

# NCRM Bitesize Lessons for Teaching Social Science Research Methods

## 8: Facilitating the development of reflexive thinking for qualitative research

### What is reflexivity?

Reflexive thinking, or reflexivity, involves the researcher in critically assessing their positionality and the effect of this on their research process, data and findings<sup>1</sup>. It enables exploration of 'issues of power and privilege that exist between the researcher and the researched'<sup>2</sup>. Saldaña and Omasta (2021: 43)<sup>3</sup> define reflexivity as 'individual reflection on one's own relationship with the data, the participants, the nature of the study, and even with one's own self as a researcher'; while reflection may involve 'looking outward', reflexivity requires 'looking inward'.

Reflexivity in qualitative research is less about transparency and 'truth' (as these relate more to positivist goals); it is more coming from a recognition that the researcher influences the research<sup>4</sup>. Going beyond critical reflection (the researcher considering their assumptions and their influence on their work), critical reflexivity engages the researcher in reflecting on how their positionality impacts on their knowing and their understanding<sup>5</sup>. This presents a challenge to assumptions, for example, about how knowledge is constructed, or power dynamics. There is an interaction here: qualitative researchers both affect the research and are affected by it<sup>3</sup>, and this makes reflexivity an essential part of the research process.

### The challenge of learning critical reflexivity

Although it is challenging, qualitative learners need to develop their capabilities in reflexive thinking. This requires active and experiential learning supported by skilled facilitators. Such development is necessary for researchers to critically explore relationships between research and practice.

For research methods educators, this requires the creation of opportunities to authentically engage with learners and supporting learners with:

- feelings of doubt or overwhelm as they reflect on their stances
- the discomfort of confronting their privilege in relation to their participants
- feelings of vulnerability when considering how their experiences influence their research<sup>6</sup>
- understanding the different ways to 'do' reflexivity<sup>4</sup>, and
- knowing how much reflexivity is enough<sup>4</sup>.

Educators themselves need support to do this, hence this Bitesize guide.

### Approaches to teaching and learning critical reflexivity

Facilitating the development of reflexivity can be approached in various ways. Many of the approaches in the pedagogic literature deploy tasks or mediums that allow researchers the space to consider their own stances, beliefs, and subjectivities<sup>8</sup> including:

- reflective journals<sup>8,9</sup>
- blogs<sup>9</sup>
- social media postings<sup>9</sup>
- videonarratives<sup>10</sup>
- collaborative conversations<sup>11</sup>

These can be used singly or in combination; moreover, one medium often prompts another. Digital spaces can be good for expanding both the number of people the learning is engaging in reflexive conversations with and range of perspectives<sup>9</sup>. However, the key is to create safe environments in which they encounter challenge.

In addition to these useful tasks/mediums, the pedagogic literature provides some models for reflective and reflexive thinking and practice from other pedagogic domains that methods educators can adapt.

- Gibbs's seminal Reflective Cycle model<sup>12</sup> involves six steps to encourage reflection: description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and action plan. Without an emphasis on critical analysis or considering different perspectives, this model requires expansion to help students engage in reflexive practices.
- Bassott's Integrated Reflective Cycle<sup>13</sup> is useful in adding theory, with the steps of: experience, reflection on action, theory, and preparation.
- Brookfield's Four Lenses model<sup>14</sup> has potential for supporting qualitative research learners to engage in reflexivity via considering varied viewpoints, including how their participants may view them, and how their prior experiences may affect the situation under discussion. The four lenses are the *autobiographical lens*, *participant lens*, *colleagues lens*, and *theoretical lens*.

Educators can demonstrate their own engagement in reflexive practices by examining power structures in their courses and their own positionality (see work on critical pedagogy). In this way modelling reflexive thinking within a culture of caring helps learners better understand how to engage in these practices themselves.

## Useful links

[Reflexivity and positionality in research by Dr. Nicole Brown](#)

[Worksheet - list of reflexivity questions.pdf](#)

## References

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