



European Journal for Qualitative Research in Psychotherapy

www.EJQRP.org



Editorial

Reflexivity, often said to be the defining feature of qualitative research (Banister et al., 1994), can be defined as a process of *critical self-awareness* whereby we examine our understandings (representations or interpretations) of others and of the research process. As such, it demands critical analysis of the ways in which our own being as researchers interacts with, and influences, the research we are conducting. Reflexivity is the means by which we examine the impact of our own assumptions, background, positionings, behaviour, and (inter-)subjectivity on the other (and vice versa). It also creates an opportunity to reflect critically on discourses, the influence of the macro-social world, and the role of various structures of power/privilege. Arguably, we have an ethical and professional imperative to disentangle the various relational challenges and social tensions which inevitably arise in any human encounter. Here reflexivity is used to deepen the analysis; it's far from being a narcissistic opportunity to emote. It is through a focus on the self that it becomes possible to look out towards the world of the other - and beyond. This is the paradox at the heart of reflexivity.

The question at stake is not *if* researchers should be reflexive, it is *how*. Over the last 30 years or so, numerous typologies of reflexivity have been advanced (Finlay, 2016). In my own writings, for instance, I've distinguished between reflexivity as introspection, intersubjective reflection, social critique, and ironic deconstruction (Finlay, 2002). Subsequently, I've come to identify strategic, contextual-discursive, embodied, and relational variants (Finlay, 2012).

All the authors in this opening round of the 2021 volume of *EJQRP* engage in reflexivity in a fascinating variety of ways. They play with various philosophical, artful, intersubjective modes which span personal introspection, social critique, and methodological evaluation.

First, **Rupert King** interweaves his expert understanding of Heideggerian phenomenological philosophy with a layered reflexive account of his own personal struggle to understand dense philosophical texts. He invites us to consider the benefits of engaging with philosophy while developing a 'poetic sensibility' towards research. As he reveals, it was only by adopting an embodied stance of openness, patience, and curiosity that he began to understand the meanings of Heidegger's extraordinary, though opaque, notion of humans as a 'clearing' in which Being can emerge.

Next, **Janet Kuhnke** applies the lens of poetic sensibility to demonstrate the reflexive use of arts-based activities (sculpture, gardening, and journaling). Through her autobiographical performative inquiry, she offers us a vivid glimpse of the traumatic challenges of living through Covid-19 times. She poignantly describes her own existential experience of grief. Drawing on the wisdom of the Canadian artist Emily Carr, she presents critical life events as involving 'stop' moments of existential questioning, even as she pushes back and finds herself creating new possibilities.

The third article also takes an autobiographical route. **Ruth Smith** provides a powerful account of the emotional impact of doing research. The post-critical ethnography of her PhD research demands that

researchers offer a critically reflexive account of their own positionality and process. She achieves this by delving, in a brutally honest way, into the wounding experience of vicarious trauma, a condition she experienced both as a counsellor and as a researcher. By sharing her personal story about becoming negatively triggered when doing research, Ruth Smith hopes to reduce the isolation experienced by other researchers in similar situations. She convincingly argues that, just as researchers have a duty of care to participants, there is a need for *researcher self-care* and that it should be an institutionally recognised requirement for all those undertaking research.

In the article that follows, **Rose Falzon** skilfully demonstrates the use of reflexivity in clinical practice by presenting a touching case study. Gary's three-year therapeutic journey following the diagnosis of his progressive neurological condition is presented as a Narrative Inquiry. After the therapy ends, therapist and client join forces to re-explore their mutual experience through dialogue, journal writing and reflexivity. A second layer of reflexive enquiry is then engaged in this article as Falzon explores the application of gestalt theory, persuasively arguing the benefits of staying in steadfast contact with the here-and-now and the soulful presence of *I-Thou* relationships.

Next, **Melanie McGovern** presents some intriguing findings from her doctoral research into psychotherapists' perceptions of their epiphany moments of acute self-awareness. She uses a reflexive, hermeneutic phenomenological approach to analyse textual data, including transcripts of interviews with seven experienced psychotherapists. Her findings offer us a nuanced and deep understanding of epiphany as an oscillating embodied awareness that moves around the threshold between conscious and less conscious awareness. Her reflexivity – which might be labelled 'methodological reflexivity' – is shown in both her hermeneutic engagement and in the critical evaluation of her research method.

Claire Mitchell, in the article following, takes an autobiographical reflexive route. She tells the story of her PhD research journey – what she calls her

'pilgrimage'. She poignantly describes the long and lonely learning road, and her experience of confronting unexpected struggles (especially to do with phenomenological philosophy and methodology). Her story will resonate with all students on similar doctoral paths. She leaves us with the inspiring message that the reflexivity and research process engaged has enabled her to become a better, more curious, open, passionate therapist – one who has learned to be kinder to her self.

Next, **Genevieve Marais** and **Alistair McBeath** engage Reflexive Thematic Analysis methodology to examine the impact and challenges of therapist self-disclosure *on the therapists themselves* – an interesting, less researched angle. Therapist self-disclosure is revealed as a complex multi-faceted, and sometimes risky, phenomenon where therapists are left with a potential gamut of emotions from regret and vulnerability, to a driving belief such disclosures can enhance client well-being. Therapists' disclosures carry multiple meanings and variable outcomes. This insightfully underscores the need to move away from simple binaries that declare disclosure to be 'good' or 'bad'. Both authors valuably reveal how the research has impacted their practice. The first author owns a shift from seeing therapist self-disclosure as taboo to embracing its potential for healing of both client and therapist. The second author continues to grapple critically with the practice recognising risks for both therapist and client.

More articles are in the pipeline and will be published when ready in the current (2021) or subsequent volumes of the *European Journal Qualitative Research in Psychotherapy*.

References

- Banister, P., Burman, E., Parker, I., Taylor, M., & Tindall, C. (1994). *Qualitative methods in psychology: A research guide*. Open University Press.
- Finlay, L. (2002). Negotiating the swamp: The opportunity and challenge of reflexivity in research

- practice. *Qualitative Research*, 2, 209–230.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/146879410200200205>
- Finlay, L. (2012). Five lenses for the reflexive interviewer. In J. Gubrium, J. Holstein, A. Marvasti, & J. Marvasti (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research* (pp. 317–332). Sage.
- Finlay, L. (2017). Championing ‘Reflexivities’. Editorial. *Qualitative Psychology* (Special issue on Reflexivity), 4(2), 120-125. Retrieved from <http://psycnet.apa.org/PsycARTICLES/journal/qua/4/2>.

Dr Linda Finlay, Editor, *EJQRP* February, 2021

Email: linda@lindafinlay.co.uk