Research Reflexivity - How to present this in your thesis

Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to provide a practical illustration of how a researcher can evidence reflexivity in their thesis. I present the reflexive stance and journey I made in completing my PhD study using constructivist grounded theory. The intention here is to depict how I began my journey as a novice nurse researcher navigating the swamps of research and finally have the epistemological courage to sign off as a full-fledged researcher. Hopefully, by exploring how the researcher role and researcher reflexivity were addressed in this constructivist grounded theory, it will illuminate the way for others to present reflexivity in their thesis.

I position myself with others who agree that an openness about the situatedness and a transparency of the relationship of the knower to that of the subjects of inquiry is important. This paper therefore ensures the capture of my thoughts as a researcher whilst undertaking the research as part of my PhD candidature. Predominantly it depicts the milieu that influenced the choices and decisions made such that the reader can make sense of the journey undertaken. By presenting it as a journal article, it is also hoped that it helps the novice researcher, about to embark on their journey of discovery, to think more deeply about reflexivity.

Keywords: Charmaz; Constructivism; Reflexivity; positioning the self; Research; Qualitative; Grounded theory

Introduction

Human beings are story tellers. There is an increased tendency for not just the participants, but also the researchers to narrate the account of their research. This proclivity of the researcher to tell their story is dependent on the context of the narrator as well as the listener. But the notion of researchers as narrators involves certain sociocultural constraints. It is a paradox - building scientific ideas out of something that is integrally biographical. Such scientific pursuits tend to push subjectivity aside. I position myself with others who situate all discourse and narratives at the intersection of history, society and biography. I do align myself with those who agree that an openness about the situatedness and a transparency of the relationship of the knower to the subjects of inquiry is essential. Such knowledge of how to situate the biography of the researcher to the context of the research is imperative to develop as a reflexive researcher.

The principal aim of this endeavour is to provide a practical illustration of how a researcher can evidence reflexivity in their thesis. Within this article, I present the reflexive stance I made in completing my PhD study using constructivist grounded theory. The intention here is to depict how I started as a novice nurse researcher navigating the swamps of research and finally have the epistemological courage to sign off as a full-fledged researcher. Hopefully, by depicting my reflexive researcher journey and explaining how researcher reflexivity formed the research, it will illuminate the way for others to present reflexivity in their thesis.

Traditional science privileges professional objectivity over subjectivity and engagement (Freshwater 2016). However, reflexivity transcends such paradigmatic polarisations and explains, elaborates and deliberates the way the research is contextualized theoretically (Engward and Davis 2015). The research findings do not naturally emerge from data collection and data analysis. They are shaped by the choices made by the researchers over the course of the research process. By critically discussing the methods of data collection and the methods of data analysis (Brunero et al 2015), reflexivity makes the research process as well as the research decisions transparent and rigorous (Palaganas 2017).

2

Generically, albeit minimally, construed as formed of self-awareness of one's own scholarly proclivities, reflexivity helps to signpost to the influences that shaped the decisions and choices made in the research, contextualising the research. A distinction is to be made from that of reflection; whilst reflection aims to gain an insight by means of looking at an action – before, during or after - reflexivity explains, elaborates and deliberates the way new knowledge is constructed.

Research Background

Using Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory approach, the research explored how the South Asians navigate lifestyle changes after a heart attack (Davis 2018). The original proponents of grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967) define it as the discovery of theory which conceptually explains the phenomena of interest, from systematically obtained and analysed data (Holloway and Galvin 2017). Quite central to the constructivist grounded theory approach is researcher reflexivity (Charmaz 2006).

Researcher reflexivity detailed here as cogitating accounts, depicts how my historical, biographical as well as societal perspective might have influenced the way I undertook the research and presented the research. As part of the reflexive process, I kept a research journal and spent substantial time noting in it my thoughts, actions, interpretations and responses. I have used excerpts from the journal to signpost my journey.

Reflexivity in the introduction to the thesis – the prelude

Charmaz (2006) proposes that under the mantle of constructivism, a grounded theorist positions themselves within a reflexive framework; thereby making transparent how they render their own reality and how they position themselves within that reality. As such, I open my thesis with a prelude that helps the reader familiarise with my thoughts around the critical debate on the nature and existence of truth and reality and the representation of knowledge. From the prelude:

"…. *I do not assume there is a reality awaiting discovery which can be excavated, nor I have finally arrived at the truth. Nonetheless what I would like to emphasise is that between reality and its representation is a process of knowledge construction which is cultural, partial, complex and positioned within a social and historical context*." (Davis 2018:11)

Further on in the prelude, I explain my history and background, essentially my biography.

"*As Bourdieu's (2017) notion of 'habitus' dictates, some of my ideas, expressions and actions may be partly shaped by my exposure to a western frame of reference, schooled in western theory and research methods; others from my South Indian middle-class upbringing, parental values, peer influences and life experiences….……*" (Davis 2018:11)

I also include the political and economic climate which can impinge on my research.

"…*The historical space within which this knowledge is co-constructed is singularly poignant with welfare weariness, fiscal restraints, devolutions and integrations of health care along with King's Fund review of the NHS (Quarterly report – March 2017) reminiscent of the statistics of a bygone era. Overhanging everything else is the anxiety and uncertainty of Brexit. Thus, the underlying philosophy, politics, history, and related power interests form a subtle but tangible link between our actions, the research and the pursuit for evidence.*" (Davis 2018:12)

Reflexivity in Methodology

One of the critical elements of undertaking the PhD candidature is to defend the chosen methodology. To help with the defence, it is vital **"*to match the philosophy of the method, philosophy of the research as well as the world view of the researcher*"** (Davis 2018). For this I undertook to explore in critical depth the different approaches to grounded theory so as to make an informed choice of which is best suited. I make it quite clear that my underpinning philosophical thoughts for this research assume that the need to address the health professional advice of lifestyle changes are both contextual and subjective (Davis 2018).The below account from my research journal, signposts how my philosophy as the researcher resonates with that of the research approach.

4

> "*In my choice of what is important to study, the methods, and the emergent analysis, I draw upon almost 20 years of experience working as a nurse in a multicultural mainstream health service. Perhaps I have always been subtly enticed by the narrations of the underprivileged, the minority. Perhaps this is why, though I have been 'pushed and pulled' around the differing ontological and epistemological turns of grounded theory, my research finally rested on a methodology that offered inroads to hear the stories and invoke the voices of participants, thus embracing subjectivity. For as a health care professional it is imperative that I know how and why South Asians choose as they do so as to enter into a meaningful dialogue with them.*" (Davis 2018:11)

I allude to the attributes of constructivist approach by signposting:

> "*I believe I will be a 'catalyst' co-constructing knowledge with my participants and this embracing of 'subjectivity' keeps with my value system. Charmaz' argument of multiple realities strikes a familiar chord......and I am definitely drawn towards the situating of my participants under the banner of constructivism......*" (Davis 2018:73)

A pivotal point in choosing a research approach is coming to terms with one's own research philosophy, which I made clear in the prelude, highlighting my position regarding 'reality and truth'. It then became vital for me to utilise the most appropriate approach that resonates with my world view and cognitive style whilst at the same time ensuring that it still matches the goal of the research. And once this was pragmatically aligned, the rest fell in place as Howell (2013:4) states**: "***When we undertake a research project, we approach the world with preconceptions about the relationship between mind and external reality; such will affect the methodological approach, research programme and methods of data collection*"**.

Reflexivity on my data collection

Interview was used as a means of data collection. Commonality between the researcher and the researched enabled an easy familiarity and facilitated rapport, thereby yielding rich data. In this account of my first interview, I highlight how being of South Asian origin, and privileging an 'inside knowledge', allowed me to feel part of the milieu, trading stories of the part of India we are from:

"I knock on the door and wait patiently. I am wearing a contemporary styled cotton 'salwar' and I check the dupatta is properly draped across the shoulders. The door opens... I smile and say 'hello'... with a beaming smile the gentleman leads me to the lounge.... I remove my shoes, walk across as a lady enters, wiping her hands on her dupatta, and she embraces me and calls beti, we sit down and then the lady asks "chai?" I say "no thank you...". "Coffee?" I refuse (as it was Ramadan fasting time for them)... and I wait and we sit and smile at each other... and I begin......". (Davis 2018:100)

My presence was felt like a researcher, asking questions and probing, however on the other hand, I was a South Asian, one of them. At first, I reflected that the similarity in ethnic identity created this sense of belonging, building the spontaneous relationship – with the participants I was interviewing (Davis 2018). Nevertheless, upon further pondering, I had to acknowledge that perhaps the participants may find it easier to work with researchers from other ethnic backgrounds, as the 'insider knowledge' is like a double edged sword. Yes, it could build an easy and immediate familiarity, but at the same time, the participants may be reluctant to share information that they perceive could harm this easily formed relationship. However, if they were working with researchers of different ethnic background, they may assume that whatever is said will neither be questioned nor challenged as other researchers may not have a detailed awareness of South Asian norms.

Therefore, I concluded that no matter who is conducting research on whom, researchers do probe into other's lives to explore the phenomena. Consequently, the qualities of a good interviewer, for example listening, being sensitive and compassionate to the information shared, may help to form the building block of any relationship; these in turn would demand honesty, reciprocity and trust - integral to data collection. Undeniably, as a nurse I may have subsumed these qualities and attributes in my clinical practice as required by my profession. Therefore, I believe it would be wise to privilege these qualities in the interviewing above any other forms of ethnic matching.

6

Reflexivity on Data Analysis – Leaving my footprint in the coding journey.

Analysis begins by transcription of the interview data and this interview data is than coded. Coding, as defined by Charmaz (2006:4) is the naming and labelling of data segments. Charmaz (2006) clarifies that as the coding progresses, it moves through increasing levels of abstraction, such that the concepts identified early remain close to the data. But as the coding advances, higher-level concepts are developed which explain and provide theoretical insight into increasingly larger slices of the data (Charmaz 2006). As a reflexive researcher, I do have the onus to make explicit the process of interpretation – the process of analysis. Using two types of coding – line by line and focused coding - as deemed appropriate by Charmaz (2006), I analysed the data to form theoretical categories and to formulate the substantive theory.

I termed the reflexivity in data analysis as leaving my foot-print in the coding journey. The relationship established during the data collection is now more emphatic in the analysis process. A tripartite relationship (between the data, the researcher and the participants) emerges and influences this process. For, as I filter the transcribed data, generated by the participants, via the lens of my personal philosophy, I make the process uniquely co-constructive, and not merely interpretive.

Acknowledging that the grounded theorist with a constructive paradigm can never be neutral in their exploration and interpretation of phenomena, Charmaz (2006) accentuates that meaning is constructed through experiences, disciplinary proclivities and perceptions. Therefore, it is important for me to acknowledge how I brought in my particular field (nursing) of knowledge and experience whilst co-constructing these categories. And for this, once again I allude to the prelude which signposts what these disciplinary proclivities and perceptions are:

> "….*my exposure to a western frame of reference, schooled in western theory and research methods, my South Indian middle class upbringing, almost 20 years of experience of a NHS nurse in a multicultural society, parental values, peer influences and life experiences………*" (Davis 2018:11)

Thus, throughout the process of coding, from the preliminary line by line coding to the formation of a substantive theory, there is an unambiguous level of researcher reflexivity enriching the theoretical sensitivity (Davis 2018). The following thoughts were written down in the research journal:(

> *"…I felt I needed someone to verify that these 'codes' are indeed correct! However, as I continued further into my coding journey, I become more conversant with the perspective of there being no 'right' interpretation, that is no 'right code' – and this is rightly aligned to the 'multiple realities' perspective. With my nurse hat on, I expected the coding and analysis to follow a neat pattern, moving from one distinct stage to another. However, I find that it was not so, and the analysis progressed in a much less 'neat' fashion. This worried me…."*

Reflexivity in Discussion

The chapter titled 'discussion' starts with an autobiographical reflection on how laborious the writing was, that stemmed from the imposter syndrome. But this reflexivity, enabled me to clarify how the chapter unfolded, how the literature review, the data analysis and the findings, all amalgamated into the discussion chapter.

> *"…I gaze catatonically at the title I have just typed in and the empty space below…… …..am I surprised at my findings? What is new here? Is there anything here that makes it different from the known literature? I turn the pages for my research questions, using these as a frame for my discussion. Then I go back into my literature chapter and pull out the sensitising concepts related to those research questions, then I re-read the narratives of my participants, then I pull out the synthesis and interpretation paragraphs of my findings chapter and I bring all three into the blank page in front of me. And I start my weaving, pulling the threads of literature and my data…."How many mornings more? 'Excerpt #4* (Davis 2018:160)

Reflexivity in the conclusion

Finally, I conclude my thesis by leaving an epilogue. In this epilogue I concede that the knowledge co-constructed is inherently partial. I allow concessions for the spatially and temporally located analysis (Davis 2018).

> *"………..alluding to the substance of everyday experience – where and when; here and now; or a there and then, I believe it would be wise not to judge the story based on the chapter you walked into…..."* (Davis 2018:285)

Nonetheless even with those constraints, as a researcher, I can still essentialise the experience of the participants in the context in which they inhabited. I also mark my signature in the field – signposting to my contribution – the end result of the PhD candidature.

> *"……As a sign of epistemic humility and honesty, I pay homage to the Aristotelian conception of 'phronesis' - practical, limited wisdom – which leaves you with just one facet of the reality, a truth as I see it with the participants, tailor made for this context, for this community, a story we tell together… me as the researcher and the participants –*......................*.therein, by claiming my findings as original contribution and marking my imprint in the field, I sign off as a researcher"* (Davis 2018:285)

Reflexivity – A perilous activity

I have termed this process of reflexivity as a perilous activity as it becomes quite challenging - balancing the self-analysis and confessing to the methodological inadequacies without jeopardising the outcome. Indeed, to what extent and in how much detail can I disclose to give an accurate account of my methodological experience without running the risk of compromising my research?

It was difficult not to fall into the swamp of infinite regress of unwarranted self-analysis - for the more insight I gained, the more I ran the risk of self-doubt. For example, in my attempts to be reflexive I asked myself – who am I by the simple of virtue of my training, to be so confident whilst interpreting and assigning meaning to another's experience? (Davis 2018). However, threading the self-analysis throughout the thesis, whilst navigating this complex path helped me develop insight into these points as well:

The insider/outsider and the trinity concept: Often, I felt I embodied the 'trinity concept' – the researcher, the South Asian, the Nurse and each in itself an entity of its own **(**Davis 2018).

> *"….As a South Asian myself, each home I visited, I felt a part of me visiting my home in India. They (the participants) received me with such warmth and generosity– I was often welcomed into the kitchen.*

It shames me to acknowledge such a welcome which they tendered; I might not have proffered to any researcher at my doorstep (Davis 2018). This trinity concept was not without its dangers. I signpost to them in this excerpt:

> **"** *As a Malayali South Asian, I acknowledge and am aware of the entrenching rituals and different practices across the groups in my multi-faith, diverse community. I could empathise with migration and integration strains they encountered, and the cultural demands placed on them. Nevertheless, my role as a researcher also raises some methodological dilemmas such as, the manner in which to address elders as well as I, as a South Asian woman addressing 'men'………."*

> *An understanding from within' Excerpt #5*

Indeed, I needed to watch for the pitfalls of misinterpreting the nuances and cues that as a South Asian I am well versed in, therefore I need to countercheck that I interpreted the nodding of the head, or the periodic ''hey na?'(isn't it so?), through which they may seek validation from me as a South Asian or as a nurse, but which I cannot give as a researcher (Davis 2018).

Empathic distance and emotional trigger: Berger (2015) discloses that usually there is a struggle to maintain an empathic distance not to disclose personal material to avoid risking any involvement thereby compromising the researcher perspective. There was such an instance when my father suffered a heart attack and an inopportune phrase from one of the participants *"I am very, very tired; I have no energy to do anything"* acted as an emotional trigger, as I had heard such a phrase from my father a week into his recovery journey. I shared the story of my father's heart attack and observed a distinct change when the participant realised, I knew from a personal perspective '*what I was asking about*' and was not just an '*outsider looking in*'. Coupled with this effect was the cathartic benefit to myself which was apparent to me towards the end of data collection. This also allowed for a deepened reflection on the similarities and differences of my father's and the participant's experiences.

The philosophy - ontological and epistemological underpinnings: In setting out the links between my ontology, epistemology and methodology, I envisage that the reader is effortlessly guided to the philosophical and theoretical rendering and to the choices I have made. This open and reflective approach is intentional, so that it leaves an audit trail of credible research decisions made in the study. As Berger (2015) and Dodgson (2019) warn, reflexivity is used not to legitimise the researcher's philosophy but to embed the research in an epistemological context.

Presenting the world of the participants through their narrative excerpts and quotes is another way the epistemological context is espoused within this research. This also ensures that the participants' voices are heard and not muffled by the authoritarian nature of the thesis (Davis 2018). Moreover, as Johnson and Duberley (2003) warns, by making known the epistemological context and the origins of any the metatheoretical advancements made by this research, I do not abdicate my intellectual responsibility. Therefore, in the prelude to the thesis and by interlacing the narration by journal excerpts, I sought to retain the conviction that this research is pragmatically driven. And that, the 'practical wisdom - Aristotelian phronesis' (Davis 2018) - gained can advance progress and promote positive change in our society.

Epistemological maturity and humility: As I draw my writing to a close, I do not harbour any claims of unlimited wisdom or epistemological perfection (Davis 2018). Rather, this exercise in reflexivity has enabled me to circumvent the arrogance of epistemic certainty and self-sufficient/self immunising knowledge. The appreciation of convictions and distinctions comes with a risk of incompleteness. For this research is not complete without further questions arising from it. Consequently, as a social researcher, I do not in any way claim I have achieved closure for my research; but only a facet of truth is revealed. I pay homage to the complexity of reality, for the words of Kalleberg (2007:141) echo relentlessly - "*how little the single scientist knows in relation to the total community of inquirers.."* Which allows me to leave the reader with "*just one facet of the reality, the truth as I see it with the participants…***"** (Davis 2018).

11

Conclusion

This paper signposts novice PhD candidates towards the importance of reflexivity in research as well as how it may be presented whilst writing up the thesis. Though much has been written about reflexivity in general, how it can be presented in thesis is seldom articulated in literature. One of the challenges that exist is perhaps operationalising the conceptual understanding of reflexivity. How to integrate reflexivity in the context of a particular study has been the source of much debate (Patnaik 2013). A final intellectual tension is the writing approach that requires practice and experience.

Towards this end, I leave you all with some questions that I attempted to address in order to espouse reflexivity (Patnaik 2013) at various stages of the research process such as how has my personal/ professional history influenced the choice of topic? ? how do my gender, culture and professional/personal background influence my positioning in the research process – choosing methodology; data collection; data analysis? how does my background - ethnic/professional – influence my relationship with the participants? ? What are the roles I might be called upon to enact while interacting with the participant? What are the possible advantages/disadvantages that I have in terms of personal history and professional competence? What might be the triggers (emotional) that my personal/professional history can influence during the research?

Reflexivity is not just a cursory explanation, but an in-depth scrutiny of the researcher role in the construction of new knowledge, of how the conclusions are arrived at, and how the resultant knowledge function to shapen the world. As such it is not a destination, but a pursuit. The very act of acknowledging the researcher voice and threading the researcher positionality throughout the thesis endorses the inter-subjectivity paradigm of qualitative research.

References

Berger, R. (2015). Now I see, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 15(2), 219–234.

Bhopal, K. (2001). Researching South Asian women: issues of sameness and difference in the research process. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 10(3), 279-286.

Bourdieu, P. (2017). Habitus. In Habitus: A sense of place (pp. 59-66). Routledge.

Brunero, S. J., Jeon, Y. H., & Foster, K. (2015). The journey of positioning self as both mental health nurse and qualitative researcher: a critical reflection. *Journal of psychiatric and mental health nursing,* 22(7), 543-548.

Charmaz (2006). Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis. Sage.

Davis, D 🆔 (2018). Lifestyle self-management experiences of South Asians post myocardial infarction, PhD thesis, University of Salford.

Dodgson, J. E. (2019). Reflexivity in qualitative research. *Journal of Human Lactation*, 35(2), 220-222.

Engward, H., & Davis, G. (2015). Being reflexive in qualitative grounded theory: discussion and application of a model of reflexivity. *Journal of advanced nursing*, 71(7), 1530-1538.

Freshwater, D. (2016). Writing, rigour and reflexivity in nursing research. *Journal of Research in Nursing,* 10(3), 311-315.

Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). Grounded theory: The discovery of grounded theory. *Sociology the Journal of the British Sociological Association*, 12(1), 27-49.

Holloway, I., & Galvin, K. (2016). Qualitative research in nursing and healthcare. John Wiley & Sons.

Howell, K.(2013). An Introduction to the Philosophy of Methodology, London, SAGE.

Johnson, P., & Duberley, J. (2003). Reflexivity in management research. *Journal of management studies*, *40*(5), 1279-1303.

Kalleberg, R. (2007). A reconstruction of the ethos of science. *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 7(2), 137-160.

Palaganas, E. C., Sanchez, M. C., Molintas, M., Visitacion, P., & Caricativo, R. D. (2017). Reflexivity in qualitative research: A journey of learning. *The Qualitative Report*, 22(2), 426-438.

Patnaik, E.(2013). Reflexivity: Situating the researcher in qualitative research. *Humanities and Social Science Studies*, 2(2), 98-106.