


Chapter 3

Critical Reflexivity in Doctoral Social Science Research: Concepts, Theories, and Practices

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ABSTRACT

This chapter positions critical reflexivity as essential to doctoral research in the social sciences. It presents reflexivity as a structured, ongoing practice that informs every stage of inquiry—question design, field relations, ethical navigation, and dissemination. Drawing on five theoretical traditions—it conceptualises reflexivity as an ethical and epistemic stance, not an introspective add-on. A five-part framework is developed: positionality, power, iteration, ethical responsibility, and contextuality. Practical tools are detailed, including journaling, peer dialogue, and reflexivity in writing. Each enhances integrity, relational ethics, and transparency. The chapter concludes by examining reflexivity’s broader implications for decolonising knowledge, challenging academic orthodoxy, and reshaping research culture. It defines reflexivity as a commitment to situated, accountable, and socially responsive scholarship. For doctoral researchers, this practice is not optional—but foundational to credible and transformative research.

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INTRODUCTION

Critical reflexivity has emerged as an essential pillar in the architecture of qualitative social science research. Its emergence responds to a broader re-evaluation of what constitutes rigour, responsibility, and relevance in knowledge production. Reflexivity demands that researchers interrogate the interdependencies between their own positionalities, the institutional frameworks they navigate, and the processes of inquiry through which knowledge is produced. In contrast to traditional paradigms, which sought objectivity through detachment, reflexivity insists upon engagement. The shifting epistemological terrain of social science—marked by critiques of positivist neutrality, challenges to Eurocentric knowledge systems, and demands for ethical accountability—has given rise to reflexivity not merely as a methodological addendum but as a foundational research ethic (Bourdieu, 2003; Krause, 2021). Reflexivity encompasses a spectrum of practices, from personal introspection to structural analysis. In its critical form, it obliges researchers to locate themselves within power-laden systems of meaning, to examine the socio-political consequences of their interpretations, and to consider the ethical implications of their representational choices (Ide & Beddoe, 2023). This renders reflexivity not a singular moment in the research process but a continual, recursive mode of scholarly conduct. While the value of reflexivity has been acknowledged across disciplines, the lack of a unified framework has led to inconsistencies in its application. Doctoral research, in particular, often reflects this uneven terrain in terms of both, conceptual application and Institutional practice creating ups and downs between tokenistic acknowledgements of positionality and sustained, critical engagements with it.

THE IMPERATIVE FOR REFLEXIVITY IN DOCTORAL RESEARCH

For doctoral researchers in the social sciences, the necessity of critical reflexivity becomes especially significant. At the intersection of apprenticeship and independent inquiry, doctoral candidates occupy liminal spaces. They must learn to navigate disciplinary expectations while cultivating epistemic autonomy. Their research journeys often entail encounters with unfamiliar communities, engagement with complex ethical dilemmas, and immersion in politicised environments. These realities underscore the inadequacy of methodological training that omits reflexive

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