Reflexive Questions: Triangulated Inquiry
“the mindfulness of reflexive triangulation”

In qualitative research and evaluation, the researcher is the instrument of inquiry, especially in the collection and analysis of data. Your professional and/or personal background, interests, and motivation for the project may have implications for the study, which could be positive (e.g., facilitating access to research subjects, adding credibility to the interpretation of results) or negative (e.g., raising questions about potential bias). The qualitative researcher needs to reflect on such issues at each stage and in every step of their project, from designing a study and reviewing the literature, through to dealing with data, discussing the findings, and reporting your conclusions.

The report of a qualitative study should therefore explain the position and perspective of the researcher to improve the validity of the data and results, and verify the quality of the research. As a minimum, you should clarify whether you perceive yourself as an outsider or insider; as an expert or learner; and conducting the research on, for, or with the people in the setting studied (Blaikie, 2007). However, “good” qualitative research practitioners provide more than simple autobiographical description; they include discussion based on analytical reflection of how their culture, gender, history, and personal experiences have shaped all aspects of their projects, from the formulation of questions to their expectations of outcomes (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

In other words, you need to “Be reflective and reflexive”, monitoring your thought processes and decision-making criteria; being in touch with your predispositions, biases, fears, hopes, constraints, blinders, and pressures; observing yourself and learning about yourself, and your analytical processes, cognitively and emotionally (Patton, 2015, p. 523).

Reflexivity here means

“thinking critically about what you are doing and why, confronting and often challenging your own assumptions, and recognizing the extent to which your thoughts, actions and decisions shape how you research and what you see” (Mason, 2002, p. 5).

Patton’s (2003) Qualitative Evaluation Checklist suggests you not only reflect on such questions, but also record your responses in field notes, and then write about your experiences, thoughts, and feelings in your research reports. In particular, he advises researchers to

“Consider and report how your observations may have affected the observed as well as how you may have been affected by what and how you’ve participated and observed. Ponder and report the origins and implications of your own perspective.”

Patton’s (2015, pp. 72, 604-605) concept of triangulated reflexive inquiry offers a framework that researchers can use to work through these issues during data analysis and report writing, and to develop the required self-awareness, based on three sets of questions about

- the researcher (the self-reflexivity question);
- the researched (the subjects, participants, or co-researchers); and
- the audience (the recipients, third parties, or public of the research or evaluation.)
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**Questions about the people who are studied:**

- How do participants know what they know?
- What shapes and has shaped their worldview?
- How do they perceive me?
- Why? How do I know that?
- And how do I perceive them?

**Questions about myself as qualitative inquirer:**

- What do I know?
- How do I know what I know?
- What shapes and has shaped my perspective?
- How have my perceptions and my background affected the data I have collected and my analysis of those data?
- How do I perceive those I have studied?
- With what voice do I share my perspective?
- What do I do with what I have found?

**Questions about people who receive the study:**

- How do audiences make sense of what I give them?
- What perspectives do they bring to the findings I offer?
- How do they perceive me?
- How do I perceive them?
- How do these perceptions affect what I report, and how I report it?

**References**