

Special resource for Utilization-Focused Evaluation, 5th edition

Excerpts on Reflexivity from *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods* by Michael Quinn Patton (2015, Sage)

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the process, and drawing on a portfolio of methodological and analytic strategies to accommodate the context issues and needs in the most rigorous way possible. (pp. 26–27)

While Rog was focusing on selecting evaluation methods to fit program and policy contexts, moving from a methods-first orientation to a context-first approach applies to any kind of inquiry. What kinds of methods are most appropriate for what kinds of questions? That issue is the core of this chapter as we examine the 12 strategic dimensions that characterize and distinguish qualitative inquiry. What is the purpose of the inquiry? Who will be assessing the rigor of the inquiry, using what standards and criteria, to judge the credibility of the findings? How will qualitative inquiry be received in the context in which the study will be conducted? Exhibit 2.4, adapted and expanded from Rog (2012, p. 28), depicts the interrelated arenas of context that come into play in determining the appropriateness of a particular inquiry approach.

Reflexivity: Perspective and Voice

γνῶθι σεαυτόν (“Know thyself” in Greek)

—Inscription in ancient Temple of Apollo at Delphi

Let me acknowledge immediately that the term *reflexivity* reeks of academic jargon. In everyday conversation, we don’t say, “I’m in a reflexive mood today. I’ve set aside time to engage in some serious reflexivity.” Such an assertion would likely evoke a profoundly unimpressed and skeptical “Whatever.” So why not just use the word *reflection*? Reflexivity encompasses reflection—indeed, mandates reflection—but it means to take the reflective process deeper and make it more systematic than is usually implied by the term *reflection*. It may sound pretentious and can elicit negative feedback for sounding academic and highfalutin, but the purpose is not pomposity. The term *reflexivity* is meant to direct us to a particular kind of reflection grounded in the in-depth, experiential, and interpersonal nature of qualitative inquiry.

In science generally, a reflexive relationship is bidirectionally interactive and interdependent. Cause and effect are circular, interconnected, and mutually influencing. I affect you, and you affect me. The interviewer affects the interviewee, and the interviewee affects the interviewer. Fieldworkers enter a place in which they

REFLEXIVITY

Reflexivity is self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher. Indeed reflexivity is critical to the conduct of fieldwork; it induces self-discovery and can lead to insights and new hypotheses about the research questions. A more reflexive and flexible approach to fieldwork allows the researcher to be more open to any challenges to their theoretical position that fieldwork almost inevitably raises.

—Kim V. L. England (1994)
Professional geographer

observe what is going on, they describe what they see and hear, they interact with people in the situation being studied, and these interactions have effects, both on those studied and on the observers. But how do we know what those effects are? How do we figure out how who we are affects what we see, how we see what we see, and how others respond to our being there, observing, asking questions, and taking notes?

The term *reflexivity* has entered the qualitative lexicon as a way of emphasizing the importance of deep introspection, political consciousness, cultural awareness, and ownership of one’s perspective. Reflexivity calls on us to think about how we think and inquire into our thinking patterns even as we apply thinking to making sense of the patterns we observe around us. Reflexivity involves “*interpretation of interpretation* and the launching of a critical self-exploration of one’s own interpretations . . . , a consideration of the perceptual, cognitive, theoretical, linguistic, (inter)textual, political and cultural circumstances that form the backdrop to—as well as impregnate—the interpretations” (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p. 9). Being reflexive involves self-questioning and self-understanding, for “all understanding is self-understanding” (Schwandt, 1997a, p. xvi). To be reflexive, then, is to undertake an ongoing examination of what I know and how I know it, “to have an ongoing conversation about experience while simultaneously living in the moment” (Hertz, 1997, p. viii). Reflexivity reminds the qualitative inquirer to be attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and economic origins of one’s own perspective and voice as well as the perspective and voices of those one interviews and those to whom one reports.

Reflexivity turns mindfulness inward. Earlier, I discussed mindfulness as a pathway to empathic neutrality. Here, reflexive mindfulness is the pathway to

EXHIBIT 2.4 Contextual Sensitivity and Assessment

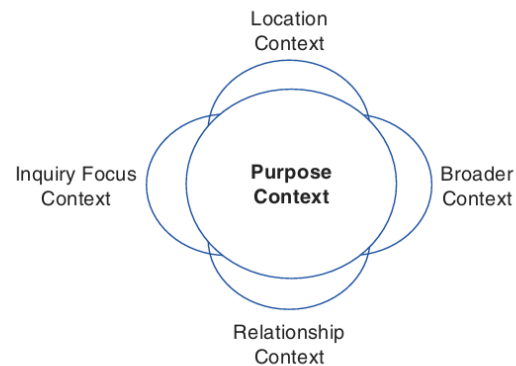
Premises

1. Context sensitivity and assessment affect choices about what methods are appropriate (Connor, Fitzpatrick, & Rog, 2012).
2. Attending to and understanding context sets the stage for studying context and takes it into account in interpreting findings.
3. How the inquirer is involved in a particular context will affect how the inquirer understands context. Researchers and evaluators “do not simply identify and respond to contextual factors, but by virtue of their actions are always constructing, relating to, engaging in, and taking part in some reconstruction of the context in which they operate” (Dahler-Larsen & Schwandt, 2012, p. 84).
4. Contexts are often complex dynamic systems. Static depictions of context as fixed will reduce the inquiry’s emergent design flexibility and misrepresent the meaning and effects of context when interpreting and presenting findings (Patton, 2012a).
5. Contextualism makes the first priority of an inquiry understanding perspectives, behaviors, relationships, processes, outcomes, and knowledge within the context or contexts studied.

Contextually Situating and Framing an Inquiry

- **Purpose context:** Why is the study being done? Who will judge its rigor and credibility? By what standards?
- **Inquiry focus context:** From what inquiry traditions, discipline, knowledge arena, interests, and issues are the inquiry questions derived? Within what larger context is the inquiry framed? To what extent are particular theoretical, philosophical, epistemological, or methodological contexts critical to understanding the inquiry?
- **Location context:** Where does the inquiry take place (e.g., physical location, organizational entity, virtual community; one site or multiple sites and levels), and how does location affect both inquiry methods and interpretation of findings?

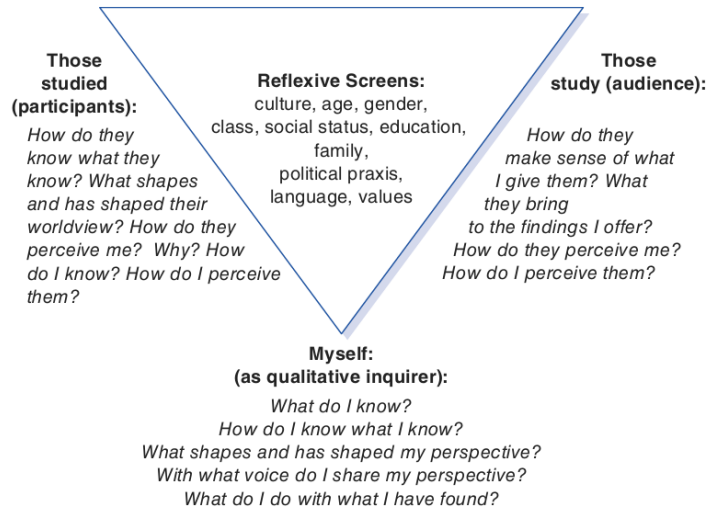
- **Broader context:** This refers to sensitivity to organizational, social, cultural, historical, political, and demographic dynamics and trends (Rog, 2012, pp. 28–30).
- **Relationship context:** What is the relationship of the inquirer (researcher or evaluator) to the people studied? To what extent, if at all, are those studied involved as participants in the inquiry? What role does the inquirer play, for example, when undertaking participant observation?
- **Other relevant contextual arenas:** The contextual arenas in the graphic below are meant to be suggestive, not definitive. For example, a study involving a team of several researchers or evaluators might add *ateam context*, or the funding of the inquiry may be such that a should be included. Part of the point of a contextual assessment is to identify and attend to those arenas of context that are important for a particular inquiry—and to be aware that the relative importance of contextual arenas may change over time as the inquirers’ engagement with and understanding of context unfolds and evolves and as the various contextual arenas are affected by broader contextual trends and dynamics.



self-awareness. To excel in qualitative inquiry requires keen and astute self-awareness. It turns out that people who excel in all kinds of activities share the quality of being self-aware and using that awareness to adapt to whatever presents itself in the course of taking action (Sweeney & Gosfield, 2013). Exhibit 2.5 depicts the mindfulness of reflexive triangulation.

Reflexivity Meets Voice

Reflexivity leads both to understanding one’s perspective and to owning that perspective. That ownership of perspective is where voice intersects reflexivity. The reflexive voice is the first-person active voice, “I.” Contrast that voice to the traditional third-person

EXHIBIT 2.5 Reflexive Questions: Triangulated Inquiry

passive voice of academia epitomized by this educational evaluation abstract:

This study will delineate the major factors that affect school achievement. Instruments were selected to measure achievement based on validity and reliability criteria. Decisions were made about administering the tests in conjunction with administrators taking into account time and resource constraints. A regression model was constructed to test relationships between various background variables and demonstrated achievement. School records were reviewed and coded to ascertain student's background characteristics. Data were obtained on 120 students from four classrooms. The extraction of significant predictor variables is the purpose of the final analysis. Interviews were conducted with teachers and principals to determine how test scores were used. The analysis concludes with the researcher's interpretations. The researcher wishes to thank those who cooperated in this study.

This journal article abstract represents academic writing as I was taught to do it in graduate school. This writing style still predominates in scholarly journals and books. No human being is visible in this writing. The passive voice reigns. Instruments were selected; decisions were made; a model was constructed; records were reviewed and coded; data were obtained;

predictor variables were extracted; and interviews were conducted. The warmth of thanks is extended by a role, the researcher: "The researcher wishes to thank those who cooperated." The third person, passive voice communicates a message: This work is about procedures not people. This academic style has historically been employed to project a sense of objectivity, control, and authority. The overall impression is mechanical, robot-like, distant, detached, systematic, and procedural. The research is the object of attention. Any real, live human being, subject to all the usual foibles of being human, is barely implied, generally disguised, hidden away, and kept in the background.

Contrast that academic voice with my explanation of how I analyzed a 10-day coming-of-age experience with my son in the Grand Canyon. Here's an excerpt in which I describe the analytical process.

I'm not sure when the notion first took hold of me that articulating alternative coming of age paradigms might help elucidate our Canyon experience. Before formally conceptualizing contrasting paradigm dimensions, I experienced them as conflicting feelings that emanated from my struggle to sort out what I wanted my son's initiation to be, while also grappling with defining my role in the process. I suppose the idea of alternative paradigms first emerged the second night as I paced the narrow beach where White Creek intersects

Shinumo and pondered the Great Unconformity [a geologic reference] as metaphor for the gap between tribal approaches to initiation and coming of age for contemporary youth. In the weeks and months after our Canyon experience, far from languishing in the throes of retox as I expected, the idea of contrasting paradigms stayed with me, as did the Canyon experience. I started listing themes and matching them with incidents and turning points along the way. The sequence of incidents became this book and the contrasting themes became the basis for this closing chapter, a way for me to figure out how what started out as an initiation become a humanist coming of age celebration. (Patton, 1999a, p. 332)

The traditional academic voice (third-person passive) may still be used because students haven't been offered and/or don't know that there's an alternative. One reviewer of an earlier draft of this section responded that the academic style

is employed by people who learned it or think they learned it and have not read the American Psychological Association style manual, which clearly says not to be mysterious. They may be thoughtlessly following bad models, not deliberately trying to portray objectivity, control, and authority.

The contrast between the traditional academic voice and the personal voice of qualitative analysis recalls the philosopher and theologian Martin Buber's influential distinction between "I-It" and "I-Thou" relationships. An "I-It" relationship regards other human beings from a distance, from a superior vantage point of authority, as objects or subjects, as things in the environment to be examined and placed in abstract cause-effect chains. An "I-Thou" perspective, in contrast, acknowledges the humanity of both self and others and implies relationship, mutuality, and genuine dialogue.

The perspective that the researcher brings to a qualitative inquiry is part of the context for the findings. You as a human being are the instrument of qualitative methods. You as a real, live person make observations, take field notes, ask interview questions, and interpret responses. Self-awareness, then, can be an asset in both fieldwork and analysis. Developing appropriate self-awareness can be a form of "sharpening the instrument" (Brown, 1996, p. 42). The methods section of a qualitative study reports on the researcher's training, preparation, fieldwork procedures, and analytical processes. This is both the strength and the weakness of qualitative methods, the strength in that a well-trained, experienced, and astute observer adds



"Not again with the reflexivity stuff. It was a great interview. They loved us."

value and credibility to the inquiry while an ill-prepared, inexperienced, and imperceptive observer casts doubt on what is reported. Judgments about the significance of findings are thus inevitably connected to the researcher's credibility, competence, thoroughness, and integrity. Those judgments, precisely because they are acknowledged as inevitably personal and perspective dependent to some extent, invite response and dialogue rather than just acceptance or rejection.

Writing in the first person, active voice communicates the inquirer's self-aware role in the inquiry: "I started listing themes and matching them with incidents and turning points along the way." Not the passive: Themes were listed and matched to incidents and turning points along the way. Judith Brown (1996) captured the importance of the first-person voice in the title of her book *The I in Science: Training to Utilize Subjectivity in Research*. By subjectivity, she means "the domain of experiential self-knowledge" (p. 1). Voice reveals and communicates that domain.

Voice Is More Than Grammar

The issue is not just first-person active versus third-person passive voice. A credible, authoritative, authentic, and trustworthy voice engages the reader through rich description, thoughtful sequencing, appropriate use of quotes, and contextual clarity, so that the reader joins the inquirer in the search for meaning. And there are choices of voice: the didactic voice of the teacher; the searching, logical voice of the sleuth; the narrator voice of the storyteller; the personal voice of the

autoethnographer; the doubting voice of the skeptic; the intimacy of the insider's voice; the detachment of the outsider's voice; the searching voice of uncertainty; and the excited voice of discovery, to offer but a few examples. Just as point of view and voice have become focal points of writing engaging fiction, so too must qualitative writers learn about, take into account, and communicate perspective and voice. Balancing critical and creative analyses, description and interpretation, or direct quotation and synopsis also involves issues of perspective, audience, purpose, and voice. No rules or formula can tell a qualitative analyst precisely what balance is right or which voice to use, only that finding both balance and voice is part of the work and challenge of qualitative inquiry. This is what Lewis (2001) has acknowledged as "the difficulty of trying to situate the I in narrative research" (p. 109).

In addition to finding voice, the critical and creative writing involved in qualitative analysis and synthesis challenges the inquirer to *own your voice and perspective*. Here, we owe much to classic feminist theory for highlighting and deepening our understanding of the intricate and implicate relationships between language, voice, and consciousness (e.g., England, 1994; Gilligan, 1982; Minnich, 2004). We are challenged by postmodern critiques of knowledge to be clear about and own our authorship of whatever we propound, be self-reflective, acknowledge biases and limitations,

and honor multiple perspectives (Mabry, 1997), while "accepting incredulity and doubt as modal postmodern responses to all attempts to explain ourselves to ourselves" (Schwandt, 1997b, p. 102). From struggles to locate and acknowledge the inevitably political and moral nature of evaluative judgments, we are challenged to connect voice and perspective to *praxis*—acting in the world with an appreciation for and recognition of how those actions inherently express social, political, and moral values (Schwandt, 1989, 2000a)—and to personalize evaluation (Kushner, 2000), by not only owning our own perspective but also taking seriously the responsibility to communicate authentically the perspectives of those we encounter during our inquiry. These represent some of the more prominent contextual forces that have elevated the importance of owning voice and perspective in qualitative analysis.

The practical side of owning your voice and perspective comes in reporting findings. Qualitative analysis doesn't have the equivalent of a statistical significance test. Determining substantive significance requires judgment, which makes it personal. It can take considerable self-awareness and confidence to report thus: I coded these 40 interviews; these are the themes I found; here is what I think they mean; and here is the process I undertook to arrive at those meanings. The latter statement calls for, even demands, a sense of one's own perspective, analytical process, and voice.

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Observing Oneself: Reflexivity and Creativity, and Review of Fieldwork Dimensions

Physician, heal thyself.

Observer, observe thyself.

—Halcolm

Observations often tell you more
about the observer than the observed.

—Chris Geiger
Journalist and cancer survivor

In Chapter 2, I identified voice and perspective, or *reflexivity*, as one of the central strategic themes of qualitative inquiry. The term *reflexivity* has entered the lexicon as a way of emphasizing the importance of self-awareness, political/cultural consciousness, and ownership of one's perspective. Reflexivity reminds the qualitative inquirer to observe herself or himself so as to be attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and ideological origins of one's own perspective and voice as well as, and often in contrast to, the perspectives and voices of those one observes and talks to during fieldwork. Reflexivity calls for self-reflection, indeed, critical self-reflection and self-knowledge, and a willingness to consider *how* who one is affects what one is able to observe, hear, and understand in the field and as an observer and analyst. The observer, therefore, during fieldwork, must observe self as well as others, and interactions of self with others.

Exhibit 2.5 (p. 72) poses three interconnected, triangulated reflexive questions from three perspectives:

1. **Myself, as inquirer:** How do I know what I know? What shapes and has shaped my perspective?
2. **People in the setting being studied:** How do they know what they know? What shapes and has shaped their worldview? How do they perceive me? Why? How do I know? How do I perceive them?
3. **Audiences for the study:** How do they make sense of what I give them? What perspectives do they bring to the findings I offer? How do they perceive me? How do I perceive them?

These are questions to address explicitly in the methods section of a qualitative report. Reflecting on these

questions informs the credibility of the conclusions you report from fieldwork.

REFLEXIVE/REFLECTIVE INQUIRY

SIDEBAR

Reflexivity involves “paying much attention to how one thinks about thinking . . . , a ‘reflexivity’ that constantly assesses the relationship between ‘knowledge’ and ‘the ways of doing knowledge.’”

Reflective [reflexive] research, as we define it, has two basic characteristics: careful interpretation and reflection. The first implies that all references—trivial and nontrivial—to empirical data are the *results of interpretation*. . . . Interpretation comes to the forefront of the research work. This calls for the utmost awareness of the theoretical assumptions, the importance of language and pre-understanding, all of which constitute major determinants of the interpretation. The second element, reflection, turns attention ‘inwards’ towards the person of the researcher, the relevant research community, society as a whole, intellectual and cultural traditions, and the central importance, as well as the problematic nature, of language and narrative (the form of presentation) in the research context. . . . Reflection can, in the context of empirical research, be defined as the *interpretation of interpretation* and the launching of a critical self-exploration of one's own interpretations of empirical material (including its construction).

—Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009, pp. 8–9)
Reflexive Methodology

Once again, for continuity, I would cite Parameswaran (2001), who has written a wonderfully self-reflective account of her experience returning to her native India to do fieldwork as a feminist scholar after being educated in the United States.

Because my parents were fairly liberal compared to many of my friends' parents, I grew up with a little more awareness than many middle- and upper-class Indians of the differences between my life and that of

the vast majority of Indians. Although I questioned some restrictions that were specific to women of my class, I did not have the language to engage in a systematic feminist critique of patriarchy or nationalism. Feminism for me had been unfortunately constructed as an illness that struck highly Westernized intellectual Indian women who were out of touch with reality. . . . It was my dislocation from India to the relatively radicalized context of United States that prompted my political development as a feminist and a woman of color. (p. 76)

Given this background and the controversial focus of her fieldwork (reading of Western romance novels by young Indian women), she identified reflective questions to guide her reflexive inquiry during and after fieldwork:

How do kinship roles assigned to native scholars shape social interactions in the field? How can commitments to sisterhood make it difficult for feminist ethnographers to achieve critical distance and discuss female informants' prejudiced views? (p. 76)

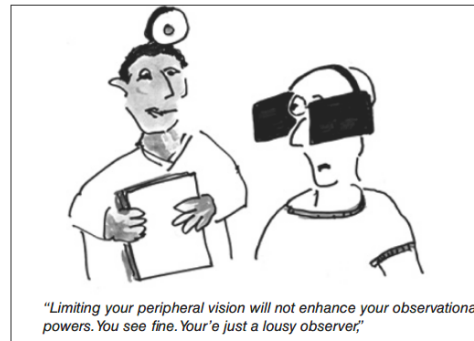
Her personal inquiry into these questions, reflecting on her own fieldwork experiences (Parameswaran, 2001), is a model of reflexivity.

Many years ago, Indian philosopher J. Krishnamurti (1964) commented on the challenges of self-knowledge. Although his reflections were directed to the importance of lifelong learning rather than to being reflexive in fieldwork, his ruminations offer a larger context for thinking about how to observe oneself, a context beyond concern about methodological authenticity, though his advice applies to that as well.

Self-knowledge comes when you observe yourself in your relationship with your fellow-students and your teachers, with all the people around you; it comes when you observe the manner of another, his gestures, the way he wears his clothes, the way he talks, his contempt or flattery *and your response* [italics added]; it comes when you watch everything in you and about you and see yourself as you see your face in the mirror. . . . Now, if you can look into the mirror of relationship exactly as you look into the ordinary mirror, then there is no end to self-knowledge. It is like entering a fathomless ocean which has no shore . . . ; if you can just observe what you are and move with it, then you will find that it is possible to go infinitely far. Then there is no end to the journey, and that is the mystery, the beauty of it. (pp. 50–51).

I realize that Krishnamurti's phrase "There is no end to the journey" may strike terror in the hearts of graduate students reading this in preparation for dissertation fieldwork or evaluators facing a report deadline. But remember, he's talking about lifelong learning, of which the dissertation or a specific evaluation report is but one phase. Just as most dissertations and evaluations are reasonably expected to contribute incremental knowledge rather than make major breakthroughs, so too the self-knowledge of reflexive fieldwork is but one phase in a lifelong journey toward self-knowledge—but it's an important phase and a commitment of growing significance as reflexivity has emerged as a central theme in qualitative inquiry.

The point here, which we shall take up in greater depth in the chapters on analysis and credibility, is that the observer must ultimately deal with issues of authenticity, reactivity, and how the observational process may have affected what was observed as well as *how the background and predispositions of the observer may have constrained what was observed and understood*. Each of these areas of methodological inquiry depends on some degree of critical reflexivity.



Fieldwork Menu Summary

This lengthy review of options for what and how to observe during fieldwork constitutes a *sensitizing framework*. It is *not* a prescriptive guide—you must do this and all of this! Nor is it a formal checklist of the kind that airline pilots go through before take-off. Rather, it is a menu of possibilities. You have to decide which items to incorporate into your own inquiry, adapt them to your own research or evaluation purpose and questions, and fill in the details within your own context. Exhibit 6.8 provides a summary graphic.