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Making space for relational reflexivity in longitudinal qualitative research

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In this issue, Balmer et al consider how time is conceptualised in longitudinal research, offering the reader ‘pearls’ for conducting longitudinal qualitative research including: the benefits of repeated data collection; potential longitudinal data analysis approaches; mutual reflexivity as part of the process; using theory to highlight time; and the benefits of long term engagement in the research process.¹ In this commentary I will consider closely how reflexivity in longitudinal research, as highlighted by Balmer et al., offers potential for change through prolonged engagement.

It is traditional in qualitative research to consider reflexivity in terms of the researcher experience and how this process can add nuance to understanding of the topic of focus.² Indeed, Balmer et al. justifiably discuss how researcher reflexivity should also take into account how time affects (and potentially changes) their thought processes and understandings.¹ However, less emphasis has been placed on participant reflexivity and how this might contribute to the research process.² There is now a growing argument that participant reflexivity adds further layers to analysis and understanding of the phenomenon being researched.² Indeed, Enosh and Ben-Ari argue that reflexivity is significant to the production of new knowledge from three perspectives: the researcher; the participants; and the research encounter.³

Whilst from the researcher perspective, knowledge of a phenomenon is often *indirect* and elicited through interaction with participants and their theoretical knowledge, participants’ access to the phenomenon is *direct* and participant reflexivity can add depth to understanding of their experiences.^{2,3} From a participant perspective, engaging in research provides an opportunity to return to experiences and explore their own narratives and learning during and after such happenings through ‘*constant movement in and out of one’s experience which... creates a liminal space vis a vis the participant’s perception of such experiences*’.^{2,3 [p580].4} The act of exploring the experience contemplatively can become a

source of new knowledge by causing one to rethink perspectives not previously accessible to either the researcher or participant.³ This *relationally reflexive practice* draws on postmodernist and social constructionist traditions that problematise single explanations of experiences and phenomena by arguing for questioning of single truths and engagement in reflexive dialogues with the self and others.^{5,6}

Central to relational reflexivity in research is the *research encounter* (i.e., the points in the research process at which researcher and participants interact). For example, the deliberative questions that encourage in depth mutual consideration of experiences during an interview.^{3,5} During research encounters relational reflexivity becomes a process of co-construction and co-creation emanating from the contemplative processes of both researcher and participant.^{3,5} Research encounters thus serve as spaces “*in which direct experience is transformed into constructed new knowledge*”.^{3, p583, 6} Potential for multiple ‘types’ of dialogue are possible including, for example: challenging the ‘taken for granted’ aspects of everyday life; helping participants make sense of emotions; and encouraging learning from experience.² This relationally reflexive dialogue becomes ever more pertinent when we consider the multiple research encounters and multiple reflexive spaces offered through time by longitudinal research methods.^{1, 2}

As Balmer et al. point out, a methodological example of longitudinal qualitative research through time is offered by longitudinal audio-diary studies performed to explore doctors’ transitions.^{1, 4} Here, participants were first interviewed to sensitise them to the topic of study before submitting audio-diaries over a time, and then undertaking a second interview in which the diaries were discussed.^{4, 6} Research suggests that in addition to diaries being used as a means to record events and experiences as they unfold over time, the process of recording and discussing these incidences in consequential diaries and interviews serves to help participants make sense of their related thoughts, emotions, changes in ways of thinking

and learning.⁷ Using this longitudinal research method, the participants identified and selected what to share with researchers, facilitating a relationally reflexive dialogue.^{4,7} Such dialogue occurred on participants' terms but change and learning was discussed and explored through deliberative questioning by the researcher.^{4,7} Balmer et al. suggest that such research encounters provide 'safe spaces' for reflection and building trust. I suggest it is more than that. These research encounters, in fact, became *spaces for relational reflexivity* in which both researcher and participant can consider and reconsider their own understandings of experiences and build more nuanced insights. For instance, the following [previously unpublished] quote from a participant in a longitudinal audio-diary study demonstrates the possibilities inherent in relational reflexivity:

I've actually felt that [undertaking audio-diaries] has allowed me a bit of reflection when I have been doing them and I have been talking about... something that has gone on and I have been thinking "Oh, I don't realise that I felt that way about it," or "Oh, I'm a bit more worried about than I thought," or—and that's been quite supportive actually

To conclude, as we move forward and consider the benefits of undertaking longitudinal qualitative research in medical education, we also need to reconsider what assumptions we make as researchers about reflexivity as part of these research approaches. Reflexivity is not the sole occupancy of research team members contributing to the credibility of the research. In longitudinal qualitative research, space for relational reflexivity should be considered for its significant contribution to the production of new insights that will occur between *both* researchers and participants during multiple research encounters over time.

5 key quotes:

1. "There is now a growing argument that participant reflexivity adds further layers to analysis and understanding of the phenomenon being researched."
2. "reflexivity is significant to the production of new knowledge from three perspectives: the researcher; the participants; and the research encounter"
3. "The act of exploring the experience contemplatively can become a source of new knowledge by causing one to rethink perspectives not previously accessible to either the researcher or participant."
4. "During research encounters relational reflexivity becomes a process of co-construction and co-creation"
5. "This relationally reflexive dialogue becomes ever more pertinent when we consider the multiple research encounters and multiple reflexive spaces offered through time by longitudinal research methods."

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