The Future of Reflexivity in Practice: Building a Collective Methodological Agenda

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Reflexivity is increasingly recognised as a cornerstone of high-quality research, yet methodological guidance on how to *do* reflexivity in practice remains limited. This article draws on emerging initiatives to operationalise reflexivity and outlines three priorities for advancing a collective agenda—turning reflexivity from something to reflect on into a teachable, actionable set of methods.

Reflexivity is the practice of making conscious and explicit our beliefs, assumptions, and dispositions, and examining how they shape knowledge production. It involves taking oneself as an object of study—understanding how one's socialisation and positionality create blind spots, influence analytical choices, and frame interpretations. When systematically practiced, reflexivity enhances research quality across several dimensions: validity (through greater transparency and robustness of inference), ethics (by clarifying power relations and responsibilities), bias reduction (by identifying and mitigating distortions), and innovation (by widening conceptual and methodological repertoires).

Since the 1980s, qualitative social science has championed reflexivity as a methodological necessity, recognising researchers as social agents who co-construct knowledge. However, most writing on reflexivity remains either normative (arguing that researchers should be reflexive) or narrative (recounting personal experiences). Both have been crucial, but they also face limits: normative approaches risk moralising without offering solutions, while experiential accounts can appear self-indulgent. Today, reflexivity stands at a methodological crossroads. The challenge is to move from exhortation and reflection to *operationalisation*—to formalise reflexivity into explicit, transferable methods to make it a cumulative and transformative component of social inquiry.

Recent innovations point the way forward. Literature called for and growingly developed step-by-step frameworks that turn reflexivity into method [1,2]. These fall into three broad types. Story-telling methods use narrative to surface assumptions, such as journaling or comic-style drawing [3]. Dialogical methods engage others to confront assumptions and interpretations, either collectively or in one-to-one settings [4]. Empirical methods collect and analyse data about one's own research practices and dispositions, for instance using discourse analysis on one's own writing [5]. In practice, these approaches overlap and can be combined.

Building on the shared objective of making reflexivity actionable, this article identifies three priorities for advancing methods for reflexivity in practice: they must be evaluable, empirically grounded, and adapted to diverse research traditions.

Evaluation: Does Reflexivity Works?

Although recent literature offers methodological guidance, clear criteria for judging whether reflexivity *works*—that is, whether it meets its goals—remain elusive. The lack of evaluative standards appears at several levels.

At a basic level, how do we know we are becoming more transparent to ourselves and identifying problems we were previously unaware of? At a deeper level, how do we know we are putting these problems into perspective, decentring ourselves from them, and widening the range of analytical

options available to us? At a transformative level, how can we tell whether reflexivity produces lasting shifts in our dispositions—acts of what might be called reflexive resocialisation?

Evaluation must therefore consider both process (was reflexivity properly implemented?) and outcome (did it improve the quality of the study?). Without benchmarks, it is unclear what reflexivity tangibly contributes—or whether the investment of time and effort is justified.

Moreover, the absence of evaluation also enables rhetorical or performative reflexivity: token acknowledgements of bias or positionality that create the appearance of critical self-examination without altering research practices. Such superficial gestures risk fostering complacency by providing the comfort of moral awareness without substantive methodological improvement. Clear guidelines and criteria for assessing reflexivity are therefore essential to ensure it produces real epistemic and ethical benefits rather than serving as methodological window dressing.

Empirically Grounding Reflexivity

Methods for reflexivity in practice should rest on solid foundations, yet existing work rarely draws on the broader social science literature on reflexivity to inform methodological development. I argue that reflexive methods should be grounded in empirical research in three keyways.

First, reflexivity must be treated as an object of study—a socio-cognitive phenomenon. We need systematic investigation into how reflexive thinking develops, what conditions enable or constrain it, and how it shapes the research process. Integrating insights from cognitive and social psychology among others can illuminate the structural and behavioural factors that foster or inhibit reflexivity and help methodologists design more theoretically and empirically informed approaches.

Second, social science methods should be used *to* conduct reflexivity. The reflexive self should be examined with the same empirical rigour as any other social actor. This applies to both data collection—whether self-generated (e.g., reflexive journals) or naturally occurring (e.g., a researcher's publications)—and data analysis, using established strategies to examine our own dispositions, positionalities, and biases through specific analytical lenses (such as gender, class, or Eurocentrism). A reflexive approach can—and should—use empirical tools to interrogate the researcher's own epistemic foundations.

Finally, comparative designs should be used to assess, rather than assume, the effects of reflexivity on knowledge production. Before-and-after comparisons—such as analysing research decisions or interpretations prior to and following reflexive interventions—offer a way to measure how reflexivity alters interpretations or mitigates bias. In short, reflexivity in practice must move beyond a philosophical ideal into an evidence-informed practice.

Adapting Reflexivity Across Traditions

Methodologically, reflexivity has been most fully developed within qualitative research, especially in relation to fieldwork and direct interaction with participants. Yet the need for reflexivity extends far beyond these contexts, and methods must be adapted to fit diverse research traditions.

Many other strands of the social sciences—quantitative, computational, and mixed-methods—also grapple with human bias and would benefit from reflexive tools tailored to their epistemic cultures [6]. This is particularly urgent in fields such as computational social science and generative AI, which have been widely criticised for reproducing and amplifying social biases present in training data,

including racism, and religious stereotyping. Despite this, methodological guidance for reflexivity in these areas remains scarce. Quantitative researchers face similar challenges: positionality is embedded in choices around measurement, variable construction, and statistical assumptions. Reflexive methods could help bridge the gap between denunciation of existing problems and practical solutions that can actively mitigate them.

Adapting reflexivity across traditions also requires contextual and cultural sensitivity. In research involving Indigenous or other non-Western knowledge systems, reflexive methods must be attuned to alternative cosmologies and epistemologies, ensuring that underlying assumptions about self, knowledge, and critique do not impose external frameworks. Reflexivity is thus not a single universal practice but a pluralistic one that must be translated into forms appropriate to different methodological, disciplinary, and cultural settings.

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