

FEATURE ARTICLE

Doing It Until We Make It: Reflexive Explorations of Researcher Identity in Nursing

Erlinda C. Palaganas, PhD, RN, FAAN¹

Abstract

This integrative article explored how nurse-researchers craft and negotiate researcher identity through reflexivity. Drawing on three reflexive narratives situated across distinct practice and career contexts, including academe and military nursing, this article synthesized how personal histories, professional roles, and methodological training intersect in order to shape how one becomes a researcher. Guided by Benner's novice-to-expert lens and contemporary discussions on positionality and reflexive practice, this article's synthesis surfaced recurring themes: identity-in-motion rather than identity-as-status; persistence and vulnerability as engines of growth; insider-outsider movements and the ethical responsibilities being invited; and methodological pluralism as a value stance that links rigor with relevance and care. The narratives also illuminated how institutional cultures, resource constraints, and role expectations contour opportunities for inquiry, while reflexive writing functions as both method and pedagogy, supporting integrity, accountability, and epistemic fluency. It was argued in this article that cultivating researcher identity in nursing requires spaces that normalize doubt, foreground values, and make visible the relational, moral, and political textures of knowledge production. Implications included embedding explicit reflexivity and positionality work in curricula, mentoring, and research supervision; recognizing mixed-methods and qualitative approaches as complementary pathways to impact and to align institutional supports with nurses' dual commitments for both practice and scholarship. In this article, the process of becoming a nurse-researcher had been shown to be a continual practice of courage, reflexivity, and commitment that is by doing it, and learning it, until nurse-researchers make it.

Keywords: *reflexivity; researcher identity; nursing scholarship; positionality; qualitative research; professional identity; military nursing*

Introduction

Becoming a researcher is never a straightforward path. For nurses, the journey is particularly complex, as it intertwines the demands of clinical practice, the ethics of care, and the intellectual rigors of scholarship. Nurse-researchers often grapple with questions of identity, legitimacy, and belonging within the research community. Reflexivity, the practice of critically examining one's own positionality, assumptions, and influence on the research process, is therefore central to this journey (Berger, 2015; McIntosh, 2023; Yip, 2024). Through reflexive narratives, nurses articulate not only their methodological choices but also their struggles, motivations, and evolving researcher identities (Sibbald, Tessier, & Warren, 2024).

In this integrative article, three reflexive narratives were weaved: an academic, a military nurse-leader, and a

values-driven mixed-methods practitioner, and ask three questions: What conditions help or hinder "becoming" a researcher? How do institutional cultures and role expectations contour identity? What practices sustain ethical, rigorous scholarship? Drawing on contemporary guidance for positionality work (Sibbald, Tessier, & Warren, 2024), it was argued that researcher identity moves forward through persistence and vulnerability; is negotiated across insider-outsider positions; and is strengthened by methodological pluralism and explicit attention to pedagogy.

The conceptual lens was first sketched that guided the readings, then came the presentation of the three narratives, and finally, all were synthesized by cross-cutting insights into implications for curricula, mentoring, and institutional support for nurse-researchers.

¹ Professorial Lecturer, College of Nursing, University of the Philippines, Manila, Philippines

Reflexivity and the Journey of Becoming

The transition from novice to researcher is often fraught with uncertainty. Patricia Benner's Novice to Expert theory (1984) reminds us that professional growth occurs incrementally through situated experience. Similarly, researcher identity evolves through cycles of learning, practice, and reflection (Birnbaum, 2025). Early experiences, such as conducting undergraduate theses or master's projects—often instill foundational skills while simultaneously exposing limitations. Reflexive writing allows scholars to embrace these limitations not as failures but as formative moments of becoming.

For nurses, this journey is shaped by their dual commitment to patient care and scientific inquiry. Nursing research is not only about producing knowledge but also about ensuring that this knowledge serves vulnerable populations, advances health equity, and reflects the ethical values of the profession (Chinn & Kramer, 2018; Polit & Beck, 2020). Reflexivity helps bridge the personal and the professional, enabling nurses to critically examine how their values and positionalities influence the questions they ask, the methods they choose, and the knowledge they produce (McIntosh, 2023; Yip, 2024).

Featured Narrative 1

#ResearchYen: Do It 'Til You Make It

A story of persistence and self-discovery, where a nurse-scholar embraces vulnerability and doubt as essential to growth, highlighting resilience, flexibility, and a commitment to lifelong learning (McIntosh, 2023; Birnbaum, 2025).

Featured Narrative 2

Who Am I and Where Am I as a Researcher?

A unique account from a military nurse, demonstrating how leadership, discipline, and service intersect with research identity, and how reflexivity reshapes scholarship within institutional and cultural contexts (Sibbald et al., 2024; Mbalinda et al., 2024).

Featured Narrative 3

Reflection of My Identity, Values, Motivations, and Aspirations as a Researcher

A values-driven reflection that integrates quantitative and qualitative methods, underscoring how ethics, compassion, and methodological pluralism strengthen the nursing research enterprise (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Sibbald et al., 2024).

Identity, Values, and Motivations

Across the three narratives, common themes emerged: resilience in the face of doubt, commitment to lifelong learning, and the drive to contribute meaningfully to nursing and society. The first narrative describes a nurse-scholar who identifies as an "advanced beginner" yet embraces the motto, *Do it 'til you make it*. Here, identity is framed as fluid—constantly negotiated through teaching, advising, conducting, and struggling with research. The narrative affirms what Birnbaum (2025) asserts that persistence and openness to learning are as vital as technical expertise.

The second narrative, rooted in the unique context of military nursing, highlighted how professional roles and institutional culture shape researcher identity. Here, leadership, discipline, and service converged with scholarship. Reflexivity exposed not only the tensions between military priorities and research priorities, but also illuminated how research can serve as a bridge between service and scholarship (Sibbald et al., 2024). At the same time, literature from low-resource and constrained settings showed how organizational and contextual factors had shaped professional identity formation in nursing (Mbalinda, Najjuma, Mubuke, Livingstone, & Musoke, 2024).

The third narrative foregrounds values and aspirations, emphasizing ethics, compassion, and methodological pluralism. By having engaged both quantitative and qualitative methods, this nurse-researcher demonstrated how methodological choices reflect deeper commitments to rigor, relevance, and care. Reflexivity, in this case, is not only about self-examination but also about aligning research practices with the core values of nursing science (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Sibbald et al., 2024). Moreover, Trent (2025) asserts that navigating the moral and emotional tensions of research-practice transitions is part of identity work for many clinical research nurses.

Reflexivity as Scholarly Practice

These narratives also remind us that reflexivity is not a solitary exercise but part of a collective scholarly endeavor. By sharing their struggles and motivations, nurse-researchers contribute to a culture of openness and authenticity in nursing scholarship. Reflexivity challenges the myth of the detached, objective researcher by foregrounding the lived experiences and values that inevitably shape research processes and outcomes (Sibbald et al., 2024).

Moreover, reflexive narratives have pedagogical value. For students and novice researchers, they offer relatable accounts

of how to navigate doubt, failure, and institutional demands. For more experienced scholars, they serve as reminders of the ethical and personal dimensions of research often overshadowed by technical concerns (McIntosh, 2023; Birnbaum, 2025).

Conclusion

This integrative paper situated three reflexivity narratives within broader scholarly conversations on researcher identity, reflexivity, and lifelong learning. While distinct in contexts and experiences, the stories converged in affirming that becoming a researcher is a journey of persistence, values, and transformation.

To “do it until we make it” is not merely a motto of endurance but a scholarly stance — to engage research with courage, reflexivity, and commitment, even amidst doubts. It is a recognition that researcher identity is not a static destination but an ongoing process of growth, struggle, and contribution to nursing science (McIntosh, 2023; Yip, 2024; Birnbaum, 2025).

By featuring these narratives, the importance of reflexivity is highlighted in making visible the personal, professional, and social dimensions of becoming a nurse-researcher. As Sibbald (2014) had asserted that these stand as testimonies since the future of nursing research lies not only in methodological expertise but also in the reflexive integration of identity, values, motivations, and aspirations.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Erlinda C. Palaganas, PhD, RN, FAAN, is an esteemed leader, advocate, and trailblazer in community health nursing and research. A retired Professor 12 and University Scientist III at the University of the Philippines Baguio, she has dedicated her career to championing nurses' rights, equitable healthcare, and qualitative research. She graduated cum laude with a Bachelor of Science in Nursing from UERMMCI in 1979, receiving the Community Health Service Award. She then earned her Master of Public Health from the UP College of Public Health in 1985. In 1996, she completed her Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Nursing at the University of Sydney, Australia, further solidifying her expertise in health sciences and qualitative research. Her research interests include social determinants of health on issues such as migration, climate change, indigenous knowledge and practices, poverty.