Reflexivity: an Essential Component for All Research?

Linda Finlay

This article explains how reflexivity offers us a way to turn the problem of subjectivity in research into an opportunity. Examples of personal reflexivity, in the form of subjective analysis of some research encounters which have occurred during my own research, are presented to illustrate how the reflexive process can unfold new understandings. The discussion argues that personal and methodological reflexivity should be included as an element of every investigation (qualitative or quantitative) and that without it the validity of the research could be undermined.

Introduction

For many people, the word research conjures up images of hard data, controlled trials, randomised samples and reliable results, all derived as a result of using scientific methodology. These ideas all arise from a positivist, quantitative research tradition (a tradition that has contributed enormously to our knowledge and scientific progress). However, when we consider research into complex human behaviour and experience, quantitative research has serious weaknesses.

For one thing, the positivist ideal of establishing universal causal laws of behaviour is largely inappropriate for studying individuals who experience ambivalent emotions; who behave in contradictory and unpredictable ways; and who change according to their social circumstances. Postmodern researchers inclined towards constructivist, interpretivist and post-structuralist persuasions[1] contest the very concept of universal, causal laws. They reject the notion of one unequivocal world and argue, instead, that reality is socially constructed and that meanings are historically and culturally situated. Furthermore, in terms of occupational therapy research, the things we focus on in therapy (namely people's motivation, emotions, thinking and relationships) remain difficult to quantify. Where quantitative methods are used to investigate these areas, the validity and/or relevance of the results can be challenged. Thus, researchers are drawn towards qualitative methods.

Qualitative researchers aim to understand the complexity and richness of people's experience (Denzin and Lincoln 1994b, Kvale 1996). They deliberately set out to probe the abstract and the ambiguous; they value subjective interpretations; and they emphasise how meanings are negotiated within a social context and how the same event can be interpreted in multiple ways. They argue that their results contain deeper, more socially relevant insights. Qualitative research, however, also has its problems. Its very focus on unmeasurables and use of subjective data means that it can lack scientific rigour or can be perceived as being 'waffly'. Thus the validity or trustworthiness[2] of qualitative research is also questioned.

Defining reflexivity

So how can we ensure that the research we do, be it quantitative or qualitative, is valid, rigorous and relevant? My answer is that we should try to adopt a self-consciously critical, systematic and analytical approach towards capturing more subjective and inter-subjective dimensions. In particular, I would like to argue the case for the use of one method: reflexivity. Reflexivity offers a tool where the *problem* of subjectivity in research can be turned into an *opportunity*. I argue that it enables richer understandings and so should be exploited as a research tool for both quantitative and qualitative research (although currently its use is confined largely to the qualitative arena).

Being reflexive involves thoughtful analysis or, as Wilkinson (1988) defined it, 'disciplined self-reflection'. It encompasses continual evaluation of both our subjective responses (*personal reflexivity*) and our method of research (*methodological reflexivity*). Through constantly reflecting on, questioning and evaluating the research process, the researcher attempts to distinguish how subjective and inter-subjective elements have impinged on (and possibly transformed) both the data collection and the analysis. As Banister et al (1994, p151) put it, reflexivity is 'acknowledging the central position of the researcher in the construction of knowledge'.

Research context

To demonstrate the role of reflexivity, the impact on research findings of four subjective elements – the researcher's assumptions, expectations, behaviour/emotional reactions and unconscious responses – are described below. The discussion around these four subjective elements falls largely under the banner of *personal reflexivity*, although they also carry methodological implications (personal and methodological reflexivity cannot be easily separated). A final discussion section argues that subjectivity is a resource that should be exploited reflexively and that ignoring it could undermine the validity of the research.

To explain and illustrate this reflexive process, I draw on my personal experiences of being involved in research. The exam-

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1. For an in-depth explanation of these theories and ideas I recommend two texts: Skinner (1985) and Denzin and Lincoln (1994a).
2. 'Trustworthiness' is usually the preferred term over 'validity' for evaluating qualitative research. It includes notions of credibility (which parallels internal validity), transferability (similar to external validity), dependability (parallels reliability) and confirmability (parallels objectivity) (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

ples used are based on my doctoral research, which aims to explore the life world of occupational therapists. Qualitative methodology, in the form of in-depth relatively non-directive interviews and participant observation, was employed in order to access therapists' individual meanings about how they experience their world. A phenomenological approach was adopted to *describe* their life world as opposed to *explaining* how and why the meanings arise. In this approach, the descriptions are assumed to reflect the participants' perceptions of their life world. The researcher strives to accept and value the individual's expressions.

Throughout both the interview and the analysis, I attempted to bracket or set aside presuppositions and previous assumptions (based on theoretical understanding and personal/professional experience) in order to attend genuinely and actively to the participants' views. At the same time, however, I needed to remain aware that it was impossible to bracket my subjective responses completely and that these still influenced the entire research process of both the data collection and the analysis. Reflexive analysis (drawing on field notes and a reflections diary) was the technique employed to help me unravel these complexities and dynamics.

Analysing subjective experience

Influence of researcher's assumptions

In my research, I am an occupational therapist interviewing other occupational therapists. My *insider* status is undoubtedly significant because there are biases and assumptions that stem from it.

In some ways being an insider is a comfortable or easy role to adopt. I can dress and behave as myself. The research participants and I share a similar professional socialisation and background. We share the same language and jargon, even the same jokes. I can identify with them, for example when they speak of their difficult patients or clients or even their difficult team relationships. Through understanding my own satisfactions, dilemmas and tensions about being an occupational therapist, I can understand theirs better. My previous knowledge gives me insights that outsiders may not appreciate.

On the other hand, I need to guard against *assuming* that we share the same language and meanings and see the job in the same way, so missing the point that there are differences. This came home forcefully to me when I first started observing therapists in the field. I started with an assumption (based on my mental health experience) that as therapists we have a fair amount of autonomy and that team relationships are reasonably egalitarian. It came as quite a surprise to me to find out how hierarchical some practices could be.

An example stands out: a therapist that I shadowed had a difficult dilemma whereby a quarter of all her referrals were inappropriate, but she still carried on seeing these clients. When I asked why, the answer came back, 'Because the doctor has requested it, it's prescribed, so I must do it.' That was the first time I realised how big some of the differences in our professional experience were. Had I not reflected on (and recorded) my assumptions, I might have missed seeing that professional responsibility/autonomy meant different things for each of us. My subsequent analysis picked up the significance of therapists having both individual and shared meanings.

Impact of researcher's expectations

Along with assumptions, the researcher brings to bear a number of expectations in advance of the research. An example of this arose when I discovered that one of my research participants would be a male therapist. My previous experience, backed by a review of the literature, suggested that in interviews men are less able to speak about their feelings compared with women (Roberts 1981, Scott 1985).

Carrying this baggage into the interview, I was not surprised when my participant actually said something to the effect that he 'didn't have feelings'. In response, I found myself feeling irritated with what I saw as a cold, mechanical approach, one that was inappropriate in a therapist. I found myself being uncharacteristically challenging with him. I pushed him to get an emotional response. Then, towards the end of the interview, he gave it to me when he spoke, quite painfully, about how difficult it was to handle certain emotions and how he had to cut off from them at work. I then felt guilty for having been so insensitive and forcing such disclosures. Reflecting on this I wondered about the extent to which I had set all that up with my initial assumptions. To what extent did he produce behaviours, both the mechanical and the emotional, because I was inviting them? I needed to be sure that what I received from my informant was not simply a product of my behaviour (despite my best intentions to be both non-directive and non-judgemental).

Having engaged in reflexive analysis (at both a personal and a methodological level), I believe that I gained insight confirming that I had probably influenced my informant. In addition, I came to understand that the multiple, contradictory ideologies that are around in our culture also had a considerable influence and that emotions reflect our ideologies (Wetherell and Maybin 1996). For one thing, I suspect that my informant had internalised the same messages as I have about acceptable gender behaviour. But I also saw that he would have been exposed to other ideologies, for instance how as professionals we should be empathetic and emotional as well as professional and in control of our feelings. My negative reactions probably reflected the society within which the occupational therapist practised and had to struggle. In this way, my reflections (about my own assumptions, society's ideas and my informant's inconsistent presentation) became part of the research data that I needed to take note of and analyse.

Examining researcher's behaviour and emotions to gain insight

On one occasion, I was observing an occupational therapist working with a patient who was in the final stages of lung cancer. Although I was supposed only to observe, I found that I could not stop myself becoming involved (by asking the patient questions and even intervening at a practical level). When I reflected on my behaviour, I understood that it was due to my active need to be involved, to do something. I also recognised my own sensitivity as an asthmatic, witnessing someone with breathing problems dying of a lung disease. Once I recognised this, I could then see that the occupational therapist was experiencing similar identifications with some of her other patients. Previously I had interpreted the therapist as being involved with fairly superficial, irrelevant tasks. Now I could see that these tasks had a meaning for her – they were as much for her as for the patient. By examining my own responses, I could understand hers better.

On another occasion, I found myself feeling angry with a therapist participant. My anger was stopping me from listening and empathising and I needed to examine what was happening. I was feeling angry on behalf of a patient who needed to stay longer in hospital to complete a range of crucial assessments, but the therapist was unable to challenge the doctors who were intent on discharging the patient. On reflection, I interpreted that my anger mirrored the therapist's anger at herself. She regularly put herself down for not communicating more assertively with doctors. On delving deeper, I located what appeared to be the *real* source of both of our angers:

the hierarchical system investing the doctor with such power. This then became a key theme in my generic analysis of the life world of occupational therapists. By reflecting on our shared emotional responses, I was led to locate the context that prompted those responses and to recognise its importance in shaping how therapists experience their work.

Probing unconscious responses

Reflexive analysis can be taken to an even deeper, psychodynamic level of exploring unconscious transferences that might be occurring within the research relationship (Hunt 1989).

When I ask questions and probe participants' feelings, the therapist in me somehow gets activated. On occasions, I have had this strange sense that the individual therapists I am interviewing are my clients. They would be talking about treating damaged, vulnerable people, and I would start to see them in the same way (particularly when they were tearful which was a not uncommon occurrence). Further, I was unsettled when I recognised that at times I also felt distant and was not my usual empathetic self. I eventually realised that my distance was in fact a defence, a familiar routine which I have used as a therapist to cope in my clinical practice (in fact, I can plot this defensive manoeuvre back to my childhood).

Recognising this, I could explore how my transferences were inhibiting relations with my participants. I also realised some possible effects. For instance, my acting like a 'distant, professional therapist' may well have produced associated, unconscious 'client responses' in the participants. By reflecting on the 'subtle dynamics of these interpersonal relationships' (Frank 1997, p85), I also gained insight into how my research method had influenced my findings (a good example of how personal reflexivity spills over into methodological reflexivity).

Discussion

As a researcher, I have found that my emotions and values are always engaged, however non-judgemental I try to be. It is impossible for me to conform to the stereotype of being a distant, objective, rational researcher. It is also clear that my behaviour as a researcher has affected my participants' responses and thus influenced the direction of the findings. Another researcher, in a different relationship, would have undoubtedly unfolded a different story. Moreover, the actual research process would seem to have the potential to transform the very phenomenon being studied. Beer (1997, p126) pursued this issue, arguing how research interviews directly affect both interviewer and informant: 'Interviews augment experience, rather than simply reflecting it. They alter meaning, instead of just delineating it. They change people.' Ultimately, any research is a joint product of the researcher, the participant and their relationship, that is, the research is co-constituted.

While researcher subjectivity can be viewed as a problem, it can also be exploited as a resource. Doing the kind of analysis I have demonstrated is not only acceptable but also desirable, because systematic reflexivity can unfold new understandings. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983, p15) made this point when they suggested: '... we must work with what knowledge we have, whilst recognising that it may be erroneous and subjecting it to systematic inquiry ... instead of treating reactivity merely as a source of bias, we can exploit it'. Similarly, as Frank (1997, p89) noted, the 'challenge is not to eliminate "bias" to be more neutral, but to use it as a focus for more intense insight'. None of the above examples of subjective analysis is earth shattering in itself, but the insights these examples have prompted have all been important. I wonder how many other insights are lost for not going through this process?

Taking the argument further, we can even challenge the idea that subjectivity means 'bias'. Putting 'bias' in inverted commas acknowledges the contested nature of this term. It implies an unequivocal reality which is distorted by subjective interpretation. The alternative view, adopted by phenomenologists and social constructionists amongst others, is to recognise the relative, multiple and socially constructed nature of reality and how meanings are negotiated in particular contexts (Denzin and Lincoln 1994b, Wetherell and Maybin 1996). If multiple interpretations of the same event are possible (for example, different researchers making different interpretations), it follows that we must positively embrace subjectivity rather than habitually dismissing it as 'bias'.

The crucial point, then, is that it is necessary to attempt to look at subjective reactions and relationship dynamics as they occur. To deny the relevance of both subjectivity and intersubjectivity must undermine the validity of research (and to my mind this applies equally to qualitative and quantitative research). In other words, explicit reflexive analysis which is open to public scrutiny can increase the trustworthiness of research. Yet all too often it seems that researchers give lip service to subjective evaluation, perhaps adding on a section in an appendix. As Kleinman and Copp (1993, p17) expressed it, researchers tend to 'safely quarantine the confessional from the substantive story'. Often researchers do this because they do not want to be seen as self-indulgent, but in the process they may lose a richer, and perhaps crucial, dimension.

Having argued the case for reflexivity as a resource, we need also to recognise some of its limitations. Firstly, such understanding is always difficult to unfold because our experience is invariably complex, ambiguous and ambivalent. Much care, skill and time needs to go into any reflexive analysis. Even when it is done well, can we be assured that personal experience is captured adequately? Secondly, challenging questions about the validity of subjective interpretations and explanations remain. Are all meanings relative? Are all interpretations equally valid? Thirdly, being preoccupied by one's own emotions and experiences can skew findings in unfortunate directions. In particular, the researcher's position could become unduly privileged, at the expense of hearing the participant's voice. Ultimately, reflexivity is neither an opportunity to wallow in subjectivity nor permission to engage in legitimised emoting.

Conclusion

I have tried to show how our behaviour and reactions both affect, and are affected by, the world we are studying. Research takes place within a social context. It is a joint product of the researcher's and the participants' mutual interpretations and negotiation. So it makes sense to explore these dynamics explicitly and, furthermore, to miss out this process could threaten the validity of the research.

I have argued in favour of being reflexive, at both a personal and a methodological level. I suggest that such analyses can enable rich understandings and, as such, should be exploited as a research tool. In other words, within every scientific investigation, the researcher's own thinking, feeling and interpretations should be valued as primary evidence. As researchers, we are part of the equation, so we need to look inwards as well as out. Next time you read or hear about research, don't ask *if* the researcher's biases are relevant but ask *how* they are relevant.

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Current Literature: Orthotics and Prosthetics

SIGOP 1977 – 1998 CIGOPW: This year the COT special interest group celebrates its 21st Anniversary.

The latest developments in materials, methods and biomedical computer robotics and engineering have always placed occupational therapists who work in orthotics and prosthetics at the forefront of technological advances. These new technologies will also offer new methods of learning for students, therapists and clients.

New areas are always opening up. Occupational therapists are now becoming involved with infants at the earliest neonatal stages where careful splinting can reduce a lifetime of deformity, damage and disability.

With the current emphasis on evidence-based practice, we need to find a balance in orthotics and prosthetics between making full use of the evidence and research available whilst ensuring that we are still at the cutting edge of involvement in trials of new methods and materials.

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