

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods

Reflexivity

Contributors: Maura Dowling

Editors: Lisa M. Given

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Reflexivity can be broadly described as qualitative researchers' engagement of continuous examination and explanation of how they have influenced a research project. It plays a key role in many types of qualitative methodologies, including feminist research, participatory action research, ethnographies, and hermeneutic and poststructural approaches. However, the extent to which researchers engage in reflexivity depends on the methodological approach they have adopted for their study.

There are essentially four types of reflexivity adopted by qualitative researchers, and the form used is dependent on the methodology adopted. Reflexivity, therefore, can be viewed on a continuum. On the objectivist end of the reflexivity continuum is the approach of “bracketing” adopted in descriptive phenomenology. Similar to bracketing, “ethnomethodological indifference” adopted in ethnomethodology is also placed on the objectivist end of the reflexivity continuum. Both of these approaches to reflexivity reflect positivist influences. In achieving this type of reflexivity, researchers keep a diary of the thoughts and feelings that influenced their methodological decision making throughout a study.

A broader view of reflexivity is evident in epistemological reflexivity where researchers are required to ask questions of their methodological decision making and are encouraged to think about epistemological decisions regarding the research and its findings. This form of reflexivity is evident in philosophical hermeneutics and in grounded theory. Similar to the objectivist type of reflexivity, researchers adopting epistemological reflexivity can keep a journal to assist in their understanding of prior assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes.

The third type of reflexivity moves beyond the mere recording of a journal to one where the reflexivity is critical and embraces an examination of the political and social issues that inform the research process. This type of reflexivity is employed in, for instance, critical ethnography and critical hermeneutics.

The fourth type of reflexivity is that espoused by feminist researchers. This form of reflexivity embraces the reciprocal nature of the researcher–participant relationship and challenges the notion of neutrality in this relationship. The researchers and informants become partners in the researchers' endeavor, and [p. 748 ↓] the researchers use their

own experiences and reflections to illuminate important meaning. Both researchers and participants, therefore, undergo reflexivity. This view of reflexivity suggests an intimate reciprocity between researchers and participants and could be considered problematic. However, in the case of research investigating sensitive and private aspects of people's lives, the endeavor to create a successful interview can be compared with the processes employed by, for instance, counselors and therapists.

Achieving reflexivity is not a straightforward endeavor. It requires consideration and examination of decisions made at each stage of the research process, and the extent to which such examination is adopted depends on the methodology adopted. Current discussions on reflexivity reflect the need for qualitative researchers to be explicit in their actual practice of reflexivity so as to avoid it appearing to merely address the need to make a qualitative study appear more rigorous.

MauraDowling

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See also

- [Researcher as Instrument](#)
- [Researcher–Participant Relationships](#)

Further Readings

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