Writing and publishing a reflective paper: Three case studies

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Abstract

Reflection refers to having an interactive dialogue with oneself. It is a process in which we ask ourselves questions about the research process, our decisions, conduct and biases. We consider what we can learn from the challenges or mistakes and how we can adapt our approach or improve our skills to ensure our research is of the highest possible quality.

Writing reflective articles requires a number of skills and so does trying to get them published. This paper starts with an introduction of reflection as a concept oractivity, followed by three case studies that highlight some of the potential barriers related to getting such reflections published in a scientific journal.

The purpose of publishing a reflective article is toshare the critical processes that underpinned the research process so that readers can underst and how the findings were produced, can learn from other researchers' experiences and mistakes - potentially avoiding similar mistakes. We suggest that reflective articles contribute to a research culture of transparency and growth.

Strategies that may help authors of reflective papers to get them published are discussed. We conclude by posing the notion that reviewers and editors may need to be challenged to acknowledge the contribution of critical reflective articles to the quality and trustworthiness of research findings.

Keywords: Publishing, academic writing, critical reflection; researcher development

Introduction

Academic writing has grown dramatically over the past half century. A large proportion of publishing is still in the traditional format of scientific papers based on primary research. The latter is especially true in the field of health and the natural sciences, with more reflective pieces being published in journals associated with the humanities and social sciences.

Reflection, sometimes also referred to 'critical reflection', is the process of considering your own perspectives, pre-conceived ideas and/or presuppositions from the point of others and critically assessing your own assumptions (Alvesson &Sköldberg, 2000). Reflection is an important part of interpretation in academic research, especially in well-conducted qualitative research (e.g. Mortari, 2015; Forrest Keenan & van Teijlingen, 2004). However, a paper reporting high-quality qualitative research (for example based on focus group discussion or in-depth interviews) is still predominantly a primary-research-based paper with a moderate reflective section. Attia and Edge (2017, p.33) argue that we need to move away from regarding "research methods as objectified procedures to be learnt by researchers" and move "towards the development of researchers who craft procedures integral to the environments in which they operate – environments of which they are also a functioning constituent." In short, reflexivity becomes second nature to the researchers in their research environment.

Here we want to highlight the importance of papers fully focused on reflection. Reflection means asking question of your own research or yourself as a researcher, including: "Why am I doing this research?; or "What are my expectations of the participants, the problem, the data, the outcomes or even the conclusions?; What am I trying to achieve?; and "What are potential consequences of disseminating my research? Reflection may, of course also cover scholarly activities other than research, such as editing an academic journal (Ruckdeschel& Shaw, 2013). Walling et al. (2013) conducted a small-scale study asking medical journal editors what they considered the essential element of a reflective paper for their journals. Theseeditors identified "narration of a specific professional experience that resonated with readers and conveyed deeper meaning" (Walling et al. 2013, p.7). Using creative methods of reflection can unlock deeper meaning and new ways of knowing by highlighting challenges and hitherto unacknowledged assumptions (Buckley 2017).

There are different models of reflection, such as Gibbs (1988), Schön

(1983), Kolb (1984) and Johns (2000). These models are particularly relevant to midwifery and nursing education. They focus on using reflection in clinical practice as well as discuss how the practitioners can use these models to increase self-awareness, self-identity and personal growth. Gibbs (1988) developed a reflective cycle to encourage learners to think systematically about different phases of an activity or experience. The cyclical pattern incorporated six different elements: description; feelings; evaluation; analysis; conclusion; and action plan. Schön (1983) was interested in how people in different professions solved work problems and differentiated between reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. His model focuses on the relationship between academic knowledge and the acquisition of clinical competence in practice. Kolb (1984) developed Experiential Learning Cycle by proposing that a person learns through discovery and experience. His model emphasises the important role that experience plays in the learning process and provides a holistic model of the learning process that is called 'experimental learning'. This is a four-stage model comprising of components: concrete experience; reflective observation; abstract conceptualisation; and active experimentation. Johns (2000) model for structured reflection encourages students to look at a particular event, its consequences and possible development. This cyclical model consists of the following elements: description; reflection; influencing factors; evaluation; and learning (Wain, 2017).

This short methodological paper introduces three case-studies to illustrate common issues experienced by academics when trying to get reflective articles published.It is worth bearing in mind that researchers are not just technicians with specific research skills but, as Mortari (2015,p. 1) highlighted, they should be able to reflect "on the mental experience which constructs the meaning about practice." This paper concludes with a number of lessons learnt from our collective experience of writing and publishing reflective articles. The following three sections summarise our case studies, two focusing on midwifery and maternity care, the first one around a study conducted in Nepal and the second conducted in the South of England. The paper used as our third example focuses on the opposite end of the life cycle, namely on palliative care.

Midwifery and mental health capacity building in Nepal

Two of the authors (JI+EvT) have been UK (United Kingdom) volunteers in a midwifery and mental-health capacity

building project in Nepal (Mahato *et al.* 2018; Simkhada et al. 2016). One of us submitted a reflective paper on the involvement of three UK volunteers and their Nepali translator (Ireland et al.,2021). This paper was first submitted to a practice development journal which rejected it because the model followed was not strictly practice development grounded. A UK-based midwifery journal rejected it due to lack of rigorous methodology. The rewritten version submitted to the *Journal of the Midwifery Association of Nepal* combined elements of planning of the capacity-building activities with reflections which illustrated the experiences of the team and the collaboration of the 'learners'. The 'learners' were equals, fellow health care professionals, auxiliary midwives, based in Nepal. This improved manuscript was accepted and published by the *Journal of the Midwifery Association of Nepal* (Ireland et al., 2021).

UK midwifery and the experience with Appreciative Inquiry

Three of the authors (RA, PM + EvT) submitted a paper reflecting on the use of AI (Appreciative Inquiry) in a UK maternity unit, to an international midwifery journal. The intention was to share the lessons that had been learnt from using this less well-known research method in the health system. We hoped to help other researchers decide if AI was appropriate for their research as well as providing practical tips for using it successfully.In the 'instructions to authors' there was no article type that encompassed methodology, critical reflection, or lessons learnt. Therefore, before the article was written, the first author contacted the journal to see if a reflection on the process of conducting the research would be a type of manuscript that they would consider publishing. The journal appeared interested and encouraged us to submit the manuscript to them.Two reviewers were assigned by the editor to review our manuscript.

The feedback from the two reviewers suggested they had not read our paper as a reflective piece of work. Reviewer 1 came back with a very short 40-word review, calling the topic interesting, but with a major criticism that the paper "lacks an aim/ purpose which makes it defocused …it is difficult to assess the quality of the research performed". In other words, the manuscript was assessed as research findings paper not a proper reflection on the research process. Reviewer 2 had much more to say, 630 words to be precise, but although detailed and fairly useful, reviewer 2 did not refer to the reflective nature of the paper either. The challenge was that, because of the word limits it was impossible to adequately

report the findings as well as sharing insights and experiences of conducting the study in the same paper. As a compromise, the study team decided to add more detail to the methodology, to structure it more like a traditional research paper and present the reflections as the findings hoping that this would be acceptable to the reviewers. Of course, we still had to respond to the reviewer's comments.

Reflecting on end-of-life care

One of the authors of this paper (JI) wrote a reflective piece on spirituality in a palliative care experience (Ireland, 2010). JI wrote a paper which told the story of a woman's last days. It starts out rather regretful but concludes with a realisation/ reflection that the woman's wishes were respected (and even if the author had initially wanted to provide different things). The manuscript was rejected by the health journal to which it was submitted. Perhaps because there is a bias towards 'positive' papers describing end-of-life care, where everyone did everything right and the message itself is overwhelmingly positive. When submitted to the second journal, *British Journal of Nursing* it was initially rejected by the editor. JI emailed the editor and appealed stressing the view that negative sounding papers deserve to be shared in a spirit of encouragement to nurses who, inevitably are not always perfectly aligned with patients and can learn from that. The editor conceded and the paper was reviewed and subsequently accepted (Ireland,2010)

Discussion

If you have (a) written up a reflection of challenges in your academic work, focused on education, scholarly activity, or research, and (b) gained true insights which are worth sharing, consider getting it published. Beware, however, getting a reflective manuscript published is not an easy option. Therefore, your first consideration should be the question: "Do I want to try to get this in a scientific journal or use another medium?" Perhaps make the reflective piece part of a research textbook or an online research blog.

If the journal is not keen, there are different ways to communicate with journal editors who are likely to reject more reflective pieces. First, put the reflective piece in an editorial, commentary or an opinion paper. Secondly, 'hide' the reflections in a pseudo findings paper, make the editor, reviewers and perhaps even the reader think that they are reading a findings paper which is dominated by a very insightful reflective element. Thirdly, submit the reflective manuscript to a journal with a section dedicated to critical reflections such as found in *The*

International Practice Journal (https://www.fons.org/library/journal-ipdj-home).

Although it is possible to employ the first two tricks, it suggests that many professional journals do not value reflective practice either for increasing the integrity of the specific study or for the growth of the research community. We would suggest that identifying and learning from mistakes, grappling with how to do things better next time, engaging with the literature, adapting and honing skills in collaboration with colleagues and the research team can be as valuable as reporting the formal study findings. For reflections to be reduced to the 'study limitations' section robs the research community of valuable learning. Furthermore, it perpetuates the impression that conducting research is easy, seamless, intuitive where actually it is often messy, complicated, full of challenges and human failure. At its best research is an on-going process of trying, being honest about things that did not go to plan, reflecting, developing different strategies for next time and growing in our skills with the aim of producing research that not only satisfies the constraints of journals and peer reviewers but honours our participants and the research process too.

It is perhaps worth asking the obvious question namely: "To whom is my reflective article is most useful?"The answer could be to readers who think that the only way of publishing is with primary papers, or to those who want to learn more about conducting qualitative research. Reading experiences of researchers as reflective papers is often helpful as novice researchers will learn about what mistakes not to repeat.

Although, reflective papers are strongly dependent on context and personal values, experience and emotional reaction, assessment of these papers can be deeply subjective. It is therefore implied that imposing strict evaluation criteria or requirements for authors could impair the quality of reflective papers (Walling et al., 2013).

Conclusion or lessons learnt

Reflective practice is part of a wider methodological approach that helps academics critically review their own and their participants' views, perceptions, biases and ways of knowing. We argue here that some of the more insightful reflections are worth publishing, but, from our experiences, this is unlikely to be an easy process

In academic publishing peer review by fellow academics is seen as the cornerstone of, and guarantee, to quality. We agree with this principle, but we also like to stress the

importance of valuing the internal critic of the researcher. Peer review is after all limited to experts making an assessment on what the authors have written (the impressive story we tell) long after the event. The internal critic, however, is the voice that needs nurturing and is we would argue what makes the real difference to quality. So, another way forward is to challenge the ideas of journal editors, editorial boards and reviewers and advocate for a change inthe status quo.

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