



## Working in collaboration: Three PhD students trouble reflexivity

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### ABSTRACT

Abstract text Written by three qualitative researchers at various stages of their research studies, this paper focuses on how their collaborations with each other informed their PhD learning journeys. There are a substantial number of companion textbooks offering guidance on doctoral study. In these, it is commonplace to find discussions about the research relationships between supervisor and student. We argue that there is much less emphasis in this literature on the value of collaborative relationships between doctoral students. Here we focus on how collaborations with each other facilitated opportunities to discuss, interpret and clarify notions of reflexivity, a methodological conundrum we were individually ruminating. We conclude that collaborative relationships between doctoral students can be supportive, fostering clarity of thought and a safe space to work out ideas such as *what does reflexivity mean to me?* In this paper, we use our own experiences of developing supportive collaborative relationships to encourage others to actively collaborate with those who can provide a critical sounding board.

**Keywords:** collaboration; reflexivity; reflection; qualitative research; PhD narratives

### Introduction

Anyone interested in studying for a PhD is well advised to do initial research, learning about the experiences of other doctoral students. It would not take long to find a plethora of blogs, websites and books where doctoral students, past and present, document their experiences of the PhD learning journey (Thomson & Kamler, 2013). When reading about the highs and lows of doctoral study, both in and outside the UK, significant attention is given to the relationship between student and supervisor and the individualised nature of working up to submitting the thesis and defending it in the viva voce (Eley & Jennings, 2005). For many doctoral students, their thesis represents a relatively solitary study experience culminating in them sole authoring a large body of work. This necessitates self-motivation because there are limited requirements or opportunities to engage with other doctoral students.

Many doctoral students note that without their efforts to engage with other PhD students (face to face or online), they could work in isolation from PhD peers for the duration of their studies. In the UK, part-time students could spend an average of five years and full-time students approximately three years without collaborating with any other doctoral student (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education [QAA], 2011). Given the limited imperative for doctoral students to build support networks with each other, it is understandable that this only leaves the student/supervisor relationship to feature significantly in accounts of study experiences. This paper focuses on collaborative relationships between the three authors, working as full-time lecturers (in the Department of Social Care and Social Work of a UK University) and studying part-time within the same institution. They also had physical proximity in their everyday work and study environments as their offices were situated closely to each other. In sum, these all featured as conducive to developing a peer support network.

Contact, not only via joint working commitments but also via passing conversations during the discharge of everyday functions and duties, presented opportunities that other doctoral students may not have. Given that discussions covered everyday life as well as the requirements, progress and pressures of research, these helpfully mirrored the realities of the qualitative researcher who is invested in the social world as part of the research process (Mason, 2009). Whilst we recognise some doctoral students struggle to develop networks with their peers, our experiences of utilising each other's experiences provided opportunities for discussion. As a researcher becomes engrossed in their own subject matter, these interactions offer fresh perspectives. We recommend that, wherever possible, doctoral students enlist the help of their institutions and supervisors in facilitating study environments opportune for engaging and interacting with other doctoral students.

Our UK institution facilitates an annual research conference where doctoral students are encouraged to engage with each other through presentations, roundtable discussions and seminars. Through ongoing everyday interactions with each other, we agreed to

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present at this research conference about the progress of our PhDs. Our presentation, *The ascent of Mount PhD* (Ogilvie, Yarwood, & Yianni, 2012), used the metaphor of climbing a mountain to elucidate the different stages in our progress. Using positive conference feedback from attendees, characterised by Gomm (2008, p. 292) as “third party viewpoint”, we collaborated on a follow up presentation, *Do the write thing* (Ogilvie, Yarwood, & Yianni, 2013), concentrating on the imperative for doctoral students to engage in writing activities throughout the duration of their studies. Throughout these presentations, we fielded audience questions such as “what does reflexivity mean to you?” and “how is it embedded in your individual research study?” These were troubling questions and we struggled to answer them with confidence. The rest of the paper focuses on these questions, which we attempt to answer.

The outline of the paper is as follows: Firstly, it considers the relationship between reflection and reflexivity. It discusses examples of collaborating with each other to develop a greater understanding of the interpretations and meanings of reflexivity in relation to the authors’ doctoral studies. Following these examples, the discussion draws together the key points about the ways collaborative doctoral study helped develop thinking about the concept of reflexivity. In conclusion, the co-authors suggest their understanding of reflexivity developed, and continues to do so, over time. The purpose of this paper is partly to acknowledge the influence of each other in this.

### Unpacking meanings of reflection and reflexivity

Common to all three authors was that we had studied models of reflective practice on undergraduate social science programmes, professional teacher training and social work training. As lecturers within the same Department of Social Care and Social Work, we taught undergraduates about reflective practice. We used a model of reflection incorporating the following five levels: describe learning, analyse learning, verify learning, gain a new understanding and indicate future behaviour (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Wessel & Larin, 2006). Our understanding is that reflection involves reliving and re-rendering: who said and did what, how, when, where, and why (Bolton, 2010). The model is designed to produce ‘highly reflective entries’ (Wessel & Larin 2006, p. 82) through effective note taking of past events. Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 280) state that “good qualitative research . . . requires careful record keeping as a way of connecting with important audiences. The first audience is self.” This was a starting point to which we developed a greater understanding of the relationship between reflection and reflexivity.

Models of reflection have influenced the development of reflexive practice. Schon’s (1995) reflective practice models significantly shaped Rothman’s (1997) work on engaging in collaborative practice to resolve conflict. Rothman (1997) mobilised reflexivity to consider joint interests in interactions beyond the practitioner, incorporating the relationship between oneself, others and the context itself. Reflexivity expands the frame of reflection, incorporating the critical analysis of underlying assumptions shaping interactions in time, place and context (Rothman, 1997). Reflexivity is defined as turning back on oneself to act and respond through a more immediate, dynamic process (Bolton, 2010). This definition guided us as doctoral students striving to understand the relationship between reflection and reflexivity.

Qualitative research converges in its acceptance that there has been a turn to reflexivity (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). This reflexive turn marked a point in which qualitative researchers sought to move beyond reflection, incorporating subjective processes of self-conscious thought whilst studying social behaviour and relational aspects of it. As qualitative researchers, the notion of reflexivity featured heavily in discussions about the three doctoral studies. However, we were each struggling to understand what reflexivity meant. This was our common ground. We worked collaboratively to develop our understanding of reflexivity. Pillow (2003) suggests that reflexivity has often been used by qualitative researchers who are not necessarily explicit about what reflexivity means to them and how they use it in their research study.

Mutual agreement was that “reflexivity is finding strategies to question our own attitudes, thought processes, values, assumptions, prejudices and habitual actions, to strive to understand our complex roles in relation to others” (Bolton, 2010, p.13). That said, it is challenging to question oneself. We argue that developing supportive relationships with peers is a strategy facilitating this process of questioning oneself. Indeed, doctoral students often document anxiety due to feeling inferior in many ways to their supervisors and peers (Thomson & Walker, 2010). They express a lack of confidence and reluctance to expose what they perceive to be their vulnerabilities in supervision meetings. As such, reflexivity can be a tall order for a doctoral student working in a solitary manner. Collaborations and supportive peer relationships can provide safe yet critical opportunities to discuss how we recognise and are active in shaping our surroundings. With the support of peers, reflexive practice can enable doctoral students to consider circumstances and relationships. In terms of our doctoral studies, this means shifting from reflection to a reflexive process of reviewing subjectivities and revising ethical ways of being and relating (Cunliffe, 2009).

### Three vignettes: Developing understanding of reflexivity

Reflexive practice means thinking from within experiences (Bolton, 2010). This is no mean feat, likened by some to a contortionist’s performance (Bolton, 2010). Indeed, it has troubled the authors of this paper as doctoral students. In the following vignettes, we capture our experiences of developing understandings of reflexivity. Developing our understandings of reflexivity is an ongoing

process, both within and beyond our doctoral studies (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). The vignettes draw on different stages in our doctoral studies to demonstrate this process of development. Understanding what reflexivity means is important for qualitative doctoral researchers; yet integrating reflexive practice into their qualitative studies can be a vexing aspect of doctoral study. In other words, what we understand by reflexivity and how we practise reflexively are interrelated yet challenging.

### **Helen: Reflection and reflexivity in the early doctoral stages**

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Prior to working with the co-authors on our joint presentation, I had been conducting my research in isolation, feeling I needed to produce something tangible in order to disseminate my work in the public domain. As a consequence, I was stuck and not sure which direction my research should go. Bochner (2001) suggests it is easy to conduct research separately, only working with like-minded researchers, staying out of contact with each other, talking to ourselves. In the early stages (particularly in the year following enrolment as a PhD student), I wasn't even communicating with like-minded researchers let alone with those outside my discipline of sociology. Bourke (2014) discusses how research is not just a product but a process, and rather than stopping once findings are disseminated, it "continues as we reflect". It was the collaboration with the co-authors and consequent discussions about reflection and reflexivity, what they mean and how they can be utilised in research which helped me become unstuck.

The work with Gemma and Chris on the joint presentation came at a point when I found I was struggling to progress in my research. The discussions we had encouraged me to reflect on my journey so far. I am familiar with the use of reflective practice as a tool for developing and progressing through teacher training, but it took me some time to realise I had been utilising reflection in my PhD. However, despite the fact that I was using it, I was stuck. I was questioning and evaluating what I was doing, which direction my research should take and giving consideration to different methodologies but was still struggling. A particular issue was the idea of my place in the research, as it was my own experience of drinking which sparked my interest in studying alcohol consumption. Being unfamiliar at this stage with methodologies in which researchers make explicit their place in the research, I was uncertain about doing this. I was considering data collection and suitable methodologies. In our meetings, we talked about our research and progress, and I talked about "being stuck", about not knowing which methodology to use, about collecting data and about my place in the research. Gemma discussed her research and the use of reflexivity, a concept I had not been familiar with. It was these discussions, starting from conversations about reflection and moving in to conversations about reflexivity, which helped me progress. So what does reflexivity mean to me, and how did discussions about this and related methodologies help me become unstuck?

Pillow (2003) suggests many researchers are using reflexivity without defining how they are using it. She argues it is difficult to define and is "slippery", but we should not let this deter us from trying to define it. It was the process of trying to define and get to grips with what it meant to me I found particularly helpful. I began to consider the differences between reflection and reflexivity and how this related to my research. My understanding of reflection came from my experience as a teacher. Larrivee (2000) suggests that if teachers do not practise critical reflection, their judgments, interpretations, assumptions and expectations remain unexamined.

What enabled me to become unstuck was developing an understanding of reflexivity and how I could utilise it in my research. My doctoral research interest in drinking motivations comes from personal experience and desire to understand my relationship with alcohol. It felt (and still feels) uncomfortable to acknowledge this. I wasn't sure whether I should or even if it was appropriate to acknowledge it in my research, especially if that research was to involve gathering data through focus groups or interviews. (I was still perhaps half in the mindset of the need for research to be unbiased and the researcher an objective observer). I was also struggling to understand how my research fitted in to existing paradigms within the field. I felt out of my depth because of my lack of knowledge and understanding and feeling I was not an 'expert'. I was experiencing the lack of confidence and anxiety Thomson and Walker (2010) refer to, which was discussed earlier in this paper. I began, however, to see the relationship here with reflexivity. I challenged my own assumption about whether my place was appropriate or not and began to realise that no matter how uncomfortable it might be, it was important to acknowledge my place in my research. Bristow and Esper (1988), for example, express the importance of being aware of one's own position and how it affects the research process, and Holloway & Biley (2011) note that experience is a resource. Corbin and Straus (2008, p. 11) argue that researchers do not want to have distance between themselves and participants but to connect with them. I was keen to understand how reflexivity might relate to some of the methodologies I was considering. There seems to be no consensus on how reflexivity is utilised in these methods (if indeed at all), but it was helpful to me to know that it is relevant. Hall and Callery (2001), for example, argue that reflexivity (and relationality) has a place within grounded theory. Clancy (2013) suggests "interpretative phenomenological analysis concentrates on understanding individual experiences through interpretation with reflexivity practice embedded within this. This is useful for me to know and I am undergoing further investigation to help me progress.

The collaborative relationship with colleagues and PhD peers enabled me to explore difficulties in an unthreatening environment. It enabled discussions about reflection and reflexivity and provided an opportunity to develop an understanding of reflexivity and consider how I can use it within my research. Ultimately, it enabled me to progress when I was struggling.

**Chris: Stuck in the middle with all of you**

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This vignette highlights a more critical way of thinking about knowledge, signifying a gear change in my doctoral learning linked to reflexivity. The ongoing process of developing an understanding of thinking about research away from the academic desk has played a part in questioning our assumptions about what knowledge is. This featured clearly in our attempts to develop our reflexive practice.

My PhD is concerned with the concept of sport as force for social change and in particular how sport is used as a vehicle for charitable fundraising. Factors such as identity, community, language and the civilising process are all areas under exploration. The task and subsequent question for me was how to start the process of writing for my PhD. This is a particularly poignant point as my PhD is mainly in the form of an extended critical literature review with content analysis. In this sense, “research writing is the major means of communicating what we claim to have ‘found’ (Thomson & Kamler, 2010, p. 151)” when we aim to contribute to a body of knowledge.

Naturally, the value of reading cannot be understated, as it is from a variety of written media that we are able to glean information and offer our own interpretations and critical analysis. However, there can be an issue with the reading of material in that it can lack spontaneity, in the sense that I have found at times my writing can become a little laboured. A feeling that ideas are drying up can contribute to a sense that focus is becoming dissipated. One of the factors that helped to assuage these problems has been discussion with others, including the co-authors of this paper. They have provided a space for me to try out ideas about my research and have given me critical yet supportive feedback.

In some ways, these collaborations with Gemma and Helen supported me to talk about issues appertaining to my research with various people in a variety of forums. Collaborations have enabled me to test ideas and order my thinking in terms of what I want to write. A further benefit to this has been the fact that people can offer me ideas to explore as a result of such conversations. One such example highlights how a conversation in an unlikely setting offered me an avenue of exploration I had not previously considered.

While discussing my PhD with a friend in a pub, I was telling him about the concept I was exploring around the ‘Sporting Celebrity’ and how this influenced societal views of issues such as social capital. During the conversation, my friend said in an almost ‘throwaway’ manner: “Spartacus; he was the first sporting celebrity”. I jokingly responded by pledging to somehow shoehorn Spartacus into my research.

However, upon further consideration, research and discussion with Helen and Gemma, I found that far from being a witty aside, the place of Spartacus in the history of the sporting celebrity is an important one. Indeed, his name lives on in many guises such as sports clubs like Spartak Moscow and the mass displays of athletic prowess by totalitarian regimes, which are called Spartakiads.

In discussing this example with the co-authors, I referred to it as a conversation in a lay setting. However, this was challenged in that to do so might demean its importance because a dictionary definition of a layman includes a person without professional or specialised knowledge in a particular subject. Therefore, to use the term lay would be to institute a hierarchy of knowledge. This would be contra to acknowledging the value of co-production of knowledge with valuable sources in any situation. However, I am aware this may not always be the case for doctoral students. Learning to listen to criticism, however supportively pitched, can be a difficult lesson to learn. Here we are arguing that it is a lesson worth learning as it prepares you for similar questions, challenges and requisites of defense within the supervisor/doctoral student relationship. Reflexivity and reflection on one’s own possible shortcomings are important to all researchers as they can offer a chance to accept constructive criticism, therefore improving the quality and validity of research. For Pillow (2010), reflexivity should better represent difference establishing ethnographic authority. In essence, it confirms my experiences and enables me to accept criticism with confidence. Pillow (2010) also asserts reflexivity is only as strong as our ability to question our own knowledge.

Therefore, by using this questioning, reflexivity is evidenced. I was offered the chance to synthesise information from a variety of sources, including my collaborative relationships with peers, which reinforces the view of Doyle (2013) that in conceptualising reflexivity as a methodological issue for research, it is seen that alongside having an individual capacity, it is also a collective activity. Doyle’s view that reflexivity and thinking are irrevocably linked reinforces the notion that synthesis of sources by offering all of them due consideration is indeed evidence of reflexivity in action during the research process. Moreover, it was this synthesis that enabled me to produce further tracts of PhD writing.

A troubling aspect for me in terms of reflexivity and research practice arose from my social work background. I have indicated that a conversation in a pub added to the process for me, and this, coupled with conversations with the co-authors, added to my ability to synthesise information to write. For me, adopting a reflexive approach in which I reflected upon certain phenomena was helpful and, as we are asserting, appropriate. However, as a social work practitioner, I was required to be a reflective practitioner to enable me to gauge the impact I had on others. Knott and Scragg (2013) state that to be a reflective practitioner requires a synthesis of theoretically underpinned work with the wisdom gained from experience as a practising social worker.

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For me, the process of reflection was not a public one and took place within my own reflections and the privacy of social work supervision with peers/managers. There may have been an initial reluctance to share and collaborate with my co-authors, because reflecting on work in this field is not something done on corridors and in pubs. There was an ambiguity I had to wrestle with in order to become a reflexive researcher, and I argue here that collaborative relationships with other doctoral students facilitated opportunities to do this. This ambiguity for a practitioner turned researcher is highlighted by Taylor and White (2000, p. 206) who assert reflexivity is “an elusive term often used interchangeably with reflection. It encompasses reflection but also incorporates other features”. These features include the collective action of a profession; it is the testing of knowledge and practice against an analytical framework. Therefore, the collaborative framework offered by my peers enabled me to understand that reflexivity can not only be another way to reflect but also a way to test the validity of my reflections.

For me, the process of reflexivity was linked to reflection and the collaborative nature of my relationships with Gemma, Helen and others enabled me to set aside initial misgivings borne out of my professional social work background and utilise reflexivity in my research. Indeed, this piece, which follows from our previous collaborations, evidences for me the importance of reflexivity and the place of a diverse range of others within this.

The notion of troubling reflexivity still lingers for me in that most of the writing about it does not offer one concrete definition of what it actually is. Writers tell us what reflexivity should do, what it can represent, that it is necessarily fluid, forever changing and questioning (Pillow, 2010). In order for me to arrive at a comfortable position as to what reflexivity represents, I refer to Burr (1995), who asserts the most common use of reflexivity is an analysis of a researcher’s own writing to reflexively discuss how his/her accounts are constructed and how these constructions impact on relationships. This marries together the requirement to take a simultaneously reflective and reflexive approach to both practice in the social work profession and the process of research.

**Gemma: Data collection and research relationships**

Here I discuss how my knowledge and understanding of the relationship between me, the researcher, and my research participants developed through a process of what I describe as reflexive practice. In this reflexive practice, I often talked to my peers (including the co-authors). I found this talk formed part of a safe space where, for example, I could admit I had forgotten something or repeatedly ask the most basic of questions or discuss the challenges of relationships with interviewees. I am not suggesting talk alone equates with reflexive practice. Instead, I am suggesting that often these discussions acted as a catalyst, stimulating a process of thinking about my assumptions, values and position as a researcher. In this example, I note the ways it impacted my thoughts and practices of developing research relationships with my interviewees.

My PhD study is an exploration of working parents’ talk about work-family reconciliation using social psychology. I interviewed fourteen working parents using semi-structured interviews. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) define qualitative research as a situated activity that locates the researcher in the world using an interpretive naturalistic approach. With this in mind, my understanding of the meaning of reflexive research practice developed over time. It framed not only the interviews per se as situated activities but also the establishment, development and maintenance of my relationships with the interview participants throughout the research process.

According to Coffey (1999), qualitative researchers construct and write the lives of others, concurrently negotiating and implicating themselves through interpersonal relationships with research participants. In this sense, the relationships between the researched and the researcher were key to the research process. However, these relationships were often complex, and I used my supportive relationships with other doctoral students (including the co-authors) to make sense of and talk through concerns I had about the times when I felt the research relationships with interviewees were challenging. For instance, after one participant volunteered to participate in the study, there was a protracted negotiation of where and when the interview would take place. Having finally arrived to undertake the interview, the participant greeted me saying, “I don’t want to be interviewed today, shall we just get a drink?” Whilst the interview did take place with the participant retorting, “Oh go on then, I’m just indecisive”, it vexed me.

In an attempt to explore this particular interview experience, I sought guidance by returning to my hard worn ‘research methods’ texts that had guided my knowledge and understanding of the research process. To my disappointment, whilst they recognised the significance of the relationship between the researcher and researched, that relationship appeared to be often underscrutinised (Oakley, 2005). According to Coffey (1999), researchers have given limited attention to the question “what can we learn about how fieldwork affects the researcher?” Moving away from textbooks, I found discussions with other PhD students, including Helen and Chris, were helpful in exploring the question “what can we learn about research relationships by writing oneself into the research?” To me, this linked to the concept of reflexivity, but explaining this troubled me.

Both Helen and Chris honed in on my use of the word reflexive practice and urged me to succinctly and clearly explain what I meant. Banister et al. (2011) argue that these questions need to be addressed by qualitative researchers in an effort to develop epistemologies of the research process. Thus my experience of talking with the co-authors and other PhD peers provided more insight than the research methods texts books I was well versed in from my undergraduate to present doctoral studies. In other words, because of

Helen and Chris's eagerness to learn about reflexivity so that they could relate to their own doctoral studies, they would not let me get off lightly when I tried to explain it somewhat vaguely. They wanted concrete explanations, and it was perhaps because of our differences that it was paramount I be clear about what reflexivity meant to me. In this sense, an easy option would have been to read their challenges as critical and disengage with further interactions with them. However, doctoral study is about defending your position, your work and your research decisions. Being prepared for criticisms is a work in progress for many doctoral students like myself; however, I have learnt this through my concerted efforts to collaborate with other doctoral students.

For me, the meaning of reflexivity I mobilise draws on Denzin and Lincoln's (2008) view that qualitative researchers interpret material practices that make the world visible through a series of representations including field notes, interviews and memos to the self. The challenges from the research relationships were explored through a reflexive practice using my own field notes, which I then discussed with the co-authors of this paper. This process of thinking, writing and discussing became embedded in my research practice as I documented what I learnt about my relationship with the participants and how I felt about the relationships. This included consideration not only of the interviews themselves but also of the establishment, development and maintenance of my relationships with the interview participants throughout the research process. My reflexive practice meant that I looked at my assumptions about the research relationship. I began thinking more critically about how the interviewees may have been time scarce. As such, the allocated interview hour could have been precious time which they could not spare. Reflexivity meant thinking differently about this than I had done initially. As such, I learnt to be more open to a flexible time slot when interviewing time-scarce participants. For me, this was part of my reflexive practice. (A further discussion with more explicit examples of these research relationship challenges can be found in Yarwood (2013).)

So what role did the collaborative relationship with other doctoral students play in how I made sense of and worked through these interview research concerns? Firstly, I was grateful to my peers who gave me the space to talk about these concerns. Secondly, Helen and Chris encouraged me to describe these aspects of my research in conference presentations. They argued that my concerns were important to hear as part of the messiness and realities of research relationships with interviewees. Up until that point I was aware that writing oneself into the research had been criticised as navel gazing (Pelias, 2009). Pelias (2009) responds to those critics who fear that writing about oneself, as the researcher, can lead to what has been called 'the loss of the Other'. Neither Helen nor Chris have been afraid to discuss their own impact on their research – Helen elucidating how her own relationship with alcohol has a bearing, and Chris discussing his thoughts around his own sporting efforts and the relationship he has with the concept of charity. I found that writing and talking about my own feelings about the relationships with my interviewees enabled me to signpost the complex relationship between myself, the researcher, and the research participants. To begin with, I only shared these research concerns with other doctoral students. However, their encouragement enabled me to develop my confidence to discuss these things more widely. As part of this process, I became more confident about talking and writing about reflexivity, broadly defined as reflecting on and understanding our own personal, political and intellectual biographies framed within the research process to explicitly locate myself in relation to my research participants. In doing, so I argue that reflexivity was a scaffold in my approach to acknowledging the critical roles I played in creating, interpreting and theorising research data as a researcher alongside participants and the complex challenges that posed (Doucet, 1998; Doucet, 2006).

## Discussion

During our collaborative work leading up to this paper, we were eager to explore how our doctoral learning journeys traversed paths. One of the ways we did this was by discussing how we all positioned ourselves within a qualitative research paradigm whilst drawing on professional disciplinary backgrounds of social work and teaching. Reflexive practice involves researchers considering their assumptions and values including disciplinary backgrounds. Disciplines incorporate hierarchies of knowledge based on taken for granted assumptions (Bryman, 2012). The authors' teaching and social work professions incorporate normative practices shaping relationships between those with knowledge and professional training and those without (such as students and service users). Reflexive practice asks us to develop a critical awareness of the ways structures in social work and teaching are operationalised with systemic power differences. Teaching and social work professionals are often deemed to hold the balance of power axiomatic to students and service users. Such professions draw on frameworks of social justice, equality and diversity, and for White (2013, p. 39), reflection and reflexivity are "characterised as processes of exploring presumptions and presuppositions . . . promoting humane . . . practice in 'just' organisations". As doctoral students, the challenge has been to consider strategies to unpack these values, assumptions, prejudices and habitual actions of these professions we are aligned to through training and experience.

Pillow (2003) questions the common use of reflexivity in qualitative research. Whilst advocating that qualitative researchers can and should use it to legitimise, validate, and question research practices and representations, they are often unclear about the definition of reflexivity they are mobilising. Pillow (2003) argues for a move away from comfortable uses of reflexivity, including recognition of self, reflexivity as recognition of other and reflexivity as truth and hierarchies of knowledge. Instead, she advocates researchers also explore reflexivities of discomfort. Practicing uncomfortable reflexivity troubles the uses of reflexivity as a methodological tool, forefronting the complexities of doing engaged qualitative research (Pillow, 2003). As such, whilst we agree that reflection and

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reflexivity are inextricably linked, each of our individual examples above represent our attempts to wrestle with the uncomfortable challenges we faced when considering what reflexivity means to each of us and how to undertake reflexive practice as doctoral researchers with teaching and social work backgrounds.

Within this context of our teaching and research, we see reflexive practice as embedded in qualitative studies aimed to understand our complex roles in relation to others such as service users, students, patients, carers, parents and so forth. Whilst developing our understanding of reflexivity, we have used our peer relationships to meet and discuss the limits of our knowledge, of how our own behaviour plays into organisational practices as teachers and social workers and why such practices might marginalise groups or exclude individuals. Given that our doctoral research projects are qualitative examinations of these social worlds, it is imperative that we continue to develop our understanding and knowledge of these issues. (Mason, 2009).

Whilst we all continue to ruminate the ways reflexivity is embedded in our learning journeys, we have found collaborations with each other useful in developing our understanding of our position in relation to others and the implications of socially situated knowledge production. Qualitative researchers are implicated in the knowledge they produce (Goodley & Smailes, 2011). The authors of this paper found that, through collaborating on conference presentations and writing this paper, we have engaged in dialogue about reflexive practices as methodological tools in qualitative research. During our doctoral studies, we have recognised that reflection, (a practice we had learned about prior to doctoral study) is inextricably linked with reflexivity, the latter being a relatively newer concept introduced to all three of us.

Thomson and Kamler (2013) advocate collaborations and supportive doctoral networks such as those developed by the authors of this paper. They argue that such supportive networks do much to prepare doctoral students for writing for peer reviewed journal publications where criticisms and reviewer feedback can appear harsh (Thomson & Kamler, 2013). Becoming resilient to criticism and open to feedback and suggestions stands you in good stead for the publishing world awaiting you. After spending time researching, it is important to disseminate research beyond your doctoral supervisors and examiners. As such, it is good practice for doctoral students to be part of a supportive network conducive to dialogue about research and ideas, particularly as it can prepare them for disseminating their work to a wider audience and discourse community.

### Conclusion

This paper evidences the collaborative work between three part-time doctoral students, transforming an often solitary learning experience through interactions with each other. Coming together as qualitative researchers, we have developed understandings of the meanings and usages of reflexivity. Reflexivity is often used by qualitative researchers who are not categorical about what reflexivity means to them and how they use it in their research study (Pillow, 2003). We have presented examples of the ways our peer support provoked us to develop understandings about reflexivity.

In search of assistance and support available on doctoral study programmes, we found that textbooks and guidelines (QAA, 2011) often focus on the research relationships between supervisor and student. We note that there is much less emphasis on the value of collaborative relationships between doctoral students. Here we have concentrated on how collaborations with each other facilitated our learning journeys through supportive relationships with each other. We are not suggesting that all doctoral students will be supportive. In fact, some collaborations can be difficult, but our experiences documented here have been positive. We also recognise that these collaborations alone are insufficient to sustain the doctoral process. However, we hope that others reading this will join us in sharing their experiences of collaborations and working with other doctoral students. Whether supportive or otherwise, disseminating narratives about our relationships with other doctoral students contributes to the debates about relationships in the research process. We believe this in itself is part of reflexive practice for qualitative researchers.

### Biographies

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