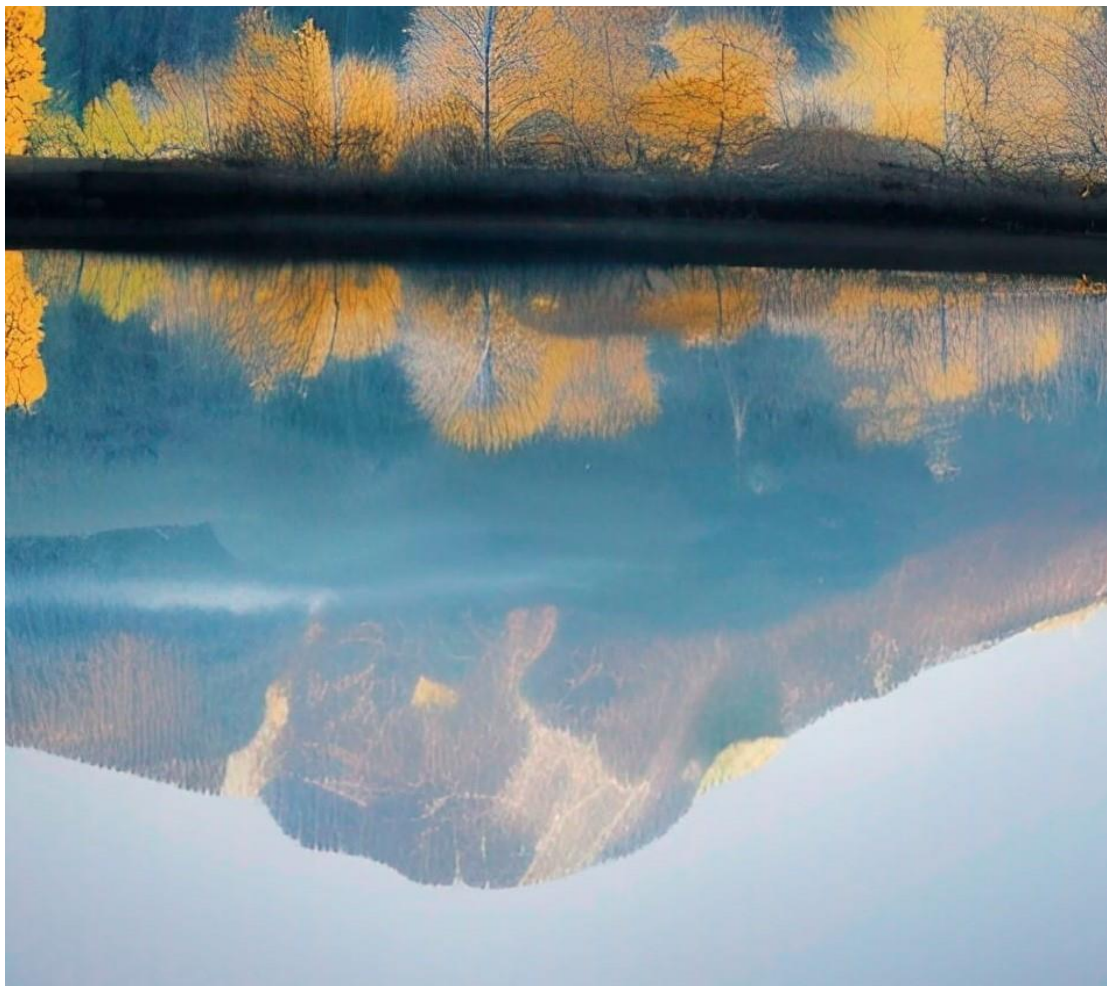




A REVIEW OF REFLEXIVE PRACTICE IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH TEAMS

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INTRODUCTION

This short report offers a review of some of the literature on reflexive practice in qualitative research teams, with a focus on social scientific and humanities research. Rather than providing a systematic or comprehensive review of this literature, this report attempts to bring together some of the learnings and resources around team-based reflexivity, so that these might aid how we plan and enact our future team-based research endeavours.

Across the social sciences, the practice of reflexivity is increasingly encouraged as a characteristic of good methodological and ethical research practice. Emerging from critiques of the model of the 'neutral' ethnographic observer and a broader scrutiny of the fallacy of a 'value-free' Sociology, a principal aim of reflexivity is to aid a critical assessment of the social scientist's own biases that might influence their research practice. Indeed, in their influential call for a 'Reflexive Sociology', Gouldner (1970, p. 489) argues that the 'The historical mission of a Reflexive Sociology [...] would be to transform the sociologist, to penetrate deeply into his [sic] daily life and work, enriching them with new sensitivities, and to raise the sociologist's self-awareness to a new historical level'.

Reflexivity has in some senses become a standardised part of qualitative research practice in the social sciences and, indeed, discussion of the researcher's positionality in academic writing is seen by some as having become a 'ritual' (Subramani, 2019, p. 1). Yet, being shaped by different disciplinary branches, the practice of reflexivity has acquired particular inflections and orientations. As Pillow (2003, p. 176) summarises, 'Qualitative researchers using critical, feminist, race-based, or poststructural theories all routinely use reflexivity as a methodological tool to better represent, legitimize, or call into question their data'. Although the concept encompasses a wide range of definitions, an important aspect of being *reflexive* rather than *reflective* is, as Chiseri-Strater (1996, p. 130) notes, that 'to be reflective does not



demand an 'other,' while to be reflexive demands both an other and some self-conscious awareness of the process of self-scrutiny'. Furthermore, the practice of reflexivity may not only comprise a professional and academic endeavour for social scientists, but can also be a 'personal project', as Hibbert (2021, p. 1) emphasises, 'It is a process of engaging with experience, that changes our ways of understanding and guides adaptation in readiness for future experiences'.

However, although reflexivity is widely posited as an important aspect of social scientific research, particularly in the interpretive and constructivist traditions, the practice of *doing* reflexivity has received less attention than its theoretical underpinnings. In particular, the practice of reflexivity in research teams and collaborations requires greater examination. As Siltanen et al. (2008, p. 45) report, ‘In trying to work reflexively as a research team, we encountered the further issue that the existing discussions of reflexive research practice speak primarily of and to a lone researcher’. Given the growing occurrence of social scientific research conducted in teams, an increasing number of which are also trans- or inter-disciplinary, this report will offer a brief review of some of the strategies for putting team-based reflexivity into practice and discuss some of the associated benefits and challenges.

BENEFITS OF REFLEXIVE PRACTICE IN RESEARCH TEAMS

This review is categorised into three subsections which comprise key benefits of reflexive practice in research teams suggested across the literature. Literature was found via database searches on Google Scholar and the University of Nottingham’s library search engine, using the keywords: ‘reflexivity’; ‘team’; ‘qualitative’; ‘social’; and ‘research’. Literature was also found through a ‘snowballing’ approach, following up on references that appeared relevant. Although organised separately for clarity, these sections are in many ways overlapping. Practical methods and tools for doing reflexivity in research teams have been emboldened throughout.

CULTIVATING SHARED UNDERSTANDINGS

A key intention in practicing team-based reflexivity discussed in much of the literature is to cultivate shared understandings of the research questions, subjects, and objects. This means doing reflexivity at both the individual and team level, working, as Siltanen et al. (2008, p. 46) describe, ‘separately together [...] to forge from separate and partial perspectives a common understanding of our research subjects/objects’. Siltanen et al.’s experience of team-based reflexivity is said to have enabled the authors to become ‘an ‘interpretive us’ and created an understanding of the researched world that was common to us as a team.’ (ibid, p. 49). They suggest that to make team reflexivity a ‘routine, embedded practice’ requires ‘working ‘separately together’ on *all* aspects of the research—from design, to field work, to analysis and to writing up’ (ibid, p. 56, emphasis added). Practically, the authors describe how their efforts towards cultivating a common understanding of the research subjects/objects were largely structured by ‘**team analysis meetings**’ in which members ‘came to the table as equals and conducted our discussion without formal facilitation, talking things through until we achieved consensus’ (ibid, p. 53).

Similarly, in their practice of reflexivity in a multidisciplinary qualitative research team, Barry et al. (1999) aimed to acknowledge what each individual was bringing to the research and also develop collective understandings of the area of study. The authors used a two-part approach which involved producing **reflexive accounts of each individual’s ‘orientation’** guided by seven ‘orienting questions’ about

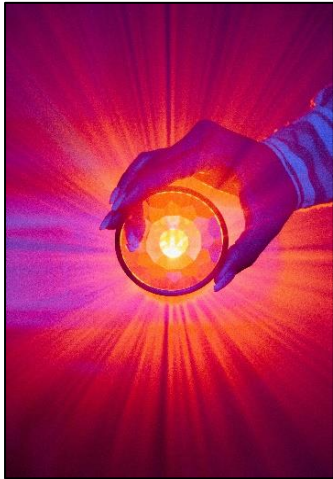
individuals' experiences, expectations, approaches, commitments, and emotions and then **generating collective 'definitions of key theoretical concepts'**, undertaking both exercises at the beginning of the project and then a year later (ibid, p. 35). In the following definitional activity, each team member gave 'definitions of topics chosen by the team as the central conceptual issues at the heart of the project', with this activity aiming to situate the team 'in the theory from the literature' and identify differing interpretations of core concepts (ibid, p. 37). Through their two-part writing model, Barry et al. used reflexivity to 'uncover the different agendas of each team member' and help to 'predict and to deal with potential criticism before publication by refining the methodology and carefully considering any methodological and theoretical decisions' (ibid, p. 41).

Also undertaking collective activities aimed at generating shared definitions of concepts and research questions, Arias López's (2021, p. 7) interdisciplinary team conducted a '**definitional ceremony**' early on in the project, inviting 'a colleague experienced in narrative practice' to act as interviewer. The ceremony began with the principal investigator being interviewed about how they had developed the central research idea and then team members were 'invited to individually answer two questions: 'What caught your attention in what you just heard?' (retelling) and 'How does your own experience relate to this story?' (relating)' (ibid). Lasting several hours, the ceremony was described as 'an emotional process of storytelling and resonances' (ibid) and ended with the interviewer using the practice of 'editorialization' to summarise individual retellings and relatings into a 'collective account' (ibid, p.9). These definition ceremonies were not only used at the beginning of the project but also used 'to engage in deeper reflections on the empirical data and how the research impacted on our own subjectivities and understanding' (ibid, p. 10). Finally, combining these definitional ceremonies with textile-making, Arias López et al. describe how members in their research team 'related to each other's experiences, thoughts, and stories when relayed through textiles, which in turn contributed to the process of coming together as a team' (ibid).

Shared understandings do not mean one singular voice in collaborative research. Practicing and materialising reflexivity can help to reveal gaps and inconsistencies. Indeed, exploring their collaborative research practice within a team in which different countries, cultures, and languages are brought together, Ryan et al. (2010, p. 116) produced reflexive writing 'grouped around conversation, its non-linearities and items lost, with the intention of examining the nature of reflection and how we write ourselves in action research'.

IDENTIFYING ASSUMPTIONS

Related to the aim of cultivating shared understandings of the research area, the aim of identifying assumptions held by individuals guides much of the practice of team-based reflexivity. Capturing the value of this kind of work in the area of adult education, Brookfield (2000, p. 47) contend that ‘in order to do good work we must consistently involve others—particularly learners and colleagues—as commentators



on our efforts. In a very real sense we depend on these people to keep us honest’. Similarly, in their analysis of interviews with qualitative social work researchers on the perceived benefits, challenges, and limitations of reflexivity, Probst (2015, p. 44) found that the aim of collaborative reflexivity ‘was not seen as reaching consensus, but as articulating the differing assumptions and agendas that contribute to multifaceted understanding’. In this way, reflexive researchers can be understood as ‘gazing in two directions at the same time’, becoming ‘aware of their own projections, attachments, assumptions, agendas, and biases—like an eye that sees itself while simultaneously seeing the world’ (ibid, p. 38).

Discussing international collaborative research, Bagshaw et al. (2007, p. 438) write that ‘Collaborative partnerships and team-building demand that we hold a mirror to the soul, look in that mirror, and not run from what we see [...] The basis in self-reflection, then, is “Who am I” as a member of an international collaborative research team?’. They suggest self-reflexively examining the ‘influence of dominant cultural discourses on our constructions of reality’ so that we may ‘reduce their power’ (ibid, p.439). Without this deconstruction, Bagshaw et al. advise that ‘it is unlikely that individuals will be open to other cultural discourses, perspectives, and meanings’ (ibid), which is of course a crucial aspect of international collaboration.

To study the assumptions underlying their collaborative process, Paulus et al. (2010) **collaboratively analysed meeting transcripts** to examine the research process being enacted and study the assumptions underlying their collaborative approach. ‘Making the tacit explicit’, they find gave them ‘the opportunity to make choices about how we want to collaborate, choices that can be articulated to others’ (ibid, p. 861). This, in turn, is taken as enabling them to ‘improve our conceptual thinking and more easily make improvements to the rigor and quality of our work as coresearchers’ (ibid).

For Carretta (2015, p. 502), the use of **deconstructive ‘self-reflexive’ writing** exercises revealed how ‘the relations and personal perceptions shaped by our convictions and backgrounds are not self-evident or alike’. In the context of cross-cultural research, Carretta suggests that such an approach underscored the requirement to ‘be more attentive to how the interplay of researcher’s, participants’ and assistants’ positionalities shape the research process and how the evolution of the research can, in turn, affect one’s identity and one’s perceptions of the others’ identities’ (ibid).



In some areas, the need to challenge assumptions is a more explicit requirement of research. Writing from the standpoint of Critical Animal Studies (CAS), Peggs (2014, p. 37) argues that ‘a critical engagement with the human oppression of nonhuman animals requires reflexivity; a different form of human being towards nonhuman animals, reflexive humans who no longer take themselves for granted in relation to nonhuman animals’. Contending that such an approach is ‘central to writing *for* animals’ (ibid, p. 46, emphasis added), Peggs advocates for the inclusion of **autobiographical insights** to move the researcher ‘from the margins to the centre of their work’ (ibid).

Finally, a particularly creative example of both using and representing reflexive practices in collaborative research, Leggatt-Cook et al. (2011) use **play-writing** as a way of examining their experiences of researcher-participant relationships and their team’s research practice, representing their experiences and analysis of reflexive practice as a ‘play in one act’. As a ‘form of (re)presentation’, Leggatt-Cook et al. claim that this kind of writing allowed them ‘to do things you cannot do and say things you cannot say in a regular academic paper’ (ibid, 245).

BUILDING GOOD TEAM RELATIONSHIPS

As well as using reflexivity to optimise the analytical capacity, methodological rigor, and ethical grounding of research in teams, reflexivity is also discussed as a way of building good team relationships. Whilst different disciplinary backgrounds, positions, and orientations to the research is a strength of interdisciplinary approaches, this can also produce issues for team relationships.

Here, Lingard et al. (2007, pp. 515-516) offer three lessons. Firstly, they stress the ‘importance of explicitly negotiating the tensions in member identity’. Secondly, they argue that ‘the question of how to maintain research activity while appropriately integrating new members is a critical one’. And finally, they emphasise the process of ‘manuscript production as a complex act of shaping knowledge through selections of audience, voice, story, and genre’ and suggest that collaborative manuscripts could include a **reflexive section** on how the group’s values and structures shaped the writing.

Another example of how reflexivity can be used to navigate team relationships is given by Rankl et al.'s (2021) use of a two-stage model for team-based reflexivity. The first stage involved establishing time for '**team reflections**' in all meetings, enabling the team to discuss themselves, their work, and any difficulties, with such reflections noted and then shared with the wider team (ibid, pp. 1361-1362). Following this, the second stage included '**informal conversations with team members**' which were guided by open-ended questions around 'experiences working with the team, areas of good practices, and areas for improvement' (ibid). As can be seen in Rankl et al.'s example, such work requires an ongoing commitment to cultivating a positive team relationship throughout the life of a research project. Indeed, also emphasising the continual requirement of reflexivity, Olesen et al. (1994, p. 126) describe of their collective experience of reflexive practice around data analysis, 'The enduring necessity to be unremittingly and relentlessly reflexive was borne in on us time and time again'.

Also using reflexivity to investigate their team dynamics, Trussell et al. (2017, p. 8) created 'moments of dialogue to express our challenges related to the research project'. In order to do so, they emphasise the value of '**semiannual research retreats**' which provided 'structure, time, and an intentional space for individual as well as group reflexivity'. In their case, two-day retreats enabled team members in their interdisciplinary project to engage in '**deep listening and reflective practice**—in a way that short (bi)weekly meetings were unable to facilitate' (ibid). Hence, they suggest that such activities 'were essential in helping us negotiate and navigate our ongoing challenges related to an interdisciplinary qualitative research team' and holding individuals 'accountable to the research project goals and each other' (ibid).



Linabary et al. (2021) also reflexively examined their own team relations and practices, developing what they call '*collaborative feminist reflexivity*' (CFR), which involved both formal reflexive practices such as '**collaborative journaling, individual journaling, and group discussions**' (ibid, p. 732) and informal '**micro-practices**' through 'text messages and emails, at social gatherings (often over wine), and during travel to professional events' (ibid, p. 724). Following these activities, Linabary et al. undertook a 'final round of **reflections on our reflections** to specifically interrogate the collaborative reflexive process as well as its potentials and constraints' (ibid, p. 724). Overall, the authors underscore that it is not only 'what we did but how and why we did it that became important to our collaborative reflexive praxis', with their practices being informed by 'feminist epistemological and ethical commitments, including interrogating power, practicing an ethic of caring, and pursuing transformative research' (ibid, p. 732). With challenges relating to methodologies, hierarchies and identities, and the sensitivity of the research topic, ultimately Linabary et al. describe using CFR as 'a useful method of interrogating and navigating these differences and their ethical implications throughout our research collaboration' (ibid, p. 720).

Finally, by asking student research assistants to produce **journal entries** on the research process, initially in an unstructured manner and then shifting to an iterative process of commentary and response, Malacrida (2007, p. 1331) reports that her team ‘were able to address issues and concerns that stemmed from the team’s exposure to sensitive, emotional, and potentially demoralizing materials and processes’ and also resolve ‘problems relating to working within a team research environment’.

CHALLENGES OF TEAM-BASED REFLEXIVITY: DOING REFLEXIVITY CAREFULLY AND CRITICALLY

With some of the main benefits of reflexive practice outlined above, it is also important to note the need for a considered approach in implementing reflexive practice. For instance, Barry et al. (1999, p. 35) discuss how reflexive activities, such as asking team members to write and circulate ‘reflexive position statements’, can be done ‘too early in the life of the team’ and, in their case, cause ‘some anxiety’. Reflecting on this, the authors suggest that it ‘may have been better to let the team engage in some bonding and gain confidence and trust in each other before embarking on this type of exercise’ (ibid). This example shows the importance of timing in reflexive practice and also demonstrates the assumptions and power differentials that might guide decisions of *when* and *how* to do reflexivity in a team.

Another issue that might occur in practicing team-based reflexivity is a lack of a shared commitment to reflexivity, however defined. Stressing the importance of a collective agreement to ‘work reflexively’, Siltanen et al. (2008, p. 50) operated through ‘three orientations’. Orientation One required all team members to ‘be willing to reflect on how the experience of doing research affects and is affected by their personal experience’. Orientation Two required all team members to ‘be willing to share our personal experiences and responses with the group’. And Orientation Three required all team members to commit to ‘working collaboratively, supportively and non-hierarchically’ (ibid). Yet, as they acknowledge, such orientations were perhaps easier to unify around due to working in a ‘small, women-only, sub-set of the full project group’ and the authors themselves raise queries about the possibility of this kind of reflexive practice ‘with a larger and/or more diverse group’ (ibid, p. 57). Indeed, as they put it, ‘Multi-vocality is a precondition for collaborative teamwork, and yet the inclusion of many voices on a research team does not guarantee that all are equally attended to [...] For a collective ‘interpretive us’ to emerge, there must be a participatory inclusiveness wherein the partial knowledge of each team member has a place’ (ibid, p. 58).

Relatedly, some of the literature on reflexivity as a way of building strong research team relationships suggests the importance of not only professional or academic bonds across teams, but also of friendship. Discussing the use of relational reflexivity in collaborative research, Hibbert (2021, p. 116) observes that ‘A foundational social dimension seems to be unavoidable [...] and on balance it is helpful when that social

dimension is imbued with friendship'. More specifically, Hibbert suggests that 'Warm motivations and caring sentiments can lead to strong commitments' and indicates that relationally reflexive collaboration 'benefits greatly from two kinds of openness that are involved with warm motivations' (ibid). The first is 'the willingness to embrace serendipity – being ready to engage with something unexpected and to recognise that something interesting might be going on that is worth exploring – just as you would in any friendly conversation' and the second is in 'seeing serendipitous insights as an invitation to reflexive practice, motivated by care for the person who offers the insight' (ibid). Similarly, Caretta (2015, p. 502) highlight that in their research collaboration 'The fine balance between friendship and professionalism was a constitutive element of our relationship' and, through this, the arising 'mutual comprehension allowed us to critically reflect on the research process'.

Finally, the adoption of uncritical approaches which treat reflexivity as a panacea to research pitfalls can pose another problem for practicing team-based reflexivity. On this point, Pillow advocates for situating reflexivity not 'as a confessional act, a cure for what ails us, or a practice that renders familiarity, but rather [...] as critical to exposing the difficult and often uncomfortable task of leaving what is unfamiliar, unfamiliar' (Pillow, 2003, p. 177). Uncritical approaches to reflexivity may also raise issues for researchers as well as the research. Here, Borgstrom and Ellis (2021) point out that although reflexivity has often been used as a way of protecting research participants against harm, the potential harms caused by reflexivity to the researcher(s) have been less explored. Working in the sensitive area of death studies, the authors reveal that 'what reflexivity does not always provide is a solution to the 'living with' of our research and the effects of the vulnerability it can engender' (ibid, p. 599). Hence, although reflexivity has been encouraged in sensitive research (Band-Winterstein et al., 2014), Borgstrom and Ellis suggest that encouraging researchers to cultivate a heightened sensitivity to the sensitivity of their work can sometimes generate vulnerabilities in researchers themselves.

SUMMARY

With a growing number of qualitative social research projects occurring in teams, often with interdisciplinary members, this report has provided a brief review of some of the key benefits and challenges of practicing reflexivity in research teams. In doing so, it has covered the advantages that reflexivity can provide for cultivating shared understandings of key elements of the research project, identifying assumptions that individuals might bring to the research, and building good team relationships. In discussing some of the challenges of practicing reflexivity in research teams, this report has suggested the value of both a care-full and critical approach. Finally, this report has highlighted some of the practical tools and methods for putting reflexivity into practice in research teams. These are given again in the list below for summary:

- ‘Team analysis meetings’ in which members can discuss the research subjects/objects together in the aim of reaching a common understanding (Siltanen et al., 2008).
- Producing reflexive accounts of each individual’s ‘orientation’ and then generating collective ‘definitions of key theoretical concepts’ (Barry et al., 1999).
- Definitional ceremonies which explore how research questions have been developed and open up these reflections for collective discussion (Arias López et al., 2021).
- Collaborative analysis of meeting transcripts to examine the research process and interrogate underlying assumptions (Paulus et al., 2010).
- Deconstructive ‘self-reflexive’ writing exercises which draw out the positionalities, relationalities, and perspectives of team members (Caretta, 2015).
- Providing ‘autobiographical insights’ to move the researcher ‘from the margins to the centre of their work’ (Peggs, 2014).
- Play-writing based on the team’s research process and reflexive practice (Leggatt-Cook et al., 2011).
- Providing a ‘reflexive section’ in manuscripts which describes how the group’s values and structures shaped the writing (Lingard et al., 2007).
- Scheduling time for ‘team reflections’ in meetings which are recorded and shared amongst the wider team.
- Engaging in ‘informal conversations with team members’ guided by open-ended questions around team-working experiences (Rankl et al., 2021).
- Planning ‘semiannual research retreats’ to engage in ‘deep listening and reflective practice’ (Trussell et al., 2017).
- Undertaking both individual and collaborative journaling and engaging in group discussions (Linabary et al., 2021).
- Writing journal entries on the research process. This can be done both in an unstructured way or can be guided by an iterative process of commentary and response between team members (Malacrida, 2007).

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