

## FEATURE ARTICLE

# Reflexivity and Research Methodology: A Second Glance

Erlinda C. Palaganas, PhD, RN<sup>1,\*</sup> and Joel C. Estacio, MAN, RN, Rm<sup>2,3</sup>

## Abstract

As qualitative researchers, we are actively involved in the research process. We accept the fact that we are the main instrument, thus are part of the social world we aim to understand. It entails self-awareness and as Parahoo (2006) posits, reflexivity, as a process, is an introspection on the role of subjectivity in the research that entails a continuous process of reflection by researchers on their values. It is also a process of recognizing, examining, and understanding how their “social background, location, and assumptions affect their research practice” Hesse-Biber, 2007, p.17). Reflexivity, as the abundant literature would indicate, is an elusive term, it is commonly used interchangeably with reflectivity, and even with critical reflection. In this paper, an attempt was made to rediscover how reflexivity has been utilized in various perspectives to define its position and role in the conduct of robust qualitative research. In the process, we would like to share and solicit perspectives on reflexivity as a process and as an output. This was done thru a review of literature and the integration and highlighting of reflexivity/reflexivities of various researchers arising from the various research that we have been involved with such as: the six-country multi-disciplinary team lead by the Ottawa University based in Canada that undertook participatory research across Asia, Africa, and the Pacific to learn how poverty can be defined and measured; the five-country multi-disciplinary team, led by the Australian National University, Australia; and various local interdisciplinary researches. These researches were conducted over three years or more, some in various stages using focused group interviews, key informant interviews, observations, ladder ranking using photographs, record reviews, surveys, and photovoice. We also included documented reflexivities of colleagues with whom we have worked with in various capacities. We analyzed these documents vis-à-vis the concern of the qualitative researcher to unravel how their personhood intersects with their experiences in the field. Indeed, revisiting reflexivity and research methods enlightens the rigor in traversing the pathways of knowledge generation in qualitative research.

**Keywords:** *Reflexivity, Approaches to Reflexivity, Research Methodology, Reflexive lens, Credibility and Positionality, Ethics, Trustworthiness and Rigor*

## Introduction

Taking another look at reflexivity, and reconstructing reflexivity in the process, numerous related pieces of literatures was put together. While there is elusiveness to the accuracy of its definition, reflexivity is distinct in its own use and application in the field of qualitative research. It is apparent where several scholars and researchers agree - that reflexivity is a turning back on itself, a crucial step in challenging the view of knowledge production as independent of the researcher producing it and of knowledge as objective (Finlay 2002).

There are many approaches to reflexivity. In this paper, four specific types were identified: sustaining objectivity, epistemology

critical standpoint, and feminist standpoint. All these reflexive lenses highlight the rigor and trustworthiness that reflexivity demand in the process.

Finally, with all the credibility and positionality that reflexivity can promote in research, several trajectories are on the horizon for this subject matter. As an individual personal practice, reflexivity has done a lot, but there is much more it could do as an ongoing relational practice of “turning back” on the construction of the “inquiry” (Hosking and Pluut, 2010). It can open up multiple forms of thinking and possibilities in society as a whole. As an individual personal practice, reflexivity has made significant

<sup>1</sup> Professor, University of the Philippines Baguio

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Don Mariano Marcos Memorial State University, Agoo, La Union Campus

<sup>3</sup> PhD Nursing Student, St. Louis University, Baguio City

\* Corresponding author email: ecpalaganas@up.edu.ph

accomplishments and continues to possess the potential in influencing the construction of inquiry through an ongoing relational process of “turning back”.

### Reconstructing Reflexivity

Reflexivity is an elusive concept. The term “reflexivity” is quite commonly being used interchangeably with reflectivity, and even with critical reflection. Reflective practice, to begin with, is surrounded by literature that remains inconclusive. However, it is to be noted that this inconclusive quality of the practice is not taken negatively, but rather is considered to be a quality that permits the qualitative tradition of research to continuously be reimagined and reconstructed, which is this paper's ambition: to find more ways for the practice of reflexivity to create meaning and open up a new form of methodology and discourse in qualitative research. The stand of this survey of the literature is how reflexivity continues to produce a considerable number of critical texts it is in conversation with, on the subject of reflective practice, and its development as a worthwhile and important endeavor.

As a personal private practice, reflective practice helps people understand themselves more. A personal private reflective practice allows people to gain a better understanding of themselves. Freshwater (2001), however, suggests (or espoused) that when reflective practice can be stretched beyond the individual into the wider society and clinical governance. It can be an adjunct to professional and organizational development and a method for continuing professional development. In *Critical Reflectivity: A Politically and Ethically Engaged Research Method for Nursing* (2001), Freshwater looks at research as an interactive and iterative process, highlighting the dynamic communicative partnership between researchers, practitioners, and the perpetrators and subjects of the research process. According to Freshwater (2001), a fully integrated practitioner is someone immersed in both nursing and research as two aspects of the same role.

Reflective methodologies have brought the field of qualitative research field to new heights. In *Reflexivity in Research and Practice* (2002), Finlay charted the progress from researchers who conscientiously recorded observations simply to prove their credentials, to gradually shifting to more personal, realist tales that detailed decisions and dilemmas from the fieldwork experience. This movement, which Finlay identified to have been most evident from the 1970s, led to the establishment of methodological self-consciousness, pushing qualitative researchers into a new paradigm where reflexivity is at the core of every project, finding, and methodological thinking. Whereas reflection highlights its capacity to communicate, reflexivity provides an extension of communication into the deeper domains of human experience (Freshwater, 2001). Leininger suggested the use of the Participation-Observation-Reflection Enabler in

understanding people's beliefs, practices, and lifeways. Research by Rio (2017, p.60) using Leininger's Ethnonursing method reflects her reflexivity can be used to influence methodological thinking.

“In ethnonursing, it is suggested that I make observations prior to becoming an active participant in a culture's activities, thus, the term “observation-participation” is adopted instead of “participant-observation”. The variation in sequence allowed me to gain some understanding of the culture, situations, and contexts before becoming an active doer. I did not begin the participation phase until the informants' responses suggested that I have already progressed from being a stranger to a trusted friend.”

Similarities between reflection and reflexivity are evident in literature. In *Approaches to Reflexivity in Qualitative Research* (2006) by Maura Dowling, a couple of definitions between the two are brought up to clarify how the two concepts interact and, in some instances, overlap. Here she cites some definitions from varied scholars:

Lamb and Huttlinger (1989) state that reflexivity is 'a self-awareness and 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. (2006, p. 8)

Reflexivity suggests “a turning back on itself” (Freshwater 2001, p. 529). It is the self-appraisal in research (Finlay 2002):

It means turning of the researcher lens back onto oneself to recognize and take responsibility for one's own situatedness within the research and the effect that it may have on the setting and people being studied, questions being asked, data being collected and its interpretation. As such, the idea of reflexivity challenges the view of knowledge production as independent of the researcher producing it and of knowledge as objective. (p. 220)

This is relevant in a field where the self is constantly expanding as it processes and constructs all the knowledge, especially the biographies, it acquires. For this particular endeavor, the position of the project stretches further the concept of turning back on itself and insists that reflexivity can be reconstructed to a process-oriented towards the realities and relations the self or the persona

is co-creating during the research process (Hosking & Pluut, 2010). Through critical reflection, qualitative researchers used reflexivity to monitor the transparency of the research process as the knowledge is transformed into a public, accountable structure. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) explain:

Transactions and the ideas that emerge from [the research process] . . . should be documented. The construction of analytic or methodological memoranda and working papers, and the consequent explication of working hypotheses, are of vital importance. It is important that the processes of exploration and abduction be documented and retrievable. (p. 191)

More than this, and perhaps importantly, reflexivity helps the researcher to identify the filters through which one is working and how this constantly changes. Self-awareness permits the researcher to process the information while being actively involved in a scientific inquiry. This process entails a degree of emotional intelligence wherein the researcher is aware of and can respond accordingly to feelings and actions, whether his own or of others. To illustrate, when an interview participant acts distressed, the reflexive lens helps the researcher act with kindness and empathy.

It is important to note that there is a wide array of literature surrounding the practice of reflexivity. Meanwhile, some claim there is not enough. Barusch et al. (2011) attribute this to researchers' fear of appearing unprofessional or even intrusive in their forms of discourse. And yet, several practitioners consistently apply the practice of reflexivity in their field of medicine and community social work. Interestingly, some put it to use in the field of teaching and reading, such as Mariam Attia and Julian Edge in *Be(com)ing a reflexive researcher: a developmental approach to research methodology* (2017), in which they used the practice of reflexivity in investigating the relationship between teacher cognition and classroom practice.

### The Reflexive Lens

The importance of reflexivity in studying others is paramount, wrote Roni Berger in the article *Now I See It, Now I Don't: Researcher's Position and Reflexivity in Qualitative Research* (2015). Berger cited Mauther and Docet (2003) who emphasized that situating one's self socially and emotionally with respondents is one of the key elements of reflexivity. Indeed, to study human phenomena and experiences that the researcher may not have personal or secondary experience is a difficult but important task. The key to reflexivity is to make the relationship between and the influence of the researcher and the participants explicit, hence giving rise to the filters through which the researchers are working (Palaganas et al., 2017).

Through reflexivity, the researcher can use a reflective lens to understand, convey and make visible the participant's experiences even without sharing the other's experience. This entails that the researcher's positionality does not exist independently of the research process nor does it completely determine the latter, but rather that it becomes a dialogue – challenging perspectives and assumptions both about the social world and of the researcher him/herself (Palaganas et al., 2017).

To illustrate this attribute of reflexivity, Berger (2015) used the feeling of being trapped, an experience that is typical to victims of abuse, as an example: "we may have viewed participants' stories through judging lenses, such as asking ourselves why they endured and did not leave, which may influence the conceptualization of the research question and eventually the interpretation of participants' experiences" (2015, p. 228). In trying to understand the phenomenon, Berger, as a researcher, maintained conscious and cognitive awareness of her personal opinions and potentially judgmental stance on the experience of the abused – which was the critical refusal to accept the abused woman's 'submissive' position. She had to make herself "deliberately aware of the possibility that these conflicting reactions may tint the way in which I hear, ignore, and overemphasize certain aspects and disregard other aspects of women's narratives" (2015, p. 228).

The constant struggle to maintain conscious and cognitive awareness, relative to the reflexive lens, helps enhance Berger's, or any researcher's ability to process and analyze data in a rigorous manner despite the absence of personal experience with the phenomenon or subject. In this particular study by Berger, this is helpful in a way that it recognizes any preconceived ideas and uses them to make meaningful views of the participants' world. It is making a sense of the researcher's participation and be co-creator of the experience.

In his reflexivity, Reburon (2018, p.130) acknowledged his position in doing his study among fellow nurses. He shares:

Hearing my fellow nurses' experiences somehow felt like someone was reading my own story out loud to me. At that moment, of transcendence, I came to terms with my position in the social system as I began to feel a sense of communal belonging. I discovered that I was not merely on the outside looking in, spectating...I was, in fact, part of their world.

This sense of belongingness in the participants' worlds elevates reflexivity to a higher level by allowing the researcher to redefine bias in research. In this array, reflexivity utilizes identified preconceptions in the process of discovery.

Pamela van der Riet (2012) exemplified the value of taking the reflexive lens gaining a more personal, human perspective of the participants, and the research process in general. She writes:

You are human, so acknowledge your own taken for granted assumptions and values and feelings and how they might impact on the research findings. Treat the process of reflexivity as an opportunity to enrich your own research and improve the lives of people. (p.32)

For van der Riet, the judgmental eye is always switched on, gazing at and containing her actions. In contrast, the reflexive eye constantly gazes with judgement, like a good novelist, “finds the unexpected, the surprising, the contradictions, the good and the bad in all its detail not with a mind to censor, but to say with fascination, ‘oh, so that’s how it is!’” (2012, p.29-30).

### Approaches to Reflexivity

Reflexivity can be viewed as a continuum. Dowling (2006) described the continuum as having the emergence of reflexivity as consideration for research in one end. This view saw a new age of blurred, interpretive genres, focused on the researcher’s presence. On the other end is reflexivity as a primary methodological instrument for inquiry. Autoethnography, autobiographies and narrative inquiry are more recent research methodologies that utilizes reflexivity as a primary methodological instrument for inquiry. The rise of autoethnography paved the way for more novel approaches in qualitative research. Furman (2004) utilized self-reflexivity through his poetry in an attempt to understand his experience of having a father with cancer.

#### Major Styles of Reflexivity

There is plenty of literature in conjunction with the different moments in the emergence of qualitative research and reflexivity in the landscape. This section details the analysis of literature on the different approaches to reflexivity. Marcus (1994) discussed five major styles of reflexivity— *sustaining objectivity*, *personal reflexivity*, *epistemological reflexivity*, *critical standpoint*, and *feminist standpoint*.

#### Sustaining Objectivity

The first type of reflexivity reflects a strong positivist influence. Aimed at sustaining objectivity, this approach focuses on the “suspension of all biases and beliefs regarding the phenomenon being researched prior to collecting data about it”. Rolls and Relf (2004) call this ‘bracketing’, utilized as well in Husserlian phenomenology (Koch and Harrington 1998).

In bracketing, the use of a journal is promoted (Koch and Harrington 1998). This helps in documenting the values and

preconceived ideas of the researcher in the study design and process. Guided by Husserl’s philosophical viewpoints, this strategy is also seen in ethnomethodology, which fits into the philosophical background of constructivism (Dowling 2006).

Ethnomethodological indifference and vigorously resist any personal judgments of the correctness of the members’ activities. To achieve this indifference, the researcher, in phenomenological research, can record personal beliefs and biases. The integration of a research diary, taking into account negotiations with members that led to the analysis of the setting, is considered [to] be essential in the many forms of reflexive socioanalytic theory (p.11).

There are three distinct phases of bracketing that are useful in sustaining objectivity in phenomenological methods. According to Wall (2004), the first stage is the pre-reflective process, in which time was set aside before interviews to raise awareness on issues that would require bracketing.

Following this is a reflection on situations, including interviews and methodological progression, leading to an identification of new learning. The final phase is identifying how the new learning that resulted from the reflections can be utilized during the interviews and the whole research process.

Tapsell (1997) comments on the difficulties with ethnomethodology of analyzing how 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 (Dowling 2006).

#### Personal Reflexivity

The first type of reflexivity acknowledges the strong, personal, and honest account of the researcher, in particular explicating the position of the researcher about the process. In Palaganas et al.’s study (2017), they brought to the surface their own takes on the research process:

[There] were a number of times during the data collection when I felt I could do nothing but to empathize with the plight of the participants and assure them that the study will definitely serve as a tool for change if utilized accordingly by policymakers and development implementers (430).

Here, the researcher was speaking about her perspective in the experience and how, during the process, she had seen the limitations of the research in the realm of social change and development, hence these sentiments.

This approach to reflexivity, which is highly personal, is prone to a degree of subjectivity. According to Jotun et al. (2009, p.45) “the “interpretation of the participants' behavior and collected data is influenced by the values, beliefs, experience and interest of the researcher.” Precisely why this mode of reflexivity insists on the need for objectivity.

To illustrate, Reburon (2018) in thinking about research:

[Was] laden with many pre-conceived judgements, not just towards my fellow Ilocano nurses but also towards the health care system in general. Putting my thoughts and feelings into actual words (using my memo) made me more conscious and cautious during the conduct of the research. Reflexivity helped me unlearn my preconceptions and reminded me that there are many versions of the truth, and that all of these versions warrant equal attention.

It contributes openness and transparency in the process, ensuring the reciprocal influence of the researcher on the participants and the outcome, which is valuable when thinking about rigor in qualitative research.

Aimed at sustaining objectivity, this approach focuses on the “suspension of all biases and beliefs regarding the phenomenon being researched prior to collecting data about it”. Rolls and Relf (2004) and call this 'bracketing', utilized as well in Husserlian phenomenology (Koch and Harrington 1998).

### *Epistemological Reflexivity*

Epistemological Reflexivity taps into a broader view of reflexivity where the researcher probes through questions: “How has the research question defined and limited what can be 'found' and how could the research question have been investigated differently?” (Dowling 2006, p.11) To what extent would this have given rise to a different understanding of the phenomenon under investigation? (Palaganas et al., 2017) This approach encourages the researcher to reflect upon the assumptions made during the research, which helps in determining the implications of such assumptions on the research's findings.

This type of reflexivity is most evident in philosophical hermeneutics, where understanding is derived from personal involvement in reciprocal processes of interpretation. Gadamer (1989) asserts that prejudices should not be totally eliminated as they have special importance in the interpretation. The reciprocal view also reflects how researchers both influence and are influenced by the experience of engaging in research, and how individuals engage reflexively on conceptual or emotional information (Hand 2003). In Palaganas et al.'s thorough breakdown of the different approaches to reflexivity, their take on

epistemological reflexivity highlights the power of rethinking assumptions and implications:

Health workers migration is not just a research subject but it is a phenomenon that affects the Filipino people. It is a phenomenon that deeply influences me as a researcher. In doing this research, I do not remain a passive observer; instead, I am also an active participant who tries to reconstruct this problem. This means that the perspectives that I utilized actively inform the research process (433).

Here, the researcher exhibits a serious commitment to reflexivity and this statement illustrates how constant reflections and review of theoretical perspectives concerning the process can heighten and enlighten the perspective of the researcher, and consequently, the output of the project.

### *Critical Standpoint*

This third type of reflexivity emphasizes the different fields of representation, and is at times also termed as “politics of location” (Dowling 2006, p.12), often employed in critical ethnography where the ethnographer is inevitably involved in the whole process of research (Palaganas et al., 2017). It takes the first approach to objectivity a step further, as it moves beyond the record of the reflections. It proceeds to examine the political and social constructions that inform these reflections and the research process.

Reflexivity aims to address the limitations of research by addressing the ethical and political questions encountered in the research process that is usually set aside. Moreover, it also addresses the interpersonal and institutional contexts of research (Mauthner and Doucet 2003).

This is the approach to the reflexive process where the researcher is asked to address ethical and political questions that shape the process. To illustrate the value of a critical standpoint in qualitative research, here is a researcher speaking honestly about an experience that involved a poverty-ridden community. He asks:

Where should the link in the chain be broken? Where does one start? Why do people in power seem not to care and hold on to that power for as long as they can? Simple questions we thought. We thought we know the answer. We thought we know the strategies. But why do we feel so frozen? Why do we feel we shouldn't be involved? (433)

In analyzing critical reflections and the research process, during a participatory action research on mental health using the photovoice approach,

My reflexivity in axiology is anchored on the basic ethical principles of respect for persons and beneficence. During

the conceptualization of the study, I had limited assumptions on the risk the participants make by joining this research. Along the way, the minimal risk seems to be underrated. Foremost, students are regarded as at the bottom of the hierarchical [power] structure in an educational institution. Truly, there are avenues to empower students – student council, student organizations, but how far? It is not uncommon for a student to just keep silent and follow policies. Because of fear? Or because of their sole decision-making ability? (Estacio, 2021, p.103)

The benefit of asking such difficult questions is realizing that examining oppressive forces critically is crucial in understanding the effect of subordination of one group to another, particularly in the participants that this researcher in the example was getting influenced by. Here, one witnesses the critical question of “Who benefits from this research?”, the answer of which representing their best possibilities for holding themselves accountable to their own project, their selves, and their participants. In conclusion, the researchers came to realize the need for them to listen to everyday processes and translation while giving voice to their participants through the project

### *Feminist Standpoint*

The fourth type approaches reflexivity from a feminist standpoint. Reflexivity in feminism is a “performed politics” (Marcus 1994) and emphasizes the power differentials within the various stages of the research process. Also referred to as “positioning”, this approach to reflexivity addresses the researcher as a unique person. In feminist research, the researcher identifies with the woman/person who is the subject of the research. This entails constant awareness of the researcher's own values, beliefs and perceptions, and how these influence the whole process. Feminist research views bias not as an influence but as a resource for researchers to understand their interpretations and behavior in their research (Olesen 1994).

To illustrate, here is a researcher faced with an ethical issue that arose because of the more personal story revealed through the process:

There were instances when the sharing of ideas and experiences became emotionally driven. Their expressions showed and reflected their burden in living in poverty situation, which made the participant, in hindsight, think of how the research could help in any way aside from what has been formerly explained (Palaganas et al., 2017, p435).

It is inevitable at one point for a researcher to be faced with such a moment, especially when the process is using the reflexive lens. This approach then forwards the question of, “Would there has

been a better way of soliciting data without being so intrusive?” This is where the concept of reciprocity comes in. According to several researchers of the field, feminist research needs to make an effort to take into account reciprocity, where researchers write and share their experience of the work and draw valuable questions, complexities, and processes in response to their experience.

Feminist research embraces the marriage of reflexivity and intersubjectivity. In sharing of knowledge, the researcher and the subject of the research become collaborators and partners in the endeavor of illuminating important meaning (Schutz 1994).

Feminist standpoint dwells on the perspective of feminism – a social movement that advances equality. As Shaw and Lee (2012) described, feminism has been thriving on “differences of ideology and practice”. Therefore, reflexivity, from a feminist standpoint, deals with internal issues that aim to prioritize equality in elucidating participants' meanings through their presence and intersubjectivity. In his experience, Reburon (2018) mentions:

I kept a research diary and wrote in it regularly to help me retrace my steps and remind me why I grouped certain codes or named specific themes the way I did. I realized that by not having to rely on others to record, transcribe, code, and group the interview data, I gained awareness of its subtleties...What I usually do to my morning tea, I did to my qualitative data: let it steep. My re-immersion to the data transcripts surprisingly opened a whole new world of nuances.

### **Ethics, Trustworthiness, and Rigor**

In *Evaluation of Qualitative Research* in the “Journal of Clinical Nursing” (2003), Dorothy Horsburgh wrote:

Given that the researcher is intimately involved in both the process and product of the research enterprise, it is necessary for the reader to evaluate the extent to which an author identifies and explicates their involvement and its potential or actual effect upon the findings. (p.309)

One of the main methodological concerns of reflexivity is the question of the researcher's involvement in the process while retaining a measure of objectivity. The qualitative researcher assumes that his social identity and personality affect the relationship with participants, which can influence the outcome of the research (Jootun 2009).

In terms of ensuring the research's trustworthiness, Berger (2015) maintains that, as reflexivity is the researcher's deliberate effort to be attuned to how the research is constructed, it helps explicate the potential or actual effect of personal and circumstantial aspects on the process. Reflexivity, thus,

enhances the quality of the research by allowing the researcher to ponder how their own personhood can both assist and hinder the process of co-constructing meanings.

In fact, according to Wanda S. Pillow in *Confession, catharsis, or cure? Rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research* (2003), reflexivity helps maintain an ethical process of research:

Reflexivity is situating the researcher as non-exploitative and compassionate toward the research subjects', thus helping to address concerns regarding negative effects of power in researcher–researched relationships. Reflexivity helps maintain the ethics of the relationship between researcher and research by 'decolonizing' the discourse of the 'other' and securing that while interpretation of findings is always done through the eyes and cultural standards of the researcher, the effects of the latter on the research process is monitored. (Berger, 2015, p.221)

Reflexivity ensures credibility while advancing the researcher's rigor in the subject matter and the process. Through the ongoing analysis of the researcher's personal involvement, reflexivity helps make the process transparent. Rio (2017) exemplified the necessary thought process behind ensuring credibility:

At the beginning, reflexivity helped me assess the feasibility of doing a study that requires fieldwork. One possible bias is that I might have the tendency to only go to villages that are accessible. But then there will be not much diversity of participants if I did that. So, I assessed myself. Can I go to the far-flung villages to have more credible data? Also, constantly reflecting on the data and my observations led me to deviate from Leininger's validation criteria.

Leininger (2006) claims that there must be validation with key informants only, not with general informants. However, some key informants shared data that were already validated across sources, thus, the lesser chances of the researcher's own bias influencing the interpretation.

Leininger's work always mentions "stranger to trusted friend" but what is in between is not detailed. Through reflexivity, I was able to "find the missing link". In most literature, there is a checklist on trust, but it seems to be only a one-way street – trust of participants towards the researcher. While this is an important aspect of credibility, I added that trust should be mutual because even if participants are telling the truth, if the researcher is skeptical, it will still affect the analysis. (Rio, 2017, p.57)

This awareness of the reciprocal but risky influence of researcher and participants in the process and outcome is a vital part of ensuring rigor in qualitative research (Jootun 2009). In an

ethnographic study using Leininger's methodology, Rio (2017) utilized reflexivity to discover methodological gaps. She wrote:

"...in Leininger's presentation of the Stranger-to-Trusted Friend Enabler, it is a tool used to establish the existence of trust of the participant towards the researcher. In this study, I included continuous assessment of my trust towards the respondents and their environment (p 181). Taking on the role of an observer-participant-reflector has required me to temporarily live with certain families or travel to some barangays (villages) with no planned accommodation set up. These were circumstances that may be considered risky. However, my trust towards the community was a major driving force that sustained me during fieldwork." (p. 195)

Moreover, rigor, as well as trustworthiness, are reflected and demanded in the process of reflexivity, in the ways the process brings to consciousness and revealed what is believed to be the truth about the topic. According to Jootun et al., (2009, p.43), this exploration of personal beliefs "makes the investigator more aware of the potential judgments that can occur during data collection and analysis based on the researcher's belief system rather than on the actual data collected from participants."

Achieving reflexivity is not a straightforward endeavor (Dowling 2006). It needs to be considered and integrated into every stage of the research project. Part of this is analyzing the context and political environment surrounding the researcher's study (Hand 2003). Reflexivity does not give the reader pause to consider biases, instead adds depth to the process by its presentation of the union of the self and subject matter. It is a matter of peeling layers of interpretation, to reveal at the core the insight in the researcher.

Essential to reflexivity is the need to recognize one's own capabilities to comply with the rigorous demands of qualitative research. In her experience, Anquillano-Carsola (2016, p.118) states:

At first, I supposed that doing a grounded theory will just be like other types of qualitative research. After my readings and series of workshops with my adviser. I found out that it really has to be done in the right way and there is no room for shortcuts... After my data gathering period, I started learning about NVivo to help me manage my data. That time, I really felt that my study was taking too much time because I had to learn everything about the software and its uses. I learned how to code my data and was able to proceed to digest my coded transcripts...I had to re-read everything over and again to capture the real meaning of my participants' responses. I also reviewed numerous grounded theory researches. I, likewise, did a number of workshops and brainstorming sessions with my adviser.

Part of this approach to reflexivity is analyzing the context and political environment surrounding the researcher's study (Hand, 2003). It does not give the reader a pause to consider biases, instead adds depth to the process by presenting the union of the researcher's self and the subject of the research.

### Reflexivity and Positionality in Qualitative Research

Biases shape the research process. According to Kezar (2002), biases serve as checkpoints along the way, helping a researcher gain insights on approaching a setting, a particular group, and effective ways of engaging with these groups. As people have multiple overlapping identities, research processes must allow researchers to make meaning from various aspects of their identity.

The researcher's beliefs, political stance, and cultural background are variables that may affect the research process significantly. As per *Brian Bourke in Positionality: Reflecting on the Research Process* (2014), it isn't just the participants' experiences that are scrutinized in the process, but also that of the researcher:

The concept of self as a research instrument reflects the likelihood that the researcher's own subjectivity will come to bear on the research project and any subsequent reporting of findings. Interpretation consists of two related concepts: the ways in which the researcher accounts for the experiences of the subjects and of her or himself, and the ways in which study participants make meaning of their experiences. (p.2)

Rio (2017) gives a practical example of how reflexivity and positionality may influence the research process when she wrote

I was apprehensive that folk healers who practice animism and spirit healing would be reluctant to discuss the details of their craft because of my affiliation with a Christian organization (p. 70).

Reflexivity allows the researcher to take good stock of these particulars and to yield these to elicit themes from data. Making sense of these aspects of a person's identity gives insight and coherence to the process. As Bourke puts it, "The cogency of the research process rises from the relationship between the research instrument (the researcher) and the participants" (2014, 3). This gave rise to the concept of positionality. One has to position themselves before one gets to say anything at all (Hall 1990).

Positionality, in the context of qualitative research, represents the space in which objectivism and subjectivism intersect and exist in a dialectic relationship. Positionality reminds us that pure objectivism is naïve and subjectivity is inevitable. "We have to acknowledge who we are as individuals, and as members of groups, and as resting in and moving within social positions" (Bourke, 2014, p.3).

However, reflexivity and positionality in qualitative research give rise to a couple of strains in the process. As detailed in the study of Palaganas, et al (2017), the principles of reflexivity should be embedded in the process and "relate to the degree of influence that the researchers exert, either intentionally or unintentionally, on the findings" (Jootun et al., 2009). This is necessary to account for the rigor in the process and to help in identifying the ways the researcher can manage the emotions of the research participants, which is one of the most common challenges in this practice.

As detachment is unrealistic, researchers are expected to be mindful of their behaviors and feelings. It is difficult to not be influenced by the participants. Palaganas et al. (2017) posit that it is only through the understanding of the inter-relationship of personal and methodological concerns that all participants in the research process can be honored. This allows the researcher to come into an awareness of their contribution to the construction of meanings and lived experiences.

Finally, as Palaganas et al. (2017) closed their article on reflexivity, they come to the significant realization that is of valuable use in exploring the role of reflexivity in qualitative researchers' journey of learning:

Our reflexivity notes/insights reveal how we explored the ways in which our involvement in the various researches influenced, acted upon, and informed the very studies we engaged at. Fieldwork is intensely personal; our positionality (i.e., position based on class, sex, ethnicity, race, etc.) and who we are as persons (shaped by the socio-economic and political environment) play a fundamental role in the research process, in the field as well as in the final text. Reflexivity must then be a part of our commitment. It must become a duty of every researcher to reveal and share these reflexivities, not only for learning purposes but towards enhancing theory building. (p. 428)

### Trajectories of Reflexivity

For most of its existence in the field of research, reflexivity has been considered as an individual practice that allows researchers to be in touch with themselves. It also allows more attuned processing of the knowledge and the roles of the participants around the whole project. In a radical take on the concept, Marie Hosking and Bettine Pluut (2010) posit that reflexivity is conceptualized and utilized as a communal learning process.

Conceptually, reflexivity highlights an individual's personal history and perspectives. Hosking and Pluut (2010) further acknowledged that in doing reflexivity, multiple local-cultural and historical realities in different but equal relations are given more space to emerge. This form of knowing-from-within process



invites the researcher and the participants to share responsibility for learning (Cunliffe, 2002). Further:

Notions of symmetry [...] become key as (teacher-student) power relations are repositioned from that of expert/learner (where the expert believes in his/her legitimacy to impose his/her views) to that of [...] a shared responsibility for constructing learning. (Hosking & Pluut, 2010, p. 214)

As reflexivity legitimizes the researcher's own concept of self in the process, it also opens up to include the power to practices that allow the construction of different but equal forms of life and not just the power over associated with subject-object ways of relating (Hosking and Pluut, 2010).

This radical trajectory of reflexivity means it is no longer an individual activity nor is it merely a matter of individual ethics, but can become an ongoing relational practice of "turning back" on the construction of the "inquiry" (Hosking and Pluut, 2010). Dialogues can open new ways of making sense of local knowledge, allowing for a communal reflection on research identities and relations. Reflexivity is not a slide into an infinite regress, but an opening up to multiple local forms of life and possibilities rather than probabilities (Gergen, 1994; Hosking, 2008).

## Conclusion

Revisiting reflexivity and research methods enlightens the rigor in traversing the pathways of knowledge generation in qualitative research. In this paper, an attempt was made to rediscover how reflexivity has been utilized in various perspectives to define its position and role in the conduct of robust qualitative research. Redefining the deep-seated role of reflexivity re-emerges our involvement in the process – as researchers and as part of the participants' social world. These make us characters who recognize that our own position can take precedence over the meanings that the participants convey. Understanding these participant meanings also entails understanding one's ownself and use this understanding to guide the comprehension to a whole new level. Bias has been regarded as a negative concept that researchers often attempt to eliminate. Qualitative research continues to open doors for biases to be viewed as an opportunity and a tool that can enrich epistemology and critical worldviews. Embracing this concept of bias could lead to a better understanding of the complexity of humanness in the context of the social world.

## References

Barusch, A., Gringeri, C., & George, M. (2011). *Rigor in qualitative social work research: A review of strategies used in published*

- articles*. Social Work Research Abstracts, 35(1), 11-19.
- Berger, R. (2015) *Now I see it, now I don't: researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research*. Qualitative Research 15:2, pages 219-234.
- Bourke, B. (2014). *Positionality: Reflecting on the Research Process*. The Qualitative Report, 19(33), 1-9. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol19/iss33/3>
- Carolan, M. (2003) *Reflexivity: a personal journey during data collection*. Nurse Researcher. 10,3,7-14.
- Coffey, A. and Atkinson, P. (1996) *Making Sense of Qualitative Data Analysis: Complementary Strategies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Colbourne L, Sque M (2004) Split personalities: role conflict between the nurse and the nurse researcher. NT Research. 9, 4, 297-304
- Cunliffe, A. L. (2002). Critical pedagogy: Reflexive dialogical practice in management learning. Management Learning, 33(1), 35-61.
- Denzin, NK. & Lincoln, YS. (1998). *Introduction. Entering the field of qualitative research*. In Denzin NK, Lincoln YS (Eds) *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications.
- Dowling, M. (2006). *Approaches to reflexivity in qualitative research*. Nurse Researcher, 13(3), 7-21.
- Estacio, J.C. (2021). *Mental Health and Well-Being in the Eyes of Students in a State University: A Photovoice Research*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation] Saint Louis University.
- Finlay, L. (2002) *Negotiating the swamp: the opportunity and challenge of reflexivity in research practice*. SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi) vol. 2(2):209-230.
- Freshwater, D. (2001). *Critical reflexivity: A politically and ethically engaged research method for nursing*. SAGE Social Science Collections: NT Research: vol. 6 No1.
- Furman, R. (2004) *Using poetry and narrative as qualitative data: exploring a father's cancer through poetry*. Families, Systems and Health. 22,2, 162-170.
- Gadamer, GH. (1989). *Truth and Method*. Second edition (translation revised by Weinsheimer J, Marshall DG). London, Sheed and Ward.
- Gergen, K. J. (1994). *Realities and relationships: Soundings in social construction*. Cambridge, England: Harvard University Press.
- Giddens, A. (1976). *New Rules of Sociological Method*. London, Hutchinson.
- Hall, S. (1990). *Cultural identity and diaspora*. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: community, culture, difference* (pp., 2-27). London, England: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Hand, H. (2003). *The mentor's tale: a reflective account of semi-structured interviews*. Nurse Researcher. 10,3, 15-2
- Horsburgh, D. (2003). *Evaluation of qualitative research*. Journal of Clinical Nursing, 12: 307–312.
- Hosking, D. M., & Pluut, B. (2010). *(Re)constructing Reflexivity: A Relational Constructionist Approach*. The Qualitative Report, 15(1), 59-75.

- Hosking, D. M. (2008). *Can constructionism be critical?* In J. Holstein & J. Gubrium (Eds.), *Handbook of constructionist research* (pp. 669-687). New York: Guilford.
- Koch, T. & Harrington, A. (1998). *Reconceptualizing rigour: the case for reflexivity*. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 28,4, 882-890.
- Kezar, A. (2002). *Reconstructing static images of leadership: An application of positionality theory*. *Journal of Leadership Studies*, 8(3), 94-109.
- Jootun, D., McGhee, G., & Marland, G. (2009). *Reflexivity: Promoting rigour in qualitative research*. *Nursing Standard*, 23(23), 42-46.
- Lamb, B. & Huttlinger, K. (1989). *Reflexivity in nursing research*. *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, 11,6,765-772.
- Leininger MM. (2006). *Culture Care Diversity and Universality Theory and Evolution of the Ethnonursing Method*. In: Leininger MM, McFarland MR. *Culture Care Diversity and Universality: A Worldwide Nursing Theory*. 2nd ed. Sudbury, MA(US): Jones & Bartlett
- Marcus, G.E. (1994). *What comes (just) after 'post'?* *The case of ethnography*. In Denzin N, Lincoln Y (Eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. London, Sage.
- Mauthner, N. & Doucet, A. (2003). *Reflexive accounts and accounts of reflexivity in qualitative data analysis*. *Sociology*, 37, 3, 413-43.
- Olesen, V. (1994). *Feminisms and models of qualitative research*. In Denzin NK, Lincoln YS (Eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications.
- Palaganas, E. C., Sanchez, M. C., Molintas, M. P., & Caricativo, R. D. (2017). *Reflexivity in Qualitative Research: A Journey of Learning*. *The Qualitative Report*, 22(2), 426-438. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol22/iss2/5>.
- Reburon, J.L.T. (2018). *Nursing Advocacy of Ilocano Nurses*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation] Saint Louis University.
- Rio, C.J. (2017). *Culture care meanings, beliefs and practices of the Ayangans of Aginaldo, Ifugao during Pregnancy and Childbirth: An Ethnonursing Study*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Silliman University, Dumaguete City.
- Rolls, L. & Relf, M. (2004). *'Bracketing Interviews': a Method for Increasing Objectivity in Bereavement and Palliative Care Research*. Paper presented at Methodology of Research in Palliative Care. Third research forum of the EAPC, Stresa, Italy.
- Shaw, S. M., & Lee, J. (2012). *Women's Voices, Feminist Visions: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (5th Edition ed.). New York, New York, United States of America: McGraw Hill.
- Schutz, S. (1994). *Exploring the benefits of a subjective approach in qualitative nursing research*. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 20, 3, 412-417.
- Tapsell, L. (1997) *Dietetics as everyday practice: an approach to research*. *Australian Journal of Nutrition and Dietetics*, 54,2, 1032-1322.
- van der Riet, P. (2012). *Reflexivity: A mainstay in promoting rigor and trustworthiness in qualitative research*. *Philippine Journal of Nursing*, 82, 28-32.
- Wall, C. (2004) *Using a reflective diary to develop bracketing skills during a phenomenological investigation*. *Nurse Researcher*, 11,4,20-29.
- Wanda, P. (2010). *Confession, catharsis, or cure? Rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research*. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16:2, 175-196.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Erlinda C. Palaganas**, is a full professor of Management and University Scientist 1 at the University of the Philippines Baguio. She is a BSN graduate of the UERMMMCI, Molave'79, a Master's degree holder for Public Health from the University of the

Philippines Manila and a PhD in Nursing from the University of Sydney, NSW, Australia. She has conducted interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary inter-country researches and a prime mover in enhancing qualitative research in the country. She is the founding president of the Philippine Nursing Research Society Inc. Her research interests include social issues such as migration, poverty, equity in health, gender and development concerns, and indigenous studies.



**Joel C. Estacio** is an Assistant Professor in the College of Community Health and Allied Medical Sciences, Don Mariano Marcos Memorial State University in La Union. He is currently finishing his Doctor of Philosophy in Nursing at Saint Louis University in

Baguio City. His research interests are on public health, mental health promotion, and sexual and reproductive health. His passion for research is evident in his involvements with several local and international collaborative research studies.

“ Not everything that counts can be counted,  
and not everything that can be counted counts ”

- Albert Einstein