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Reflective and reflexive research participants: Growing the scope for engaging the expertise of frontline workers for policy change

Methodological Innovations

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Alexandria Innes 

Abstract

A key value of reflexive research is the constant attentiveness to the forces that produce the way we think about the world. Yet, the researcher constantly grapples with the risk of making him or herself too central to the research. In this article I argue that the risk of researcher-centred research can be mitigated while enhancing the benefits of reflexive practice by incorporating the methodological practice of reflexivity on the part of research *participants*. This research develops a theoretical argument for a research design that values the expertise of frontline workers understood as whole and complex people rather than simply as agents of the state. I demonstrate that putting their expertise into a reflexive methodological framework can realise effective policy, institutional and systemic change.

Keywords

Ethnographic methods, focus groups, reflection, reflexivity, impact, frontline workers

Introduction

Reflexive research has become standard practice for researchers adopting ethnographic methods, working closely with particular populations and communities, and offering a responsive practice that can acknowledge and account for overlapping relationships, personal biases and limits in researchers' own understanding of the world (Brigden and Mainwaring, 2021). Yet, reflexive methods can become 'self-indulgent', placing the researcher central to the research in an effort to consciously address and identify subjectively held or structurally imposed biases. A key value of reflexivity is the constant attentiveness to the forces that produce the way we think about the world. In this article I argue that the risk of self-indulgence and researcher-centred research can be mitigated while enhancing the benefits of reflexive practice by incorporating the methodological practice of reflexivity on the part of research *participants*.

The proposal to incorporate reflexivity on the part of research participants is relevant across multiple disciplines,

particularly with regard to evaluating policy and best practice. For example, qualitative research is often adopted as a means of evaluating policy in its practical application, identifying areas where policy revision is needed, and gathering experiential evidence of policy implications or experiential insight into policy application in practice (Axelsson, 2017; Dodge et al., 2005; Elias, 2022; Invær et al., 2002; Raphael, 2016). Qualitative methods also offer strength in clarification of existing theories, and in theory development, given the capacity to advance detailed and contextualised descriptions of phenomena (Nowell and Albrecht, 2019). Reflexivity, defined as practicing an awareness of social context for the research and the researcher (Watts, 2019), is an established means of

Violence and Society Centre, City, University of London, London, UK

Corresponding author:

Alexandria Innes, Violence and Society Centre, City, University of London, Northampton Square, London EC1V 0HB, UK.

Email: alexandria.innes@city.ac.uk



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ensuring robust qualitative research, although researchers are increasingly making a case to apply the principles of reflexivity to quantitative research (Jamieson et al., 2023; Ryan and Golding, 2006). This article looks specifically at qualitative research that centres experiential knowledge and argues that there is an added value to asking research participants to practice reflective thought and to consider reflexively their relationship with the research process as a means of deepening insight and producing robust findings. The research exemplified this method through a staged focus group methodology.

Here, I provide a brief overview of the value of reflexive research drawing from work in public administration and policy, international relations which has seen a growth in ethnographic and experiential research over the last two decades, and migration studies in the context of the example project. Incorporating reflexivity into research practice is not a controversial proposal, particularly in the context of ethnographic research that works very closely with participants. However, I move beyond the proposal that reflexivity is best practice for the researcher to suggest it is also best practice for research participants in the context of gathering experiential data by interview, focus group and ethnography.

In what follows, I develop these insights to offer a theorisation as to why reflexive practice can and ought to be requested from research participants. In order to develop the theoretical argument, I draw on the methodological design of a project that employed critical reflection and reflexivity in the context of research with groups of ‘front-line workers’. I use this term to refer to relatively low-level or mid-level employees, working in state institutions, who are positioned on the front lines of public engagement with state services. I demonstrate that asking frontline workers to think reflexively about their jobs was able to offer new insight into the functional workings of the state, and the implications for service-users from a perspective not elsewhere available. I argue that this can add to the body of data critically appraising state practice and, essentially, can do so in a language and framework that is legible to policy makers and elites. Therefore, the potential to realise meaningful change is incorporated in a research design that embeds reflexivity throughout the project.

Experiential research, scientific rigour and reflexivity

Elias (2022) notes that the field of public administration has been focused on reproducing scientific rigour in a way that has detracted from experiential and practice-based research. Reflexivity offers a means of maintaining scientific rigour; done well, it can counteract the subjectivity that a researcher might introduce in interactions with

research participants that are necessary for experiential and ethnographic research, and in the analysis of the data produced by these interactions (Ackerly and True, 2008). It is important to note, subjectivity is not removed but is made transparent for the reader. Likewise, Vradi (2008) situates a growth of the use of ethnographic methods as a ‘return to empiricism for the discipline [of International Relations]’, but a *better* empiricism that has the potential to avoid hierarchies of knowledge production and offer an emancipatory engagement with international politics (Vradi, 2008). Yet, reflexivity also runs the risk of centring the researcher at the expense of the experiences of research participants (Finlay, 2002). The relationship between the research and the research participants influences the data produced; where reflexivity is one-sided, an imbalance occurs.

Reflexivity and critical reflection in research methods

The concept of reflexivity has been variously used in research contexts. In public administration research, Finlay describes reflexivity as ‘thoughtful, conscious self-awareness’ (Finlay, 2002: 532) that is ‘immediate, continuing, dynamic and subjective’ (Finlay, 2002: 533). This is distinguished from reflection, which is object focused and therefore more static: the continued reflexive consideration of the self can recognise and account for how the subject position of the researcher evolves as the research project evolves. To be reflexive is to mark an awareness of the relationship between knowledge and practice, but this awareness might have different foci or emphases. It is important to distinguish between, but also to understand the relationship between reflexivity and reflection because they are often paired. Reflexivity has also been used interchangeably with critical reflection (Moon, 2007); yet Watts (2019) differentiates between the two concepts, suggesting reflexivity is a practice of awareness of social context, while critical reflection requires engagement with social theory and different orientations to knowledge. D’Cruz et al. (2007) locate the roots of the concept of reflexivity in a Giddensian modernity, as a manifestation of agency where reflexivity is a skill one can develop to better process information and therefore enhance decision-making. Simultaneously, this form of reflexivity is a means of making the self, whereby acting with an intentionality and processing events in the context of their circumstances forms a method of identity-making through conscious action. However, the critical roots of the concept temper the bald agency at the core of this particular formulation (D’Cruz et al., 2007). A critical approach more broadly acknowledges that circumstances are subject to inequalities and that one can act only within the constraints of those structural inequalities in the context of their circumstances. A truly reflexive process seeks to recognise and acknowledge such constraints. The

acknowledgement of inequality situates a researcher within a set of power relations and the process of reflexive research draws critical attention to the operation of those power relations, hence requiring engagement with social theory in this context. The act of being reflexive involves intentionally destabilising the body of knowledge that reflects extant power relations as a means to improve knowledge. This is perhaps a more critical use of the term reflexivity than the one used by Watts which finds utility in the distinction.

Critical reflection is part of the process of reflexivity. Reflexivity is about an awareness of the self but a dynamic self that is reconsidered and remade performatively by action in given circumstances and is cognizant of structural constraints. Critical reflection is a crucial part of reflexivity that involves the questioning of the self and involves taking a critical approach to understanding the past self in context, while being able to apply self-criticism and to consider external ideas or the views and motives of others in order to produce a learning process (Moon, 2007). Thus, fitting with Watts' definitions, critical reflection is something that requires a base of knowledge and learning in social theory, while reflexivity is a practice of self awareness that anyone can (and should) undertake to orient themselves in the social world and particularly in the contexts in which they carry out research.

A reflective technique is often used in healthcare settings where qualitative experiential data is collected regarding patient experience and the results are reported with a view to improving patient experience in healthcare settings (for some examples, see Andersen et al., 2017; Handberg et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2020; Sparla et al., 2017; Vennik et al., 2014). This is not necessarily critical reflection: patients are asked to reflect upon their experiences, but not to contextualise these experiences within a broader structure, context and self-awareness. D'Cruz et al. (2007) note the value of critical reflection, arguing that that while reflexivity might be employed in a particular situation, critical reflection offers an understanding of the situation that is generalizable. The self learns from the self by reflecting on contexts, circumstances, decisions and actions, and doing so in a way that is both socially situated and empathetic.

Reflexivity and critical reflection are at the core of a feminist epistemology. Ackerly and True (2008) argue for adopting the process of reflexivity in research, which they construct as a key mechanism of a feminist research ethic. Feminist research is characterised by a cognizance of power and its abuses, particularly gendered structures and outcomes that are an effect of the preponderance of power claimed by structures and systems wrought by masculine elitism over time. Reflexivity is a commitment to inquiry about how we inquire that is in-built to the process and practice of feminist research. Its application does not *require* feminist politics, although is informed by

feminist politics: the researchers commit to continuously (re)considering their inquiry from a range of perspectives. Reflexive research compels researchers to appraise their own situatedness within the structures and objects of study to be better aware of their own subjective biases (Ackerly and True, 2008). Objectivity is not sought, but reflexive subjectivity can effectively mitigate a risk of bias. Nevertheless, representativeness in research is key because exclusions and silencing are more easily and frequently recognised by the excluded or the silenced. If various positions come into conversation, then they are thrown into relief through comparison and relative awareness of a variety of perspectives. The feminist research ethic of Ackerly and True (2008) is about maintaining and preserving this attentiveness both in theory and in practice – it adopts what feminism has done and does – but offers up an application for best practice across research paradigms and politics. Conscious reflexivity, and critical reflective practice in research can allay the subconscious or unconscious bias of which we might not otherwise be cognizant.

Nevertheless, reflexivity or critical reflection on the part of the researcher is often an insular and individualised process that carries the risk, as noted above, of centring around the experiences of the researcher rather than the research participants (Finlay, 2002). As Pillow outlines, reflexivity has been critiqued as 'self-indulgent, narcissistic [and] undermining the conditions for emancipatory work' (Pillow, 2003: 176, citing Kemmis, 1995 and Patai, 1994; D'Cruz, 2007). Yet, Pillow finds in her study of how reflexivity is used that the value of reflexivity remains but the question of how it is practiced needs to be tempered (Pillow, 2003). Kohl and McCutcheon (2015) suggest a communal reflexivity through informal conversations as a means of combatting the individualised process to avoid self-indulgent or self-centred practice). This communal sharing of experiences has the capacity to counteract the forms of emotional harm that Sampson et al. (2008) find to be enhanced for researchers undertaking feminist and reflexive practices.

In summary, while reflexive practice and critical reflection are not immune to critique, practicing them as defined method that can be characterised 'vigilant' research: rather than reflexivity being confessional or being understood as a 'cure' for the subjectivity introduced in experiential methods, it is understood as an exposition of these subjectivities, positionalities and their power structures (Pillow, 2003).

Experiential methods, reflexivity and migration studies

Much ethnographic research in the context of migration studies has been focused on offering a platform and a voice for migrants in terms of conceptualising borders (Brigden, 2016; Johnson, 2013), conceptualising, theorising and recognising migrant agency (Squire and

Bagelman, 2012), critically engaging security that challenges state-dominated discourses (Innes, 2015; Wibben, 2011), and conceptualising identity and foregrounding identity politics and their relevance in international relations (Sabaratnam, 2017). Yet the impact of this academic platform is not always visible to the subjects whose insights are offered up, who often continue to reside in a world without accessible immigration status, social protections and ongoing security. This arguably has produced a sense of fatigue in migrant communities who have seen visible evidence of research and researchers, but no meaningful change in terms of the inaccessibility of legal status, the difficulties associated with border crossings, the obvious racial and economic hierarchies in visa politics, the presence of violence and abuse tied to immigration experiences, and the development of pathways out of intractable immigration-related situations (Andersson, 2014, Karooma, 2019).

Research that centres around migrants and incorporates migrant voice in migration studies, critical border studies, international relations and sociology has demonstrated meaningful conceptual development, and has elaborated categories of analysis. For example, our understanding of the implications of immigration controls (De Haas, 2008; Innes, 2015; Johnson, 2013; Nevins, 2007; Squire, 2010), the lived experience of the migration journey (Brigden, 2016; Brigden and Mainwaring, 2016; Sanchez, 2016) and the various processes of bordering (Nyers, 2012; Nyers and Rygiel, 2014; Squire and Bagelman, 2012) have become significantly more sophisticated, often challenging, deconstructing and radically remaking the boundaries of the discipline. The question I raise here aims to look beyond the boundaries of migration studies discipline and towards the potential of radically remaking the systems and institutions in which migration happens and policy is made. While it is fair to say this is often a key objective of ethnographic research, there is a gap in the extent to which critical ethnographic research is accepted and used by policymakers and elites. The standards of generalizability and verifiable evidence that are applied to positivist quantitative methods cannot be applied in the same way to qualitative and ethnographic methods, often leading to a lack of confidence in the research outcomes. That is not to say that the outcomes and findings are less robust, but to acknowledge that they are subject to a set of measures designed for a different study type. Moreover, standing alone, small 'n' qualitative and interpretivist research often does not present a significant challenge to the armour of statistical data behind state immigration policy, which focuses on net migration as the measure of interest and as the main indicator of which policies are considered successful. This is evidenced by the UK Conservative Party's immigration policy over the course of the last decade that has repeatedly reinforced an objective of reducing net migration,

with scant attention to what this means in the broader context of economics, international human rights or the lived experience of migrants and transnational families (see Cangiano, 2016; McKinney, 2019; Partos, 2014; Partos and Bale, 2015).

Of course, doing research to influence policy and practice is not a new phenomenon: ethnographic work is often partnered with interested organisations and takes a participatory action approach to effect meaningful change in that context. Working alongside organisations, researchers access the research participants they need to answer co-designed research questions that fulfil an identified community need (Mora and Diaz, 2004). Nevertheless, the question remains as to how researchers can effectively resolve the issues of representation in the context of policy and practice, in addition to the context of academic findings. For example, migrants experience first-hand state services, social services, and those services provided by relief agencies that are in place to help resolve their particular crises, yet those services do not always meet their specific needs (Innes, 2015). If services and more relevantly the policies that govern those services responded to the needs of migrants rather than to ideologies of state security, then there is more chance that needs could and would be met. The first step in this process is conceptual: to investigate how the ideology can be reframed. This has been the fruitful project of much ethnographic, experiential and feminist research; for example, in migration studies and critical security studies (such as Brigden, 2018; Huysmans, 2006; Johnson, 2014; Wibben, 2011). The second step is the focus of this paper: how can that reframed ideology be – very practically – turned into policy and practice-relevant feedback for service providers, in this case, the state. And crucially, how can that feedback be packaged and communicated in a way that will be heard?

Establishing reflexivity with research participants

Methodological context

A potential answer to the above question came in the midst of fieldwork for a different project during private conversations that begged further investigation. In several conversations, police and immigration workers were highly critical of some of the enforcement actions they were required to take against people who were designated 'immigration offenders'. Where police work and immigration law were becoming integrated, it was clear to the police that some people were facing punitive measures and removal for doing very little other than having no authorised immigration status, and that this was a waste of police resources that could be used to apprehend people committing serious and harmful crimes. Thus, when police workers reflected on their actions and the policies

that were directing their actions, they found significant evidence to support their views that some policies they were required to work by were inefficient and ineffective. This was notably different from a political or ideological position that might suggest that removing a person for an immigration infraction was unethical. The act of directing resources towards identifying immigration offenders, apprehending and removing people (or more accurately detaining them in immigration removal centres) was described as detrimental to working to gather evidence that could build a case against a perpetrator of a serious crime. The police in question were applying their expert knowledge of policy and standardised practice in their working environment to offer an observation regarding the utility of that policy and practice.¹

Establishing reflexivity

Conventionally a reflexive research design will seek to continuously and critically reflect on the positioning of the self and the influence and implications that has for the research design, methods and practice. Yet, here the work of being reflexive tends to reside with the researcher. Reflexivity establishes constant learning and growth where hierarchies of knowledge are destabilised and knowledge can be re-evaluated as a result of critical reflection. Reflexive methods and the practice of critical reflection is well established in qualitative research methods, particularly in interpretive and critically oriented research and the body of ethnographic research cited above. Simultaneously, within ethnographic research there has been a move to establish participants as experts in their own everyday life, or experience, or professional environment, or identity (Johnson, 2016; Khosravi, 2018). Ethnographic work might enrol research participants as co-producers of research. Valuing expert knowledge that exists outside of academia and other hierarchies of knowledge has been a key contribution of ethnographic methods in the study of politics, policy, international relations and social sciences more broadly. The intended objective of reflexivity is to better value the knowledge, contexts, and lived experience of research participants and to move the centre of research away from the limited contexts and assumptions of an uncritical researcher. I argue that there is value in taking the additional step of creating a research environment where participants and practitioners are also compelled to think reflexively about their own situatedness within the structure or environment at stake, to appraise the episteme in which they practice, and to consider how their positionality affects their own perceptions. This is key in the context of research where participants are enrolled as providing expert knowledge, such as in the context of elite interviews, working with particular professionals and practitioners, or experiential research where

participants are considered experts in their own everyday life.

To ask for reflexivity and, crucially, to create a research environment that produces reflexivity can offer a depth of knowledge and insight that is perhaps not available to a researcher who gathers data but exists as an outsider to that data looking in. Even in embedded ethnographic research, the researcher stands apart. While she can be aware of her positionality and the mediation of knowledge through her situatedness or her outsider (or insider) status, she cannot adopt the full awareness of events as they are contextualised in the longevity and the expansive context of the everyday. If reflexivity is best practice for researchers, and we seek to actively enrol research participants as producers of knowledge, then to embed reflexivity into the framework of knowledge and/or data production is a means of producing greater depth, and greater awareness of the filtering processes of thought that might affect how we organise our knowledge of the world. Morley (2004) employed a technique of critical reflection with social services workers, as a means of overcoming entrenched power dynamics in their practice. I develop this to suggest that applying their expert knowledge reflexively to the systems, structures, institutions and circumstances in which they operate, coupled with their experience over time and exposure to different incidents and interactions, practitioners can offer a picture of what is happening that already speaks the language of their professional environment. This can offer up legible communication to those responsible for designing, running and managing that professional environment and making the laws, policies and guidelines that keep it operational. Hence, suggested changes to the laws, policies and guidelines are formed already-embedded within a shared framework of knowledge.

Definitional note on frontline workers

The context in which I have applied this research has been with frontline workers in immigration-related interactions. Frontline workers are low-level or mid-level employees who have direct contact with the public regularly in their professional role. This might include people such as police and immigration officers, social workers, interpreters, health care professionals and NGO officers. The views of lower-level employees are rarely gathered and incorporated into policy analysis and policy design. Yet, they possess first-hand experience of working with policy within the confines of standardised practices and protocols. Asking them to reflect on how policy, practice and protocol prevents or permits them to achieve the objectives associated with their professional role offers a largely untapped resource.

It is worth differentiating the objective of this research from that of work on *street level bureaucrats*. The latter

tends to evaluate the agency of frontline workers to affect outcomes. That is, what capacity to act do the workers have, within the confines of policy in which they are working, that might provoke different outcomes. It is generally assumed that in most bureaucratic positions there is a degree of discretion that can be used and that leads to diverse outcomes that may align with moral norms, a variety of legal interpretations, the adoption of different narratives, varied emotional commitments and so on (Dörrenbächer, 2017; Dörrenbächer and Strik, 2018; Lavee and Strier, 2018; Lipsky, 1980; Ottosson et al., 2013). Work on street level bureaucrats seeks to identify and understand the diverse outcomes and the relationship to the degree of discretion or the type of discretion that is available in policy implementation. Here, I draw upon that research but reposition the focus to the frontline worker's (or street level bureaucrat's) own reflective and reflexive view of the policy world in which their work is situated. Rather than observe what they do, in the empirical project I use to illustrate the process of adopting reflexivity on the part of research subjects detailed briefly below, we asked frontline police and immigration workers to reflect upon their work and evaluate the systems, policies and practices in which they work. In this process they also reflected on and recognised moments of agency at which actions on their part would realise change in the process and consequently, potential change in outcomes. Introducing reflexivity is consistent with a feminist epistemology that seeks to recognise the workers as whole people who are capable of critical reflection thoughts rather than situating frontline workers as cogs in the machine of the state, or as workers who consciously or unconsciously find space to adapt outcomes in line with their ideological preferences (drawing from Enloe, 2011). Instead, the worker is enrolled in the analytical process through critical self-reflection. Our findings suggest that asking for this reflexivity and reflective thinking on the part of the research subject can offer crucial insight that permits evaluation of policy and standardised practice, from the perspective of the very people who habitually use the policy and standardised practice. The advantages of this are twofold. (1) Frontline workers who habitually use a particular policy or standardised practice have a perspective that is different from that of the academic researcher and therefore can offer insight to elaborate or expand on – or indeed counteract – an academic analysis. For example, any unintended consequences of particular policies, or habitual side effects, are likely to be apparent to frontline workers that might not be visible to those outside the profession. And (2) Because working with frontline workers engages the state, the insights can be packaged and communicated to policy makers in familiar language or with a very clear direct interest group. For example, if it can be demonstrated that police officers find a way of working to be detrimental to their first interest of protecting the

public, it is in the interests of the state to engage with that line of argument. Rather than directing critique at the state, the researcher in this case looks for critiques of the state that exist internally and systematises them. Thus, the language of the state is internal to the research.

It is worth acknowledging here that a relevant critique of this research method is that the state habitually causes harm. That harm is often directed towards vulnerable people: people without immigration status or in insecure status, racialised minorities, and specific groups that have been historically and systematically abused by state power. To some degree, this research method involves working *with* the state, rather than operating against the state to resist the extant systems of power. That said, the research participants are not policy makers or elites, but are the everyday frontline workers who are generally low or mid-level employees. They often witness first-hand the harms associated with particular policies. To assume that they are whole people who are capable of forming opinions independent of the objectives attributed to their professions is to assume they are capable of recognising and critiquing policies and practices that are simply not fit for purpose, or that are bad, harmful or violent in practice. Time spent working in the profession builds a broader and deeper type of experiential knowledge that is internal to state practices. Patterns of harm, whether by intent or as side-effects of other objectives, can be observed over time. This depth of knowledge – particularly when supported by other types of evidence – is difficult to dismiss.

Theory in practice: Observations from an empirical project

As mentioned above, this research methodology was integrated into a larger project that had the overall aim of facilitating the integrated work of police and interpreters in an increasingly transnational world where more and more people speak English as a second language. It is worth giving a brief illustration of this methodology in practice as a model for how it might work (or be adapted). The Transnational Organised Crime and Translation (TOCAT) project was designed and led by Principle Investigator Professor Joanna Drugan to explore the working relationships and challenges faced by police and translators working across languages to investigate serious crimes like human trafficking and child sexual exploitation. Any person who is a second language speaker in the UK, regardless of their level of English language, has the right to be provided with an interpreter in police interview and other legal settings. This has implications for provision, including the cost to the police, access to interpretation for a number of different languages, quality of the interpretation, and the limited supply of qualified

linguists with the requisite certification. With growing numbers of second language speakers across the country, increased variety in the number of different languages spoken, and the increased geographical dispersion of languages across the UK (and indeed, similar dynamics cross nationally), there are significant logistical and economic challenges to providing translation and interpretation of a standardised high quality.

Methodology

Integrating reflexivity. The TOCAT project, led by PI Professor Joanna Drugan, comprised initially a working group composed of experts in language and communications, police and interpreters. This group collaboratively designed a set of new guidelines for police working with interpreters, with the aim of testing these and establishing them as part of the requisite standardised training for investigative officers who might be carrying out interviews across languages. The testing of the guidelines was designed to create a space for reflexive practice on the part of participants that would then validate and feed back into the guidelines and their delivery to interviewing officers who would adopt them. Pilot groups of police and immigration officers were trained in using the guidelines and, crucially, asked to reflect on how these guidelines responded to their own knowledge of working with interpreters. The element of reflection is of interest here: this can be considered reflexive practice because the participants considered how their own professional experiences, body of professional knowledge, and social context interacted with new and previous institutional guidelines. Adding reflexivity on the part of the research subjects produced insight regarding policies that was internal to the state and offered by police and immigration officers. Additionally, asking participants to reflect on their own knowledge and experience also incorporated and acknowledged the value of their practical expertise, therefore situating the participant as a collaborator in knowledge production rather than a subject.

The act of incorporating reflexivity was designed to take place across four stages (see Innes, 2021 for a summary of the methodology). Participants were recruited internally by police and Home Office partners to take part in a training session. This session was integrated as part of regular staff competency training for police officers and immigration officers seeking a level 2 qualification to undertake investigative interviews. The training itself was compulsory for the identified cohort of participants although they could opt out of the other three stages of the process. Stage one of the reflective focus groups asked the participants to complete a questionnaire about their own past experiences and their expectations for the training session in advance of attending the session. More than

50 questionnaires were distributed, and because they were required as part of the training there was a 100% completion rate. Stage two comprised the training itself, which was integrated into the regular programme of training that was provided to existing cohorts of participants. The third stage comprised three or four focus groups after each training session, each including 6–12 participants and facilitated by the Principle and Co-Investigator. These reflective focus groups drew on responses from the pre-training questionnaires and also asked the participants to reflect on the training, which was observed by the researchers carrying out the focus groups, while contextualising it within their past professional experience. While the focus groups ran responsively to the discussion, the set of guiding questions asked participants to evaluate their past professional experiences within their social and professional contexts (such as ‘what sort of challenges have you experienced working with interpreters and why do you think that is?’ followed by ‘do you think the guidelines provided in the training will resolve the challenge, why (not)?’). The focus group setting also allowed them to listen and respond to each others’ experiences. This meant that when particular cases were discussed, new perspectives and their related social and professional contexts were introduced within the focus group setting. The fourth and final stage was a follow-up interview several weeks after the training, asking the participant to reflect again on the training, this time in the context of the intervening weeks. There were fewer responses in this stage. The staged nature of the investigation introduced necessary reflection, and the guiding questions particularly during the focus groups asked participants to contextualise their thoughts about their own and others’ experiences.

The reflexive process offered insights that could not have been gained elsewhere. These insights relied on people working on the ground, conducting interviews and using guidelines for standardised practice in their everyday professional lives: having used them in previous context and applying that knowledge to appraise new institutional guidelines. Their working lives provided the empirical basis upon which they could draw their reflections. The training introduced a new set of considerations that they could connect their past experiences. Their specialist knowledge was developed over time by their exposure to a variety of different situations. A group-based method allowed the variety of situational experience to be further contextualised and elaborated on. The focus groups were followed up with interviews for additional reflection several weeks later. This provided an opportunity for the participants to adjust their normal responses to situations having received the training, or to reflect on what questions might not have been answered in the training. The training session was revised in response to the reflection and feedback provided. Ultimately this

training process produced a module that was adopted at the National College of Policing (UK) as part of the *Professionalising Investigation Programme* (PIP) Level One training curriculum.

Implementing reflexive methods. While the overarching project generated outcomes relevant for both interpreters and for police and immigration officers, the portion I refer to focuses on police and immigration officers because this was the section of the project with which I was primarily involved and related to my academic expertise in critical security studies and migration studies. The above-described empirical project offered insights beyond the content and delivery of the training for police officers (e.g. see Drugan, 2019, 2020, Innes, 2021), yet the reflexive process was initially designed to encourage reflective thought with regard to the training itself and how it might be contextualised in broader professional experience. The focus groups incorporated several questions asking the officers to reflect on their experiences and these reflections offered insight into this moment of encounter between an officer of the state (police or immigration) and a migrant interview participant. It is worth noting that the interview participants might be people interviewed when accused of a crime, might be people interviewed as witnesses to a crime, or might be people participating in any type of immigration interview with an immigration officer.

Focus groups were selected as a means of inviting a collective reflection on the various opinions regarding the training, which replicates to some extent the communal process introduced by Kohl and McCutcheon (2015). The group discussion invited each participant to reflect on the points others were making, which broadened the scope of the opinions they could then form drawing on their own experience of the training and contextualising that in their career history. It also introduced experiences outside of their own immediate frame of reference, which created scope for more critical self-reflection as they considered ‘what did I do / might I have done in the same situation’ and then were pushed to think about why, what guided their choices, and to reconsider their own perceptions in the context of others. There was a variance among the participants in terms of level of experience and years of work experience which meant that newer officers could draw on and learn from the experiences of more established officers but also might introduce a new perspective, counteracting potential path dependencies that more established officers might be subject to, after years of working according to standardised practices. For example, if an officer related an anecdote of something they had experienced, they could use the group as a barometer to determine how unusual such an event might be, different options for action, and then think through the action while considering newly introduced frameworks of

working with translators and interpreters from the training. The variety of contexts invoked here created scope for reflexivity. Reflexivity is evidenced in this context by the discussions in focus groups during which police and immigration officers reflected on what the experiences of the interpreters might be in relation to officer practice. These included insights adopted by the participants regarding the nature of interpretation, problems preventing a fair interpretation for migrant interviewees, and the power structure and power imbalances in the interview room (for a detailed discussion see Innes, 2021). The act of drawing on the experience of the participants acknowledged and made central to the research their professional and practical expertise. As researchers, we recognised and valorised the fact that they had access to a form of information that was only accessible through their professional role and that had accumulated over time. As participants they were valued for a specific skill level and were enrolled in the project as subject experts to guide the areas and the analytical outcomes, rather than as simply informants who provided information to be analysed academically. By creating conditions for reflexivity on the part of the participants, they gained and provided to the project a deeper level of insight from their expertise that could mitigate their own subjectively held biases thus generating better knowledge.

Reflectively oriented questions in the focus groups included things like ‘can you think of a time you have interviewed with an interpreter in the past? Do you think anything came up then, that was not addressed in the training?’ These questions asked the participants to reflect not just on the training but on their own broader experience. They were also asked ‘what might you have done differently in a past situation if you had already taken this training module?’ This asked them to critically reflect on their past experience and to apply the context of the training, to allow them to evaluate it. These are reflective questions that are asking participants to think reflexively both about their past professional experiences and things that they have recently learned or been exposed to. Crucially, they are asked to self-evaluate and question their past actions in order to form a critical opinion regarding standardised professional practices. Participants were asked to consider what might have been better or worse, or what facilitated or prevented them from properly doing their jobs.

For example, questions that responded to the pre-training questionnaire included a discussion based on doubts regarding the quality of translation. One participant had mentioned in his pre-training questionnaire that he found it problematic that he might ask a question in an interview that is interpreted into a second language by the interpreter, and a long response to the question is given in the second language. Yet, the interpreter would then turn to him and give a one-word or very short answer. This made him doubt the accuracy of the interpretation. As the

interviewer, he wanted to know everything that was being said because that might have provided relevant information or affected follow-up questions. The focus group question initially posed referred directly to this idea that a shorter response might be interpreted from a long response in a second language, asking participants if this was something they had encountered and if it provoked similar doubts as to the accuracy of the interpretation. The theme was then developed in the form of a broader question such as 'have you worked with an interpreter and had a sense of doubt about the accuracy of the interpretation, and what gives you that sense?'. This was then followed up with 'what sorts of things do you pick up on that make you worry about the quality of the interpreter'. These broader questions invite critique, reflection and discussion from the participants. They were actively being asked to draw on their own experiences and to use them to evaluate and analyse. They were also asked to consider the perspective of the interpreter and the various reasons why this situation might emerge. This led to a discussion of the need for better communication with interpreters, and the potential for (and barriers to) a standardised qualification in interpreting for investigative interviews. A theme that was introduced by one participant was dealt with both specifically and then broadened to invite further responses regarding different situations (and different opinions, because participants were not always in agreement) that focused on a similar theme of worry or doubt about accuracy of interpretation. This was then expanded into a discussion of whether the content of the training had provided techniques to alleviate that doubt and if not, how it might be improved, which generated critical insight for the participants and for the development of the training module as an output of the academic research. Moreover, broader questions and themes travelled across focus groups: for example, this question about doubt as to accuracy of interpretation was asked at all subsequent focus groups. Reflexivity on the part of the researchers meant that the focus group questions remained under scrutiny rather than forming a static script.

Discussion: The case for reflexive research participants

The motivation for this theoretical and methodological exposition was to suggest that engaging reflexivity on the part of research participants – particularly with regard to acknowledging their professional or personal expertise and consequent insight into policy and standardised practice – can produce active change at the institutional and policy levels, and at the level of standardised practices. This outcome was endorsed in the exemplar project, through the established set of guidelines for interviewing officers that was adopted as a required training module at the National College of Policing (UK).

The focus groups were integrated into a larger project. They informed the adaptation of the training that was incorporated into a module taught at the National College of Policing in the UK. The main observable outcome of the focus groups was that the level of the module was changed to target less experienced officers, and to teach and therefore ensure best practices are used when working with interpreters at an earlier career stage. Hence the reflective focus groups did indeed produce actionable change at the level of the training design that would not have been possible without them.

Perhaps more significantly, the focus groups produced observations that highlighted the need to increase investment in translation and interpreting services in a globalising world and an increasingly diverse Britain. These observations came from police and immigration officers themselves who use translation and interpreting services in the context of their everyday professional lives and were constantly exposed to the drawbacks of being unable to properly accommodate second language speakers. While this research alone has not realised this change, it has contributed to a body of empirical evidence that this increased investment is warranted. The critique of the state in this case is internal to the state: the critique of policing and immigration practices is lobbied by police and immigration officers themselves. This provides an additional platform to that of academic research from which to lodge critique and one that is specific to policy purpose, and already legible to policymakers.

Aside from the active outputs of the research, there is at the heart of this endeavour an assumption that workers are whole people, and that their personhood can be brought to bear on their experience of professional life, and that their professional experience should be recognised and valued. Gathering a body of evidence from groups of workers who are part of different workforces across the country produced of course diverse perspectives, but also located places where various views, insights and perspectives overlapped. This has the potential to create a robust body of expert opinion on what changes might be needed to better achieve service objectives. Creating a pathway for reflection within the research process allowed for a deeper understanding of the expertise of frontline workers and their critical and analytical perspectives of their working lives.

Finally, returning to one of the central questions in migration studies: what is the potential extent to which this can help resolve the problem of representation not just in terms of academic findings, but in the context of policy and practice? This question remains to be fully explored. In the context of this study, identified harms at the level of standardised practice could be acted upon and resolved. Yet, there is no guarantee that the relevant critiques of the harms wrought by specific policies will be acted upon. Nevertheless, if pervasive harms are actively

and collectively recognised by frontline workers who are key deliverers of state services, the body of evidence of harm gains an additional dimension that is internal to the state. The robustness of this evidence is improved by asking for reflexivity and critical reflection from the research participants, frontline workers and deliverers of state services. As argued above, reflexive practices offer a means of enriching analysis and insight, and working to mitigate the risk of bias produced by unconsidered subjectivity.

Of course, resolving problems of representation depends on more than simply including reflexive practices. Rather it depends on the capacity to practice inclusive research methods. In the case of the project cited in this study, participants were recruited among police and immigration officers and therefore representation is subject to the biases that affect entry into these professions. While these biases overlap and intersect with biases of representativeness in academia, there are also some differences. A lack of representativeness is not solved, but by expanding the scope of group of collaborators, it is arguably improved upon (although by no means resolves structural barriers to social equality). The method of using focus groups arguably helps reach conventionally hard-to-reach populations (Barbour, 2007), but is far from guaranteed to resolve lack of representation, and inclusivity in representation should always be at the forefront of research design. In this case, frontline workers are positioned more closely to the people who they are interviewing than policy makers. Frontline workers can see law, policy and practice at work in individual lives in a way that elites and policy makers do not witness. The intention of adopting reflexivity as research practice in this context is to value the expertise of research participants and put this expertise into a framework that, while of course subject to imperfections, can realise effective policy, institutional and systemic change.

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Data availability statement

The research materials described in this article have been deposited with the UK Data Service under the reference Drugan,

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ORCID iD

Alexandria Innes  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0100-8990>

Note

1. It should be noted that this was in the context of informal conversation rather than an academic research interview. I am not suggesting these conversations be considered evidence, rather I am relating an interaction that I attribute in part to motivating the research described in this article.

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Author biography

Alexandria Innes joined the Violence and Society Centre at City, University of London in November 2020. She specialises in the international politics of migration. Theoretically, Alexandria's research is situated at the intersection of migration studies and critical security studies in International Relations. She has published in various outlets, including Migration Studies, International Political Sociology, Security Dialogue, Geopolitics and International Relations. She is the author of two monographs, *Migration, Citizenship and the Challenge for Security* (Palgrave, 2015), and *Postcolonial Citizenship and Transnational Identity* (Routledge, 2020). Alexandria has provided commentary for the BBC World Service, and US National Public Radio.