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Reflexivity in qualitative psychological research

Reflexivity is sometimes regarded as a defining feature of qualitative research, a point of contrast from quantitative research where researcher subjectivity is viewed as a source of contamination or bias, especially in psychology (see Gough & Madill, 2012). In fact, for at least 30 years positivist notions of objectivity, neutrality and validity have been undermined by feminist theorists and other critical thinkers, invoking a 'crisis of representation and legitimation' (e.g. Denzin, 2001; Haraway, 1988). In this context knowledge is viewed as situated, negotiated, and fluid – and for reflexively inclined researchers, researcher subjectivity is reframed as a resource, an opportunity to contextualise and enrich research processes and outputs (Finlay, 2002).

There are various approaches to reflexivity in theory and practice. A good place to start is the seminal paper by Sue Wilkinson (1988) where she outlines three forms of reflexivity which can inform (feminist) qualitative research: personal, professional, and disciplinary. Personal refers to individual preferences, motivations and knowledge which influence choice of topic, research expectations and the issues to be pursued. The professional level refers to research practices and effects, including perceptions of participants, interpersonal dynamics, communication styles etc. At the disciplinary level we explicate our stance towards theory, method and psychology – political, epistemological and theoretical. In practice all three forms of reflexivity interconnect; for example, if we choose to research depression in men our methods will be informed by any personal experience of mental health issues (self or significant others), our communication style with participants (empathetic? detached?) and our preferred theories concerning gender, depression and 'treatment'.

There have been other typologies of reflexivity since Wilkinson's (1988) paper. For example, Finlay (2002) discusses five variants, incorporating different levels of analysis (personal, interpersonal, societal) and objectives (e.g. better collaboration, sociocultural analysis, exposing rhetorical strategies): *personal, intersubjective reflection, mutual collaboration, social critique, and ironic deconstruction*. As with qualitative research more generally, one must decide whether to adopt a broadly experiential or constructionist position; personal reflexivity implies an assumption about (access to) individual 'feelings' while ironic deconstruction suggests an orientation towards discourse dynamics. In order to do reflexivity, one must first investigate then invest in one of the reflexivities on offer (see Gough, 2003).

There are a number of practices which can be adopted to facilitate greater reflexivity when studying positive psychology: on the personal level, a research journal can prove to be a valuable resource where important decisions and events can be captured at different stages of the research process; working within a research team, regular reflexive discussions can help group cohesion and the development of shared goals; at the disciplinary level, interrogating prevailing assumptions and practices can help refine one's position; with respect to discourse, attending to the language games of self and others can raise awareness of particular agendas (see Gough & Madill, 2012; Gough & Finlay, 2003). To finish with a note of caution: one must be careful not to slide into a reflexive spiral where a preoccupation with self obscures the phenomenon of interest (see Pels, 2000).

In sum, [Positive psychologists](#) can heed this excellent qualitative resource and start to incorporate more reflexive practices in order to enhance the quality of their work. Furthermore, editors of Positive psychology journals could start to ask for this and be aware of the importance when reviewing qualitative submissions. Ultimately, reflexivity is an imperative part of the qualitative research process, and not something to be removed for the sake of word count.

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