as to why one thinks certain ways

and what other ways of knowing might offer is the beginning of this process. Reflexivity privileges multiple interpretations—which in practice is the antithesis to positivist ideas of a single truth (Finlay, 2002)—so a supervisor or team member who is strongly embedded within a positivist paradigm may struggle to appreciate reflexivity and in their attempt to reconcile differences in opinion may not progress. A persuasive rationale for the need to engage in the practice of reflexivity may be needed, and the growing body of literature in HPE research will support these conversations (see the reference list of this paper for a start). However, an important skill of a qualitative researcher is to listen to multiple perspectives, so engaging in a process of team reflexivity such as that described by Barry et al. (1999) might provide a rich insight into the diversity of the team and may expand understandings of the many and varied ways of seeing and knowing (Varpio & Ellaway, 2021). This *collective* activity will ultimately strengthen current and future work.

Disrupting research practices

Whilst foundational notions of reflexivity might still be a bridge too far for some, reflexive approaches and critical qualitative research have the potential to help teams tackle big problems in HPE. Perhaps this might be worth feeling a bit uncomfortable for. Maintaining a reflexive approach to conducting decolonising research practices, for example, challenges us to critically reflect on our own identities and racial beliefs and positionalities and requires taking a critical approach to the methodologic practices and systems of our research as well as the entrenched systems of society and the academy (Karani et al., 2017; Russell-Mundine, 2012; Wyatt et al., 2022). Readers looking for guidance for this type of reflexivity can look to Milner's (2007) *Race, Culture and Researcher Positionality*, which encourages researchers to research the self, research the self in relation to others, engage in reflection and representation, and shift from the self to the system. This focus on the self, others and process aligns with Walsh's (2003) four types of reflexivity (see above). A key consideration here is the emphasis on how the researcher, or research teams, must consider and reflect on systems of oppression, social privileges and biases that may influence research, including recruitment, data collection, analysis and interpretation (Karani et al., 2017; Milner, 2007; Wyatt et al., 2022).

There is no doubt that a dive into systems of oppression and social privileges may be uncomfortable for some, or as Karani et al. (2017) state, perhaps even shameful. However, without a deeper engagement with the context within which our research is situated, reflexivity does nothing to challenge current practices and leaves itself as simply a “useful but ultimately shallow tool” (Russell-Mundine, 2012, p. 87). Upon making decisions about study design, researchers may begin to acknowledge the oppressive history tied up with many social science approaches (Wyatt, 2022). This acknowledgement and subsequent desire to change one's practice, requires deep questioning and engagement with what we do as researchers and why we do it; in essence this is the practice of personal, interpersonal, methodological and contextual reflexivity (Wyatt, 2022). This work of deep questioning and engagement, and challenging of dominant research

practices, should not be held only by those who have historically been without power (Wyatt, 2022) but rather by all researchers. For example, Russell-Mundine (2012) highlights the enormous work done by Indigenous researchers and academics in Australia in challenging structures of knowledge creation and dissemination, whilst she also emphasises the imperative that non-Indigenous researchers develop the skills to reflexively examine their own positions and contribute to this movement.

Researchers interested in privileging other ways of knowing and examining dominant research practices in their work can do so by explicitly making methodological choices that align, such as choice of theoretical lens (e.g., intersectionality, critical social sciences, feminist methodologies), methods (e.g., participatory action research and co-design, composite narratives) and choice of research team (Wyatt, 2022). This authentic engagement in reflexive practices and rethinking of how research is done might require some practice and some bravery, however engaging in this way could strengthen and enliven one's work through more critically engaging with the research team, the participants and the audience, thereby impacting research translation (Ellingson, 2009; Finlay, 2002; McElhinney & Kennedy, 2022; Pillow, 2003; Wyatt, 2022).

How is reflexivity reported?

So how is the practice of reflexivity reported in a manuscript or thesis? For the budding researcher, the most accessible exemplar of a completed research report is a published research article or, perhaps, a conferred thesis that is complete, has a logical flow, is typeset and has (mostly) no errors. This is certainly not reflective of the research process. Research, and the practice of reflexivity, can be messy, iterative and convoluted. We often see only an articulation of the tidied, finished product and not the indecision, dialogue or complex reflexive notetaking required to get there. To this end, Flannery (2001) uses the metaphor of quilting as a “feminist metaphor for scientific inquiry” (p. 628) to compare both the process and products of research and quilting. Both the quilter and researcher are intimately related to their work. They both make decisions based on tradition and creativity and, in the end, decide what to include in their finished product (i.e., quilt, manuscript/thesis). The wrong turns and rough edges are generally hidden behind a backing or edited out in the writing process (Flannery, 2001). However, there is potential for researchers to fully engage in reflexive practices, “embracing it fully at all stages of the research, without necessarily displaying the whole process in any one article” (Finlay, 2002, p. 543). But how is this done? Despite its potential, reflexivity is still underutilised or even absent in much qualitative HPE research.

Reflexivity, involving exposing the researcher's assumptions, biases and decision making, requires a certain comfort with expressing vulnerability. We know that in the health professions more broadly, including practices of teaching and researching, this expression of the uncertain or imperfect (showing the backing of the quilt) isn't something that everyone is comfortable with (Molloy & Bearman, 2019). If our research

is a finished product, then like the metaphor of the quilt, how might we reveal enough of the backing—the threads of decision making and dialogue with self and others that reflexivity asks us to pay attention to—without just exposing a mess. Might a researcher’s credibility be challenged if too much of this mess is revealed? As mentioned by Olmos-Vega et al. (2022), there is a certain privilege afforded to the reveal. Can a researcher with more social capital (and perhaps credibility) be braver when exposing their subjectivities? This tension between credibility and vulnerability draws parallels with intellectual candour, a concept described as the exposure of learners and teachers’ “thought processes, dilemmas or failures” in the context of teaching and learning (Molloy & Bearman, 2019, p. 32). Drawing from the work of Molloy and Bearman (2019), decisions about what to expose need to align with a clear purpose. With intellectual candour, this purpose is for one’s own learning and the learning of others (Molloy & Bearman, 2019). For reflexivity, this purpose might be to make clear the personal, interpersonal, methodological or contextual factors that have significantly influenced the construction of knowledge so that the audience can draw their own conclusions about the findings and the quality of research bound up in those results.

Some genres of writing afford more space to dedicate to writing about reflexivity than others. For example, my own PhD thesis leant on the metaphor of quilting and explicitly incorporated sections of “reflexive quilting” in each chapter. I laid bare my intersecting identities, my challenges and subjectivities and the positionality of my research in an attempt to demonstrate the rigour of my qualitative work but also to create a cohesive thread in my thesis (Indermaur-Denniston, 2018). But shorter forms of writing also provide opportunities for authentically incorporating reflexivity as the entire publication (Laurila, 2016; Verdonk, 2015; Wyatt et al., 2022) or a section (see Olmos-Vega et al., 2022).

Concluding remarks

Through completing this work (a critical read of the reflexivity literature and my own experience and reflections), I am reminded that reflexivity is difficult, and it takes time, care, skill and constant rehearsal to do it well. Engaging with this literature has prompted me to continue to practise shifting beyond self-reflexivity to consider others and the system within which my research practices are situated and to persist with reflexivity despite it feeling uncomfortable at times. The emphasis on articulating how reflexivity will be used from inception, as a core part of design, has also been reinforced to me and will inform my work as a researcher, educator and supervisor. Like any new skill that needs both expansion and sharpening, there is often discomfort in first attempts. The reflexivity literature reinforces that these uncomfortable reflexive practices need to be exercised, and like any developmental process, rehearsal and feedback are essential parts of that process (Finlay, 2002). Building in an expectation for reflexivity (and structures to support it) within teams, departments and institutions, where deep questioning and self-conscious critique are part of collegial exchanges, might be a start.

Footnote

As a researcher and educator, my interpretations and analysis are based on my worldview, which is influenced by the lenses of my multiple identities (Russell-Mundine, 2012). Beyond my researcher identity shared in the introduction, I also identify as a white, cisgender, heterosexual female. I live in a middle-class suburb of a major regional town in Australia with my partner and two children. I do not experience life through any physical or mental disabilities, and I have the privilege of a supportive community and family. Who I am has influenced how I have written this paper, the tone of voice I have chosen to write in and the examples selected. I speak to a representation of voices (my own and others) from a privileged position, and I recognise that. But reciprocally, this work has influenced me and my ways of knowing. I am always learning and am only at the beginning of my journey of unpacking how my multiple identities, and the subjectivity this brings, influence my research and research practice.

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