

# Developing a Reflexive Approach in Qualitative Research and Grant Writing

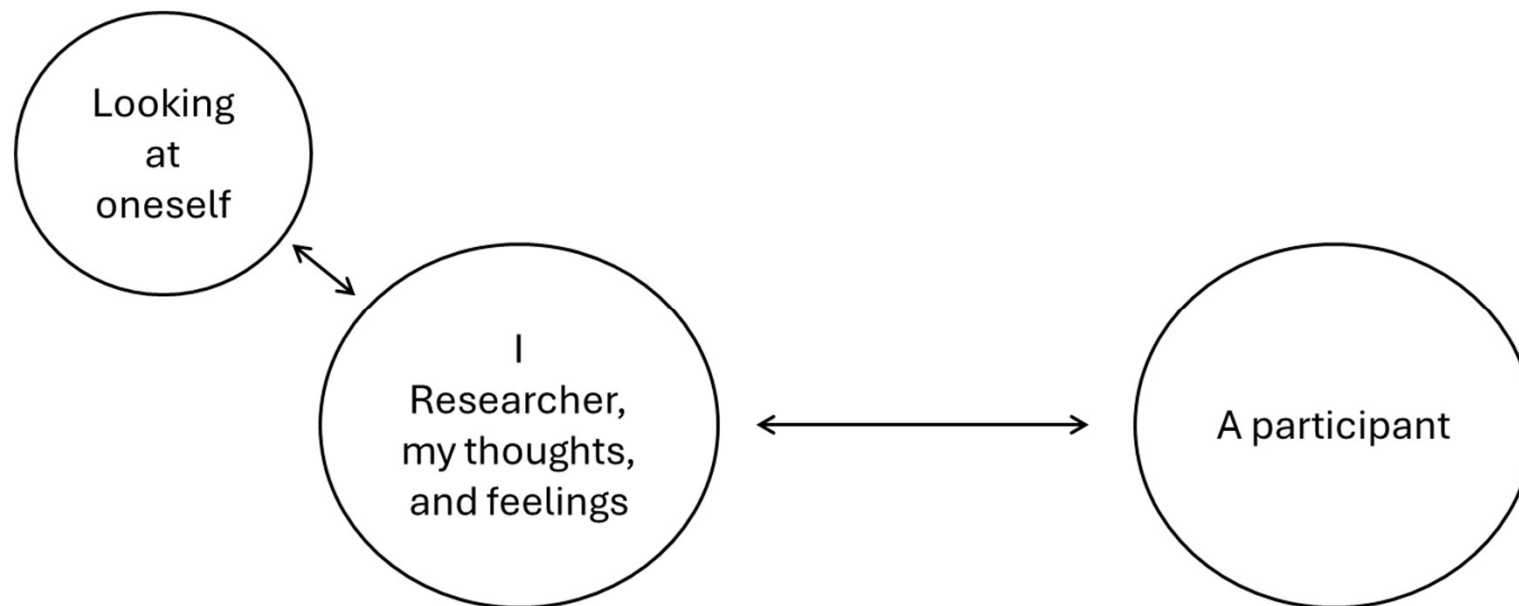


Caroline da Cunha Lewin & Sharli Paphitis



# What is reflexivity?

- To employ introspection and self-analysis to elucidate one's positionality, subjectivity, ideology and experiences
- To examine the influence of these intersecting identities and perspectives on the interpretation of qualitative data
- Should take place throughout a research project (there is not an end goal nor is it possible)
- Whilst not an exhaustive list, it may be in relation to:
  - How data analysis is carried out
  - One's underlying feelings and thoughts throughout the research process
  - The reasons for your research



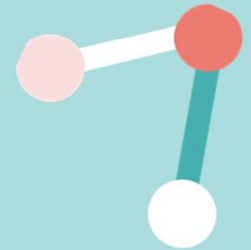
# What is reflexivity?

- Some would argue that *strong* reflexivity enables *strong* objectivity (Gani & Khan, 2024)
- As such, *quantitative priorities* are not applied
  - **Bias** (unconscious and conscious) cannot necessarily be controlled for
  - **Consensus** to be explored ('discrepancies' across findings)
- As such, *quantitative priorities* are not applied to this process

## Example of reflexivity (with peers) in CdCL's work

- Engage with peers with lived experience of self-harm
- Initially, proposed service-user derived definition of self-harm to replace current constructions (focus on physicality does not align with LE)
- LE peer asserted that this would risk exclusion by being too specific
- Altered research objective, changed research direction
- Reflected on what personal biases CdCL brings to research (clinical researcher/focus on certain things/etc)

“Being reflexive makes us more accountable, keeps us engaged and makes our work more reliable. Being reflexive reduces the chance that we will leave damage in our wake. Exercising genuine reflexivity, nevertheless, should not be easy. It should not be comfortable” (Enloe, 2016 as cited in Gani & Khan, 2024)



# Why is reflexivity important?

When done effectively, productively, honestly and with accountability and humility, reflexivity can allow the researcher to:

- Better recognise power and intersectional inequalities.
- Reflect on how our identities and experiences contribute to our research and the decisions we make.
- Be more caring, ethical and responsible in engaging with participants and communities.

## Why is reflexivity important?

Helps knowledge generation and provides a deeper knowledge of your research area

Supports rigour and transparency

# Why is reflexivity important?

6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Can't Tell
<p><i>CONSIDER:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><i>If the researcher critically examined their own role, potential bias and influence during (a) formulation of the research questions (b) data collection, including sample recruitment and choice of location</i></li><li><i>How the researcher responded to events during the study and whether they considered the implications of any changes in the research design</i></li></ul>	

Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Checklist for Qualitative Research (2024)

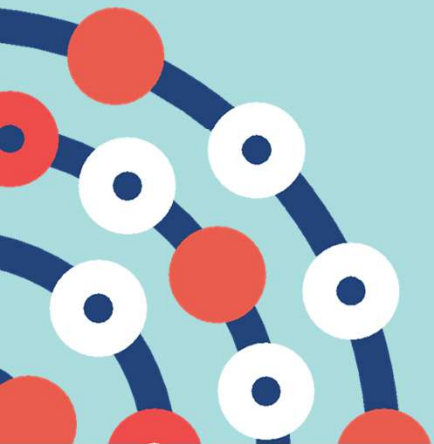
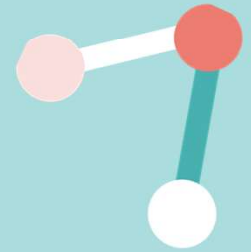
# Why is reflexivity important?

## Methods

S5	Qualitative approach and research paradigm	Qualitative approach (e.g., ethnography, grounded theory, case study, phenomenology, narrative research) and guiding theory if appropriate; identifying the research paradigm (e.g., postpositivist, constructivist/interpretivist) is also recommended; rationale <sup>b</sup>
S6	Researcher characteristics and reflexivity	Researchers' characteristics that may influence the research, including personal attributes, qualifications/experience, relationship with participants, assumptions, and/or presuppositions; potential or actual interaction between researchers' characteristics and the research questions, approach, methods, results, and/or transferability

O'Brien (2014). Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research: A Synthesis of Recommendations

# How can reflexivity be applied?



# How can reflexivity be applied?

- What should be included in reflexivity?
  - Identity/identities - but what you are comfortable with disclosing!
  - Professional experience, leanings and positionality
  - Ideology – how you are interpreting and analysing the data? (to a particular epistemological approach? And why?)
  - Have you got experience investigating the area under investigation? (either personal or professional?) – again comfort about disclosing!

# Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA)

- RTA follows standardised six-phase process aligned with TA
  - 1) data familiarisation
  - 2) systematic data coding
  - 3) generating initial themes
  - 4) developing and reviewing themes
  - 5) refining and naming themes
- Such steps do not need to be followed rigidly
- It is a process of continual reflection and revisiting each step to explore and revise arising interpretations
- It is not a text box to tick off, but a process of knowledge generation

## Activity

- “You got people that self-harm to get attention. That sounds awful but I’ve seen some of them”

(Male support worker with a previous history of self-harm and suicidal attempts)

- “I don’t know what people think we’re doing. Ok, we might be attention seeking, I don’t know, maybe as well there’s something else. But if that’s what people are doing and there’s nothing for attention, no support, they’re still gonna hurt themselves more and end up in hospital. And it’s only gonna cost the NHS more in the end. So why can’t they just listen to them at the time and say what is it?”

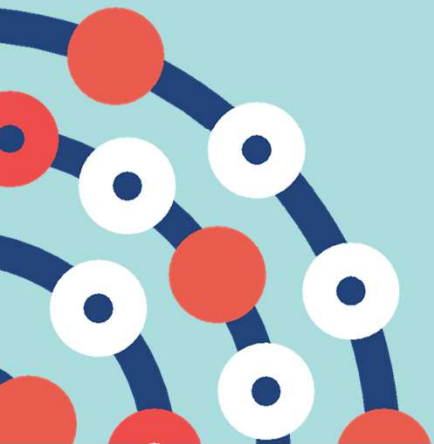
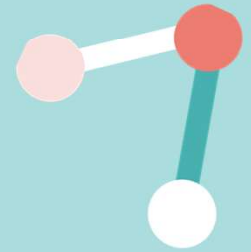
(Female older adult with history of on/off engagement with self-harm)

- Troya et al (2019)



- What feelings come up when you read the quote(s)?
  - What words jump out?
- What do these words/phrases mean to you?
  - Where do you think your feelings come from?/and why do you feel like this?

# Reflexivity in Grant Applications?



# Why Reflexivity in Grant Applications?

- Grant applications are often the first site of shaping relationships, values, and voice in a research project.
- Grant applications set the trajectory of the research.
- They define:
  - What problems we tackle
  - Who we involve
  - How we do the work
  - What “impact” looks like

# Critical Reflexivity

Keep asking:  
Why this?  
Why now?  
Why me/us?

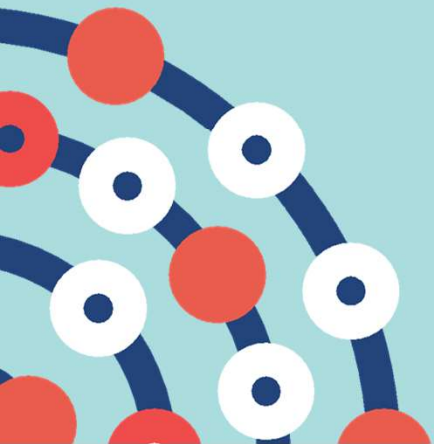
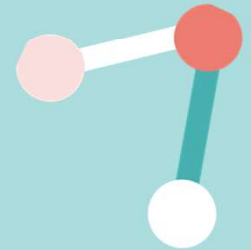
## Use reflective questions throughout the writing process

What values are driving this choice?

Whose voice is missing?

How might we be reproducing harm or hierarchy?

# Reflexivity Isn't a Section – It's a Thread



# Where Reflexivity Can Show in Grant Applications

- Project Rationale / Background: Who is framing the problem, and why? Whose urgency is this? Reflect on who was involved in shaping the project
- Methodology/design: How do your assumptions shape your approach? What are you prioritising and why?
- Stakeholder Engagement / PPI / Co-production: Are you reflexive about power?
- Impact Plans: Who decides what counts as impact?
- Team Composition: What your positionalities bring; where are the gaps? Be honest about your position and limitations...
- EDI Statements: These often require positionality, but shouldn't be siloed

# Activity Case Study: Perinatal Mental Health Access Study

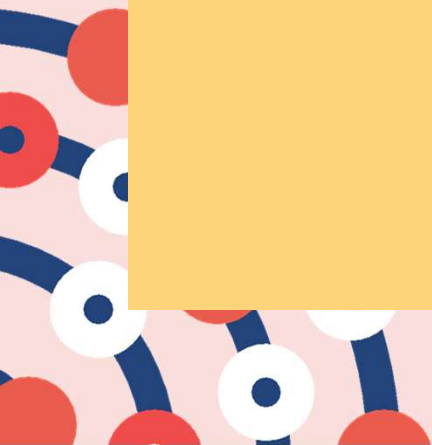


- Your team is designing a study to understand how new mothers access mental health support services in the first year postpartum.
- The study will use surveys and follow-up interviews. Recruitment is planned via GP practices, NHS maternity clinics, and email lists of recent patients.
- Your team includes clinicians, a social scientist, and one lived experience advisor who has accessed NHS perinatal mental health care.

What are the hidden assumptions built into this recruitment plan?

What are the hidden assumptions built into this recruitment plan?

- That women trust NHS services
- That they have stable housing or phone/internet access
- That they feel confident or safe disclosing mental health concerns



## Activity Case Study: Recruitment Reach

- Your team is designing a study to understand how new mothers access mental health support services in the first year postpartum.
- The study will use surveys and follow-up interviews. Recruitment is planned via GP practices, NHS maternity clinics, and email lists of recent patients.
- Your team includes clinicians, a social scientist, and one lived experience advisor who has accessed NHS perinatal mental health care.



Who is likely to be included with this approach?

Who might be unintentionally excluded?

### Who is likely to be included with this approach?

- Mothers already engaged with NHS services
- Women who speak English confidently
- Those with regular access to digital tools

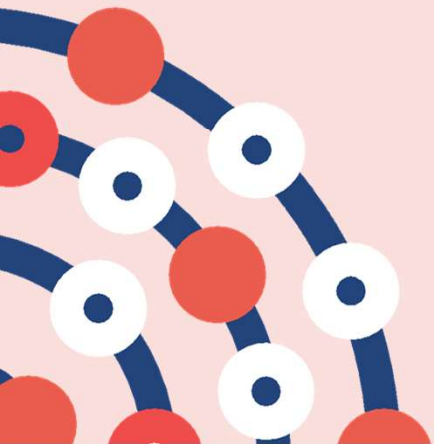
### Who might be unintentionally excluded?

- Women not registered with a GP
- Refugee or undocumented women
- Mothers with traumatic birth experiences who distrust services
- Women facing domestic abuse
- Those in rural areas with poor access or transport

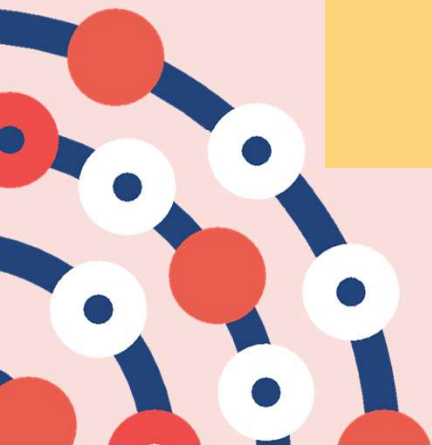




**What could a more reflexive and inclusive  
recruitment strategy look like?**



- Partner with community doulas or peer support groups
- Use WhatsApp audio messages in multiple languages
- Attend baby groups in non-clinical settings (libraries, religious sites, food banks)
- Work with migrant or refugee organisations to co-design approaches
- Offer childcare and compensation for participants



## How might these insights translate into reflexive language in a grant application?



- In the Methodology Section:

“We initially planned to recruit via NHS maternity services, but through conversations with community doulas and lived experience partners, we recognised this would miss key populations—particularly racialised, migrant, and undocumented mothers who often avoid NHS contact. We are therefore expanding recruitment through grassroots partners and adapting our materials with their input.”

## How might these insights translate into reflexive language in a grant application?



- In the Public Involvement Section:

“Our lived experience advisor highlighted that many mothers with traumatic birth experiences feel distrustful of NHS systems. Based on her insight, we are designing recruitment and interview processes with trauma-informed principles and co-developing materials with peer supporters from non-clinical networks.”

## How might these insights translate into reflexive language in a grant application?

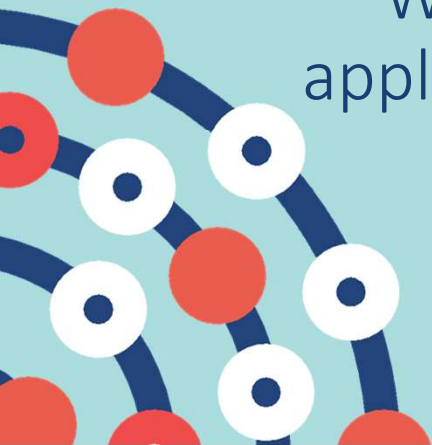
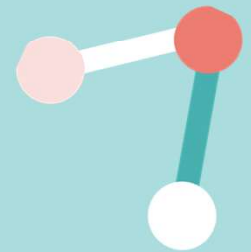


- In the EDI or Team Section:

“Our team does not include members with lived experience of migration or refugee systems. To address this, we are partnering with a migrant support organisation ([Name]) to ensure our recruitment strategies and materials reflect the barriers their service users face.”

One of the easiest ways to embed reflexivity in grant writing is to make your thinking visible—to explain not just what you're doing, but why you're doing it and what shaped your decisions.

We often see very generic language in grant applications. Let's practice rewriting some of that together to show reflexivity.

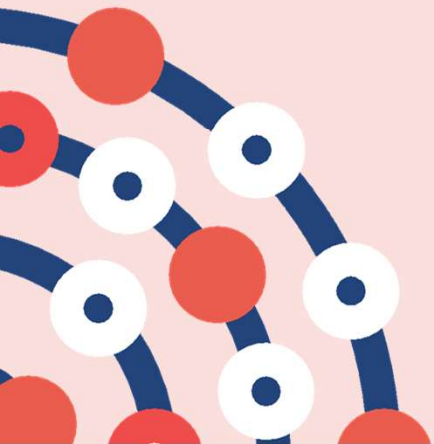


## Reflexivity Exercise: Reflexive Rewriting – Show the Thinking



“The project team has expertise in qualitative and quantitative methods and experience working with vulnerable populations.”

- What’s missing from this statement?
- What assumptions are being made?
- How could we show more reflexivity
- What does "experience working with..." actually mean?
- What does the team’s positionality bring—or lack?



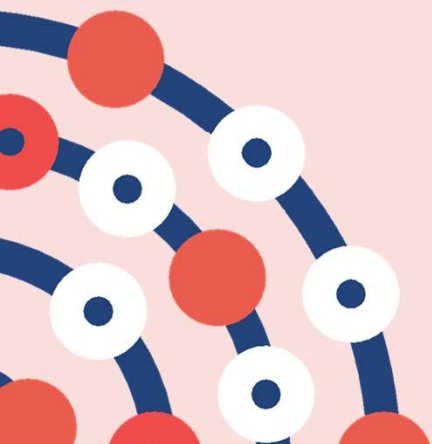
“The project team has expertise in qualitative and quantitative methods and experience working with vulnerable populations.”

“Our team includes academic and community researchers with lived and professional experience related to mental health and housing insecurity. While several team members have previously conducted research in marginalised communities, we are conscious that ‘researching’ does not equate to understanding. We are partnering with peer-led organisations to shape the research questions and ensure relevance and accountability.”

“Although our team includes diverse disciplinary backgrounds, we recognised a lack of cultural familiarity with our target communities. We are therefore bringing in two co-investigators with language and community ties to lead recruitment and engagement.”

“We are aware that our positionality as researchers affiliated with public institutions may impact participant trust. We are partnering with independent facilitators from Organisation X for parts of data collection to address this.”

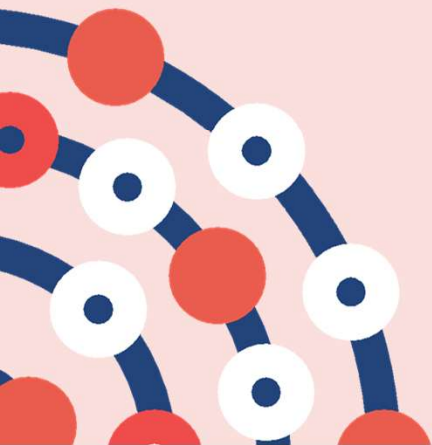
“We will aim to include participants from diverse backgrounds.”



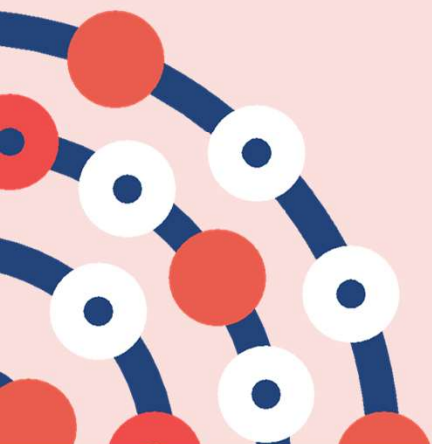
“We will aim to include participants from diverse backgrounds.”

“We recognise that recruitment strategies often fall short in reaching underrepresented groups, particularly those who experience structural barriers to research participation. To address this, we are co-designing recruitment materials with community advisors, translating key documents, and partnering with grassroots organisations to build trust. We will monitor recruitment patterns to adjust strategies in real time.”

Reflects on why underrepresentation happens and offers clear, reflexive steps to counteract it.  
It could still be improved!!!



“We will conduct interviews with service users and stakeholders to gather perspectives on the new intervention.”

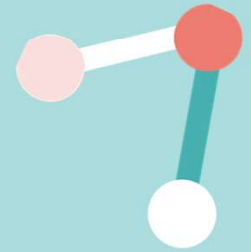


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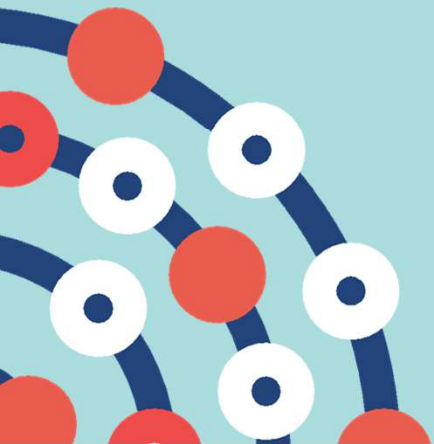
“We chose focus groups based on prior projects where they fostered peer dialogue. However, feedback from initial advisors highlighted that some people with trauma histories prefer one-to-one settings, so we will offer both.”

“We selected semi-structured interviews based on feedback from lived experience contributors who felt this format allowed for flexibility and personal narrative. Recognising the power imbalance between researchers and participants, we are offering participants choice in interview mode and ensuring the interviewer reflects shared experience where possible. ‘Stakeholders’ include frontline workers and carers, not just service leads, to reflect different perspectives on implementation.”

- From what to why
- From vague to specific
- From neutral tone to values-aware language
  - From researcher-led to co-produced



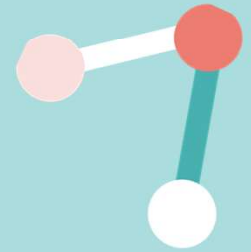
# Critiques of reflexivity



- “Reflecting on one’s one positionality and its effect on one’s research methods have been heeded most often by gendered, racialised, immigrant, queer, working-class and other marginalised scholars” (Massoud 2022)
- Massoud argues that such people unevenly carry the burden of positionality, most frequently women and ethnic minorities.
- Therefore, he asks: are we complicit in existing power structures if those in powerful positions do not authentically write a statement of positionality showing their difference and reflecting upon their identities? (Massoud, 2022)

- Reflexivity, when done with humility, accountability and practice-oriented disruption of unethical research, can be productive.
- However, it can risk “navel-gazing” and “self-absorption” or “confession”, wherein the researcher centres themselves at the expense of the research subject
- This may be amplified if the researcher is searching for a redemption of guilt for their privilege (DiAngelo, 2019)
- There is a balance to be struck whereby a line is drawn “Between reflexive candour and unwitting self-absorption” (Enloe, 2016)

# Thanks, any questions about our service?



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