Approaches to reflexivity in qualitative research

The term ‘reflexivity’, as it applies to nursing, is poorly described and elusive. Yet it represents a new chapter in qualitative research, argues Maura Dowling, closing the door on a belief that distance between researcher and participant is paramount, and providing momentum for a move towards a position where boundaries between the two are surrendered.

Introduction

Reflexivity is a curious term with various meanings. Finding a definition of reflexivity that demonstrates what it means and how it is achieved is difficult (Colbourne and Sque 2004). Moreover, writings on reflexivity have not been transparent in terms of the difficulties, practicalities and methods of the process (Mauthner and Doucet 2003). Nevertheless, it is argued that an attempt be made to gain ‘some kind of intellectual handle’ on reflexivity in order to make use of it as a guiding standard (Freshwater and Rolfe 2001).

The role of reflexivity in the many and varied qualitative methodologies is significant. It is therefore a concept of particular relevance to nursing as qualitative methodologies play a principal function in nursing enquiry. Reflexivity assumes a pivotal role in feminist research (King 1994). It is also paramount in participatory action research (Robertson 2000), ethnographies, and hermeneutic and post-structural approaches (Koch and Harrington 1998). Furthermore, it plays an integral part in medical case study research.

Key words

reflexivity, epistemological, critical, feminist
Reflexivity is often narrowly viewed as the analytic attention to the researcher’s role in qualitative research, such as that first posited by Gouldner (1971). The use of the term in general research discussions assumes that the researcher should engage in continuous self-critique and self-appraisal and explain how his or her own experience has or has not influenced the stages of the research process (Koch and Harrington 1998). This fits with the view of Furman (2004), who argues that researchers should resist the temptation to ‘look good’ and instead push themselves toward self-revelation.

Reflexivity, however, requires researchers to operate on multiple levels (Etherington 2004), and acknowledges that the researcher is intimately involved in both the process and product of the research endeavour (Horsburgh 2003). It involves being aware in the moment of what is influencing the researcher’s internal and external responses while simultaneously being aware of the researcher’s relationship to the research topic and the participants. This view reflects the two principle types of reflexivity evident in published literature: personal and epistemological.

Similarities between reflection and reflexivity are evident in the literature. Lamb and Huttlinger (1989) state that reflexivity is ‘a self-awareness and an awareness of the relationship between the investigator and the research environment’. Personal reflexivity is described as ‘self-awareness’ (Giddens 1976) and mirrors reflection as a learning tool. Definitions of ‘reflexive’ suggest an activity of self-inspection (Colbourne and Sque 2004) or ‘self-reflection’ (Carolan 2003). Moreover, Finlay (2002) argues that ‘reflection’ sits at one end of a continuum, with ‘reflexivity’ at the other, suggesting that reflexivity is more ‘active’ than mere reflection.

Reflexivity is also referred to extensively in the context of counselling and psychotherapy. Personal reflexivity in this context is regarded as a characteristic of human personhood and viewed as the ability to represent oneself to oneself, and it is this ability that allows a person to develop an awareness of self (Wolfe 2003). This type of reflexivity is presented in the self-reflexivity of poetry utilised by Furman (2004). Such use of reflexivity represents autoethnography, an autobiographical field of writing and research that

(Thompson 2004), and is one of seven foundational processes consistently seen in studies that come under the ‘critical’ label (Fontana 2004).
displays several layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural, with varying emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethnos), and on self (auto) (Ellis and Bochner 2000).

The importance of the role of reflection on reflexivity is not disputed. However, both Auerbach (1993) and Lewis (2000) argue that self-reflexivity is not the achievement of ‘introspection’ as an isolated mind in private contemplation, but always involves an intersubjective process of vibrant tension between oneself as a subject and as an object. To create this tension, a relationship with a research supervisor such as that achieved in clinical supervision is needed. Rolls and Relf (2004) report that they utilised their project advisory group to engage in a series of taped interviews through which they identified the assumptions and past experiences of the principal researcher in order to ‘bracket’ or put them to one side. Such a process assisted in understanding how these assumptions may have impacted on the data collection and analysis process (Rolls and Relf 2004). What Northway (2000) calls ‘critical friends’ can also help with reflexivity if they can challenge the self-deceptions of researchers. This approach to reflexivity has a contemporary feel about it and can in some respects be compared to clinical supervision as used in reflective practice.

Reflexivity can also be viewed on a continuum. At one end is its emergence as a consideration for qualitative researchers in what Denzin and Lincoln (1998) call the third stage of qualitative research. This stage of qualitative research (1970 to 1986) saw a new age of blurred, interpretive genres where the researcher’s presence in the interpretive text was under the spotlight (Denzin and Lincoln 1998). At the other end of the continuum, reflexivity may be utilised as the primary methodological instrument for an inquiry as in research using what is termed autoethnography – autobiography and narrative inquiry.

The emergence of autoethnography represents the (next) sixth moment of qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). This sixth moment is evident in, for instance, the work of Furman (2004) who utilises self-reflexivity in the form of poetry in an attempt to understand his experience of having a father with cancer. In between the third and sixth moments, Denzin and Lincoln (1998) trace the fourth moment of crisis of representation – where...
narrative research

the emphasis is focused on reflexivity, class, gender, race and so on – and the fifth moment which heralded the advent of action-oriented research, with the abandonment of the aloof researcher.

Koch and Harrington (1998), drawing on the work of Marcus (1994) (who discusses four styles of reflexivity in relation to ethnography), outline four forms of reflexivity. All of these four forms, to some degree, are associated with the issue of validity, and all can be placed in one or more of the qualitative ‘moments’ outlined above.

Reflexivity aimed at sustaining objectivity
The first type of reflexivity is aimed at sustaining objectivity, and reflects a strong positivist influence. This is not surprising as early developments in qualitative research were associated with the positivist paradigm (Denzin and Lincoln 1998). For instance, the utilisation of ‘bracketing’ in Husserlian (descriptive) phenomenology is an effort to maintain ‘objectivity’ in phenomenological methods (Koch and Harrington 1998). Bracketing is the suspension of all biases and beliefs regarding the phenomenon being researched prior to collecting data about it. This type of reflexivity is also evident in the use of what Rolls and Relf (2004) call ‘bracketing interviews’.

In order to achieve reflexivity aimed at ‘bracketing’ biases, the use of a journal is promoted (Koch and Harrington 1998). Wall (2004) (in Wall et al 2004) utilised a reflective diary in her phenomenological study guided by the phenomenology of Husserl. The first stage she utilised was one of prereflective preparation where time was set aside before interviews to raise awareness of the specific issues that would require bracketing. This reflects the prereflective process which participants undergo in their whole reflexive process and knowledge of the world (Sadala and Adorno 2002). Following this, reflection on situations, including specific interviews, and methodological progression was undertaken. After reflection, an identification of new learning was identified. Finally, Wall identifies how the new learning can be utilised during subsequent interviews. Three phases of bracketing clearly emerge from this process: bracketing ‘pre’ action; bracketing ‘in’ action; and bracketing ‘on’ action (Wall et al 2004). These phases are also evident in the reports of Hewitt-Taylor (2002) who indicates that she achieved reflexivity
by abstractly hypothesising in a more detached way when regarding her research questions, and how the data she gathered (including her reflective accounts) gave insight into these.

Husserl’s philosophical viewpoints of the need for bracketing biases are also evident in ethnomethodology (a type of sociological analysis that integrates sociology and phenomenology). Ethnomethodology fits into the philosophical background of constructivism. This paradigm believes that the values and preconceived ideas of the researcher always influence the study design and process (Guba and Lincoln 1989). The ethnomethodological researcher must adopt what its founder, Garfinkel, terms ‘ethnomethodological indifference’ and vigorously resist any personal judgements of the correctness of the members’ activities. To achieve this indifference the researcher, as in phenomenological research, can record personal beliefs and biases (van Manen 1984). The integration of a research diary, taking into account negotiations with members that led to the analysis of the setting, is considered by Coulon (1995) to be essential in the many forms of reflexive socioanalytical theory. Moreover, Tapsell (1997) comments on the difficulties with ethnomethodology of analysing the way in which people think, feel and act when the researcher is also thinking, feeling and acting. She therefore recommends that the ethnomethodology researchers account for their position and present their rationale in light of this.

**Epistemological reflexivity**

A broader view of reflexivity is evident in epistemological reflexivity where the researcher is required to ask such questions as: ‘How has the research question defined and limited what can be “found” and how could the research question have been investigated differently?’ Therefore, epistemological reflexivity encourages the researcher to reflect upon the assumptions (about the world, about knowledge) that are made in the course of the research, and it helps the researcher think about the implications of such assumptions for the research and its findings.

This type of reflexivity is evident in philosophical hermeneutics, guided by the writings of Gadamer (1989). In philosophical hermeneutics, understanding is derived from personal involvement by the researcher in reciprocal
processes on interpretation that are inextricably related to one’s being in the world (Spence 2001). Gadamer (1989) asserts that pre-judgements or prejudices have a special importance in interpretation and cannot or should not be disposed of (Pascoe 1996). This view of reflexivity is also evident in grounded theory, where researchers brings their previous experiences into the data and no effort is made to put aside assumptions about the situation under study (Baker et al 1992).

Researchers both influence and are influenced by the experience of engaging in research (Hand 2003). This view reflects the belief that individuals can engage reflexively on conceptual or emotional information stored in memory or in-the-moment experience. Reflexivity could therefore be compared to the ‘hermeneutic circle’ as applied in phenomenological research.

Another form of reflexivity is associated with self-critique and an openness to the possibility of a ‘many voiced’ account in the research product. This form of reflexivity has a strongly personal nature. Gadamer (1989) argues that in order to understand another, one must first understand oneself. Turner (2003) utilised Bildung (meaning openness to meaning), another of Gadamer’s key concepts, in a study of hope as seen through the eyes of a small sample of Australian youth. Bildung is the keeping of one’s self open to what is other and embracing more universal points of view (Turner 2003). Recording in a journal can also be utilised in this form of reflexivity. To reach this point of ‘openness’ Turner (2003) kept a journal in order to understand prior assumptions, beliefs and attitudes about hope.

**Reflexivity from a critical standpoint**

The third type of reflexivity emphasises the diverse field of representations and is termed ‘politics of location’. It should be an account that moves beyond the audit/decision trail recorded in a daily journal to one where the reflexivity is critical – that is, an examination of the political and social constructions that inform the research process (Koch and Harrington 1998). Reflexivity, when discussed in relation to critical research, involves honesty and relates to validity as well as addressing ethical and political questions encountered in the research process, in order to identify, acknowledge and do something about the limitations of the research (Fontana 2004). Moreover, it
must also address the interpersonal and institutional contexts of research and the way data analysis methods are used (Mauthner and Doucet 2003).

This type of reflexivity is employed in critical ethnography where the ethnographer is an unavoidable participant throughout the text and its creation (Muecke 1994). This type of reflexivity is also evident in critical hermeneutics, which combines interpretive and critical paradigms. Gadamer’s philosophy represents the interpretive element and the philosophy of Jurgen Habermas resides in the critical paradigm, which regards knowledge as active and entrenched in a socio-political context (Lutz et al. 1997).

Reflexivity from a critical standpoint is evident in critical ethnography as that utilised by Manias and Street (2001). In their study of nurse-nurse and nurse-doctor interactions in critical care, they encouraged the participating nurses to contribute ‘freely, critically and reflexively’ by their access to research data. For instance, in the initial stages of the study, Manias and Street (2001) gave the field notes and transcripts of interviews to participants for verbal and written feedback. However, this strategy was not without problems. For instance, the participants often remarked on their own inadequate grammatical expression and their inability to converse constructively, which they experienced as a disempowering state (Manias and Street 2001).

Reflexivity from a feminist standpoint

The fourth type is referred to as ‘positioning’ and approaches reflexivity from a feminist experiential standpoint. ‘Politics of location’ is also of concern to feminist researchers (Koch and Harrington 1998). Reflexivity in feminism is a ‘performed politics’ (Marcus 1994). Current discussion on reflexivity in feminist research emphasises the power differentials within the various stages of the research process (Mauthner and Doucet 2003).

The reciprocal nature of the researcher-participant relationship is evident in this ‘positioning’. This view of reflexivity addresses the researcher as a unique person. How the research affects a researcher personally is not often raised, but Pellatt (2003) does attempt to address this issue.

Reflexivity is vital in feminist research as the researcher identifies with the women she is researching and must therefore constantly be aware of
how her values, beliefs and perceptions are influencing the research process. Feminist researchers have epistemological concerns at their centre, and the notion of value neutrality is challenged (Koch and Harrington 1998). Feminist research views bias not as an influence that distorts the findings of a study but as a resource and, according to feminists, sufficiently reflexive researchers can evoke the bias for understanding their interpretations and behaviour in their research (Olesen 1994). This view of reflexivity also fits with the suggestion that engagement rather than detachment is necessary of the qualitative researcher (Sandelowski 1986).

Reflexivity and intersubjectivity are married in feminist research. Through the reciprocal sharing of knowing, the researcher and those being researched become collaborators in the research project. The researcher and informants become partners in the research endeavour and the researcher utilises her own experiences and reflections in order to illuminate important meaning (Schutz 1994). Both researchers and participants therefore undergo reflexivity (Letherby 2000). This view of reflexivity suggests an intimate reciprocity between the researcher and participants and could be considered problematic. However, in the case of research investigating sensitive and private aspects of people’s lives, the endeavour to create a successful interview can be compared to the processes employed by, for instance, counsellors and therapists (Birch and Miller 2000). Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that the researcher needs to try and suspend the belief that a more personal story reveals a more authentic story (Birch and Miller 2000).

The intimate non-hierarchical partnership when conducting interviews in feminist research is considered more effective than assuming a detached approach (Oakley 1981). This view is particularly relevant in, for example, research involving sensitive issues, as mentioned above. The researcher and informants are viewed as partners (Sigsworth 1995), and intersubjectivity between researcher and participant and the mutual creation of data are essential aspects of research (Im and Chee 2003). This type of relationship between researcher and participants is of key relevance for nurse researchers. It is reported that issues surrounding the desire to reciprocate with study participants is particularly difficult for nurses, and the experience of assuming an impartial data-gatherer acutely challenged nurses’ professional
code of practice (Johnson and McLeod Clarke 2003). Johnson and McLeod Clarke (2003) posit that this difficulty has its roots in nurses’ experiences of being trained to relieve suffering. Others also express issues with role-identity problems experienced by nurse researchers, among them, Colbourne and Sque (2004).

An attempt to be ‘objective’ and detached in assuming a constructed research persona can be perceived as false by both participants and researcher and may not help the research study (Colbourne and Sque 2004). Hobson (2004) agrees with this sentiment and suggests that if the nurse in the researcher can not be removed, then the skills should be utilised rather than concealed.

Elements of feminist thought on other qualitative researchers are also evident. Furman (2004) (male) also suggests that researchers should not expect research participants to be open with researchers if the researchers themselves are unwilling to be open. Hand (2003) concurs with this sentiment but simultaneously acknowledges the complexities of fulfilling such rhetoric.

The realities of achieving reflexivity

Achieving reflexivity is not a straightforward endeavour. Hand (2003) argues that reflexivity should be considered at each stage of the research project, with the researcher examining and making explicit the decisions made. Also, an analysis of the context and political environment surrounding the researcher’s study is a part of reflexivity (Hand 2003). Such reflexivity does not give the reader pause to consider the biases but adds richness to the ethnographic report by its presentation of the union of the self and subject matter (Gergen and Gergen 2000). In feminist research it involves researchers turning on themselves the very lenses with which they scrutinise the lives of the women with whom they are researching (Humphries 1997). Such incessant reflexivity is not without problems (Olesen 2000). Northway (2000) gives the example of a disability activist and academic who, following his revelations that he was the main beneficiary of his research, would not undertake any further disability research. A less extreme view is reported by Manias and Street (2001) who describe how reflexivity challenged them to identify and acknowledge their own taken-for-granted values and
to think about how they impinged upon their judgements towards nurses in their study, whose values were very different.

Allen (2004) rightly argues that unless the actual practice of reflexivity is made more explicit, ‘there is a real danger that it will remain little more than a device for according studies the appearance of academic rigour’. Reports of the utilisation and awareness of the importance of reflexivity by qualitative researchers are becoming more commonplace in the literature, and many express difficulties. Walsh-Bowers (2002) interviewed graduate students and faculty staff based at diverse departments of psychology in Canadian universities and found that although he shared his own views and research experiences with interviewees he admitted that he felt more comfortable doing so with those whose views appeared similar to his. Moreover, Pellatt (2003) shares her experience of being unprepared for the emotional impact that listening to patients had on her.

The issues arising in the field where nurse researchers attempt to divorce their ‘nurse’ and ‘researcher’ identities is raised by many. Allen (2004) presents an insightful detailed description of her experiences of negotiating her research role in the field in an ethnographic study. Pateman (2000) found that the male respondents in his study, which utilised a ‘phenomenological framework’, disclosed intimate and personal issues surrounding their lives, which he did not reciprocate, choosing to disclose ‘safe’ information only. Furthermore, Whitehead (2004) also acknowledges that while she felt a degree of reciprocity was important in her hermeneutic study, she was aware that she should not be involved in a therapeutic relationship with the participants in her study and reminded participants (with chronic fatigue syndrome/myalgic encephalitis) where necessary that she could not offer advice on symptom management. Colbourne (in Colbourne and Sque 2004) also raises a similar experience to Whitehead’s (2004). She reports that participants in her study regularly and directly asked her specific information and expected knowledgeable and caring responses from her as a nurse, not a researcher. Despite her attempts to avoid ‘over-familiarity’, she still encountered situations where participants used her as a nurse and not a researcher. Johnson and McLeod Clarke (2003) address this issue of nurse-researcher role conflict. They raise the issue that if study participants...
have an expectation that the research will ratify the role of nurse, it puts the researcher under considerable pressure to ‘step out of’ the researcher role and into the role of nurse, and possibly even the role of counsellor.

**Conclusion**

Reflexivity is a concept central to qualitative research in general, where it is viewed as a means of adding credibility. Reflexivity, in the form of articulating the researcher’s personal views and insights about the phenomenon explored by means of, for instance, a personal journal, is a method of enhancing credibility in grounded theory methodology (Chiovitti and Piran 2003). However Gergen and Gergen (2000) caution that although reflexivity is valuable to the vocabulary of inquiry, the reflexivity ‘movement’ has not been entirely successful in subverting the concept of validity. Because the act of reflexivity requires the reader to accept itself as authentic in its efforts to ‘tell the truth’ in the making of the account, it results in the possible infinite regress of reflections on reflection (Gergen and Gergen 2000). Waterman (1998) addresses this issue of infinite regression in reflexive analysis. Nevertheless, Allen (2004) presents several processes in researcher reflexivity that augment the rigour of a study and enable the researcher and reader to assess the validity of the study findings. These processes include: relating with how the field of study is sorted by the interpretive lens of the researcher; acknowledging that the researcher has an effect on the phenomena being studied; and recognition that the researcher is also affected by being in the field.

The actual term ‘reflexivity’, as it applies to nursing, remains poorly described and elusive (Carolan 2003). It is evident that the separation of the nurse from the researcher is a key issue for nurse researchers. It would appear that the divorce of nurse and researcher identities in qualitative research is most difficult to achieve as it may be the nurse in the researcher that promotes healthcare consumers to consent to participate in qualitative studies in the first place. This issue also prompts thoughts that it is false to use one’s nurse identity to recruit study participants and then shed this identity once the study begins.

It is evident from the variety of approaches to reflexivity discussed that developments in views of reflexivity have mirrored the developments of
Qualitative research over the past three decades. Reflexivity marks a new chapter in qualitative research. It closes the door on a belief that researcher objectivity and researcher-participant distance is paramount and opens another one to the transparency of reality and the need to address ethical, political and epistemological concerns of research (Marcus 1994). This view fits with that of a critical methodology for nursing as proposed by Fontana (2004). Within this methodology, a collaborative, non-hierarchical relationship between researchers and participants is promoted and participants play an active role in the construction and validation of knowledge (Fontana 2004). Such an approach acknowledges the primacy of ethics being intrinsic to the research process, or what Lincoln and Guba (2000) term a ‘moral tilt toward revelation’ (in direct contrast to an extrinsic ethics with a ‘tilt toward deception’ as promoted in research guided by positivism). This move to a ‘moral and sacred qualitative social science’ represents the beginning of the seventh moment of qualitative research, as proposed by Denzin and Lincoln (2000). Such a move embraces a human science perspective of intersubjectivity where the researcher and those being researched surrender their boundaries (as in participatory action research). However, it also brings a greater challenge for reflexivity.

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