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Embedding reflexivity in social work research through the Critical Reflexive Framework

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Abstract

Following the global pandemic, there is a need for more cross-national social work research which speaks to the increased and widespread, intra- and international, effects of global social phenomenon. Achieving this aim requires social work researchers to be responsive to the intersection of complex lives, complicated problems, and dynamic structural contexts. It is, therefore, important that researchers recognise how their identity and positionality within the research project spans several terrains such as social, political and value systems, as well as integrating multiple social categories and social roles. However, a review of the existing literature shows that the lack of conceptual guidance for 'doing' reflexivity means that researchers can sometimes pay insufficient attention to the influence that they have on the people and topic being studied. Drawing on the combined concepts of identity, translocational positionality and epistemic privilege, we aim to strengthen conceptual guidance by advancing the Critical Reflexive Framework (CRF). Following an illustrated example of the CRF, we argue for its widespread adoption to enhance the rigour, integrity and quality of social work research. We conclude that such high-quality research is essential to promote the emancipatory elements of social work practice which occurs in contexts of complexity, uncertainty and flux.

Key words: epistemic privilege, identity, reflexivity, social work research, translocational positionality

Teaser text

Reflexivity is an important component of rigorous, high-quality social work research. However, conceptual frameworks to support reflexivity in social work research projects have been under-developed. This paper advances a Critical Reflexive Framework (CRF) underpinned by concepts of identity, translocational positionality and epistemic privilege to further enable reflexivity in social work

research. We argue for its widespread adoption to enhance rigour, integrity and quality of social work research.

Introduction

Social work research is underpinned by the same aims as social work practice; that is, to promote social justice (the fair and equitable distribution of resources, opportunities and privileges in society) through social change, social cohesion, and the empowerment of people (International Federation of Social Work [IFSW], 2022). Moreover, social work research is vital in generating knowledge to enable practitioners and services to be responsive to the intersection of complex lives, complicated problems, and dynamic structural contexts. There is a need for currency and more cross-national social work research which speaks to the increased and widespread, intra- and international, effects of global phenomenon (e.g., the Ukrainian War, and recent earthquakes in Turkey and Iran). In this paper we draw on the United Kingdom (UK) as a site for implementing a new model for reflexive social work research. The UK offers an ideal context which is impacted by both national and global issues such as population and demographic flux including, for example, an increasing ageing population, migration impacts and multiculturalism.

Whilst anti-oppressive frameworks and reflective practice models for social work practice are well established, a review of the literature suggests that similar frameworks for social work research are less so. In England, for example, to support practice, there exists the Professional Capabilities Framework (BASW, 2018) and the regulatory body's Professional Standards (Social Work England, 2019). However, the principles of research governance as set out in the UK Policy Framework for health and social care research do not prescribe how to 'do' reflexive social work research (NHS Health Research Authority, 2020). We argue, throughout this paper, that unequal attention to reflexivity could jeopardise high-quality research needed to enable social work to remain responsive and current.

This gap between practice and research frameworks has become critical for UK social work research. Following the global pandemic, the then National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) published a commitment to extend and broaden its social work research portfolio, including in children and families social work research (NIHR, 2022). Demonstrating this commitment, in the same year, the NIHR changed its name to the National Institute for Health *and Care* Research (NIHR, 2022). We argue, implementing a robust framework for reflexive social work research is timely to match those already in operation for research governance and practice, and to support what will be, we hope, a new era for social work research.

In this paper, we propose a 'Critical Reflexive Framework' (CRF) for researchers. The CRF is underpinned by a rich and novel theoretical framework to reflect the complexity of social work practice. We examine the praxis of social work research in the context of reflexivity *and* knowledge production and argue that the CRF can be used in the creation and interpretation of data to support research which has robust findings, conclusions and implications, and can support change to achieve the social justice aims of social work. Whilst we propose this framework for social work research, we recognise that it can be widely applied in social science research with a social justice objective. Similarly, we emphasise the applicability and relevance of the CRF to social work communities in other national, and international, contexts.

The original contribution of this framework is that it offers a means of '*doing*' reflexivity, rather than merely describing or categorising reflexive states, or offering personal reflections (see literature review below). We draw on the combined concepts of 1) identity, 2) translocational positionality and 3) epistemic privilege as the CRF's theoretical foundation. First, put simply, we consider identity to be a person's sense of self and this is formed in contexts of diversity and plurality (Huppertz et al., 2016). Second, translocational positionality (Anthias, 2002) refers to an individual's location within a set of social relations, shaped by both structural and individual contexts. The value of combining these

concepts mirrors the need of social work practice to reflexively consider diverse positionalities and subjectivities.

Third, we advocate the adoption of Bourdieu's (1994) conceptualisation of epistemic reflexivity. Epistemic reflexivity is the scrutiny of disciplinary knowledge production within an intellectual field (that is, the field of social work). It seeks to advance understanding about the very conditions of knowledge production that, in our example of social work research, is then used to improve social work practice. We begin by presenting the results of a literature review on scholarship pertaining to reflexivity for social work research. We then more fully explain the concepts of identity and translocational positionality. Acknowledging the co-construction of knowledge in qualitative research, we offer some analysis of the relationship between reflexivity and epistemic privilege. We bring these concepts together in the Critical Reflexive Framework.

Methods

The framework proposed in this paper is undergirded by findings from a literature review. Four databases (CINAHL, ASSIA, Scopus, and the University of Sheffield's StarPlus) were searched (see Table 1). To include a wide range of papers, we did not apply date restrictions. However, we did include in our inclusion criteria the requirement for papers to be published in English (due to language limits of the authors and no access to translation services). A total of 1,288 papers were identified. Duplicates were removed, and all remaining papers were screened for relevance based on the publication's title and abstract. Papers were rejected for lack of relevance on the grounds of: wrong discipline; personal reflections only; focus on social work practice or education. 22 papers remained. However, full-text reading found that papers examined or discussed social work research and reflexivity but were mostly personal reflections on research, or focused upon the impact being reflexive had, or on types of reflexivity. We included these papers to illuminate the gap in current scholarship in terms of prescription or guidance on 'doing' reflexivity. Included papers are identified

in the reference list by an asterisk. Due to the considerable dearth of social work research-specific papers, we have used wider social science literature in the discussion that follows.

Insert Table 1

Current scholarship on reflexivity and social work research

A review of the existing literature suggests a simple definition of reflexivity as the analytical scrutiny by the researcher of the influence that they have on the people and topic being studied and on all matters of research design and process, whilst simultaneously reflecting on how the research impacts them (Gilgun, 2008). The very concept of reflexivity can be nebulous, meaning researchers either pay insufficient attention to it, or become shackled by excessive introspection (Finlay, 2002). Scholarship suggests that the 'doing' of reflexivity for social work research is neither simple nor straightforward due to the messiness of researching complex lives.

Finlay (2002, p. 209) describes reflexivity in research as 'full of muddy ambiguity and multiple trails as researchers negotiate the swamp of interminable deconstructions, self-analysis and self-disclosure'. Others argue that often a researcher's motivations, biases and reactions may not be easily reflected upon and, instead, can be deeply hidden (Probst, 2015). Probst (2015) notes that confronting one's limitations, vulnerabilities and mistakes is challenging even for the most well-meaning, reflective researcher. Further, researching sensitive topics (which characterise social work research) can trigger unexpected and powerful reactions (Gilgun, 2008). As a result, much reflexive practice in social work research remains at a surface level (Kinsella and Whiteford, 2009; Probst, 2015) which, we argue, is insufficient.

Finlay (2002) suggests a path through the research 'swamp' by outlining five modes of reflexive praxis, including: introspection; intersubjective reflection; mutual collaboration; social critique; and

discursive deconstruction. However, because the process is so idiosyncratic, at a study's outset it is difficult for the researcher to know what will require reflexivity or what tool will serve best (Probst, 2015). It remains wholly possible for researchers to get lost along the way, submerged in navel-gazing, immersed in narcissistic self-absorption, or engaged in protracted and legitimised emoting (Finlay, 1998). Probst (2015) asks whether reflexivity actually produces better research. We argue that it should, particularly in social work research involving vulnerable communities.

Folkes (2022) goes further in her critique of reflexive practices as she argues that it mainly results in positionality statements that seek to compare researcher and research participant identities. Rogers (2021) notes that it tends towards describing insider/outsider negotiations, barriers and facilitators (e.g., see Gill, 2022). Gill (2022) argued that having a shared identity with her research population, enhanced access, rapport building and shared knowledge creation. Gill's account mirrors much reflexivity scholarship which are personal, autoethnographic or autobiographical accounts which describe navigating ethical dilemmas to the neglect of other reflexive matters such as the differences in identity-related privilege and power dynamics (Poulton, 2020).

Scholarship has mostly focused on personal reflections (e.g., Carbo, 2008; Gill, 2022) definitions and typologies of reflexivity (e.g., Finlay 2002; D'Cruz *et al.*, 2007), or discussions of its utility (e.g., Ben-Ari and Enosh, 2011; Probst, 2015; Thurston *et al.*, 2023). Probst and Berenson (2012) set out to understand qualitative social work researchers' use of reflexivity with a modest sample (n=6) who described techniques for reflexivity (e.g., adoption of diaries). Probst and Berenson noted their study's limitations including reliance on self-reports and that participants potentially presented as more reflexive than they actually were. They acknowledged that their study was entirely descriptive and small in size. In a different study on reflexivity and qualitative research, Ide and Beddoe (2023) offer a conceptually-rich description of reflexivity and examples of reflexive thinking by the first author, but again this lacks direction for 'doing' reflexivity. Thus, this literature review found that the

'doing' of reflexivity (and prescription about 'how' to be reflexive) has been somewhat neglected giving way to descriptive work depicting reflexive modes, and accounts of its value and outcomes; e.g., knowing oneself (Pillow, 2003), being emotionally intelligent (Herland, 2022) and transparency about role performance (Ide and Beddoe, 2023).

There are additional problems within current scholarship in that even when the key concepts of identity, social location and positionality are examined in relation to social work research, the proposed solution has been to merge anti-oppressive practice (AOP) with research praxis (Rogers, 2012). This emphasis is, however, problematic. For example, whilst the concept of intersectionality undergirds the need to recognise oppression in all of its manifestations, anti-racism - a driving force in modern social work research and practice - can be lost by an unreflected commitment to demonstrate AOP (Mayor, 2022a, 2022b). Although decentralised political and social movements, including the Black Lives Matter movement, have legitimised the resurgence in power-levelling practices to tackle racism in social work, anti-racist research praxis has not been advanced in an equal way. Where existing frameworks advocate anti-racist research practice (Mayor, 2022a, 2022b), accompanying theory often lacks the depth and guidance needed for meaningful application. In additions, such frameworks risk neglecting other intersectionalities.

We accept that without a commitment to anti-racism, power-levelling and AOP in research cannot equate fully to reflexive practice. The values of anti-racist practice should be, and are, reflected in our framework because, at its core, anti-racism is concerned with countering prejudice, systemic racism, and oppression. Our framework has relevance for all social work research and, we argue, goes further to embed a more sophisticated understanding of the multi-dimensional and intersecting nature of identity, positionality and privilege as fundamental in shaping human experience. Emerging scholarship is addressing this; e.g., see Rogers and Brown's (2023) work examining their cisgender identity in research with gender diverse individuals.

Power-levelling strategies in social work research are typically reflected in participatory and co-production research designs. Such approaches arguably embed the principles of reflexivity, as these necessitate reflecting upon engagement and collaborative, power-sharing intentions. However, Flanagan (2020) argues that involving people with lived experience in social work research (also termed 'user involvement') is not common, despite long-standing calls for action in this regard (Golightley and Holloway, 2018). Claims of inclusion and co-production in social work research can often be challenged as it mirrors the tokenistic involvement that can occur in social work practice (Boxall and Beresford, 2013). Moreover, Loughran and McCann (2015: 706) concluded that 'although service user involvement in research is desirable, it remains unclear what this means in practice'.

Again, our framework helps to address the issue raised by Loughran and McCann. As opportunities for collaborative research can be enhanced through an equal commitment to reflexivity, we believe that all those involved in the research should be supported to demonstrate self-awareness and thus identify any influences that could affect data collection or analysis. For this reason, our framework has value for primary investigators and co-investigators, but also for those with lived experience, increasing shared understanding and allowing for a more rigorous approach, as part of any participatory research process.

Core CRF concept 1: Identity

In simple terms, identity is a person's sense of self, established by their unique characteristics, affiliations, and social roles. Both individual and group identity are formed in contexts of diversity and plurality and should, in fact, be discussed as identities in plural (Huppatz *et al.*, 2016). The way in which identities are recognised and constituted occur 'across a range of different discourses, often competing and inconsistent, and constructed not just by us, but for us' (Pini, 2004, p. 171). In other words, identity is discursive, situated and a construct shaped by social and temporal contexts. It can

be self-assigned or ascribed by others. Researchers must be mindful that attributing an identity to another (e.g., the 'service user') can be experienced positively, but also as disempowering, oppressive and marginalising (e.g., leading to the 'service refuser').

Identities are an important dimension of social work practice *and* research. In practice environments, it is agreed that a positive sense of self and identity is fundamental to human development and flourishing (Merrill *et al.*, 2016). Identity is, therefore, a fundamental aspect of social work assessment as intervention which foregrounds ways to promote positive identity to enhance well-being is vital (Flynn, 2021). Moreover, identity formation and maintenance are complex transactional relationships (Dominelli, 2022) and, as such, identity is central to relational practice; a core social work skill which helps to build rapport and trust, as well as to nurture positive interactions. Moreover, it is imperative that researchers consider those identities that are adopted by participants, or ascribed by others, within the context of social work practice and the wider, often challenging, environments that shape people's lived experience.

The notion of belonging is important too as it has experiential, affective, practical and material dimensions. It is associated with how a person makes sense of and describes their identity and location in the social world. An understanding of identity requires an acknowledgement of similarity and difference which, inevitably, denotes boundaries and belonging (and its opposite, non-belonging). These processes of belonging are not discrete, nor independent, but they serve to emphasise the interplay of similarity and difference. Bilgen *et al.* (2021) add a word of caution highlighting that the recognition of difference or similarity does not always enable the social work researcher to develop a reflexive response. Reflexivity requires an honest engagement with the factors that influence the co-construction of knowledge to consider how ontologies and social constructs create and reinforce identities in the first place. It is also a reflexive commitment to iteratively consider difference and

similarity through the intersubjective encounter of data collection and knowledge co-construction, and afterwards during the process of data analysis and sense-making.

Core CRF concept 2: Translocational positionality

The term 'positionality' refers to an individual's location within a set of social relations (Anthias, 2002). An analysis of positionality can be used to understand the manifestations and performative nature of identity, as well as a person's sense of belonging in diverse, shifting structural and systemic contexts. Considering the positionality of research participants requires *critical* and *sustained* engagement with the notion of situated, and shifting, identities and positionalities of both the researcher *and* the research participant. This enables the researcher to understand what is influencing the co-construction of knowledge including their own biases, motivations or affective responses, or those of the participant.

Translocational positionality is a concept that also refers to an individual's placement, or position, within a set of social relations (Anthias, 2002). It refers to behaviour, performativity or 'practices that implicate identification' (Anthias, 2002, p.501). The term 'translocational' signals contextuality and the multiplicity of locations that a person may inhabit across time and space. It also involves connections between the past, the present and the future. Indeed, the term 'translocational' reflects the complex nature of positionality and the interplay of a range of locations in relation to those social identities noted above (such as age, gender, language or ethnicity) but also other locations shaped by political or religious views, citizenship or some other legal status, for example.

Anthias (2002) claims that translocational positionality is 'an intermediate concept between objectivism and subjectivism, inhabiting a space between social constructionism and approaches that stress agency' (2002, p.502). In other words, using translocational positionality helps to facilitate an analysis of how macro-level (structural) contexts shape individual agency (at the micro-level), and how

both are mediated by people's multiple and shifting positionalities (Rogers and Ahmed, 2017). Positionality represents a meso-level system (middle ground, or liminal space) between structure and agency. Reflexive considerations take place within the meso-system during which the researcher considers micro-level factors (*individual influences* such as identity and personal experience) and the connections with macro-level factors (*structural influences* such as societal norms, poverty or colonial histories, as well as institutions such as family, religion and law).

Adopting a translocational lens helps to analytically breakdown the complexity of identities and positionalities into meaningful elements. Translocational positionality considers identity in terms of locations which are not fixed but are context-, meaning- and time-related, and which, therefore, involve shifts and contradictions. In different locations, the positionality of a person reflects the context of their lived experiences, practices and mobilities. It concurrently implicates notions of categorisation in relation to social order and social hierarchies, which Anthias (2002) explains are informed by individual, intersubjective or co-constructed, organisational and/or representational knowledge.

Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality is relevant to this discussion of translocational positionality, and whilst it has advanced our understanding of the oppression experienced by people with intersecting marginal characteristics, we also need to acknowledge the breadth of identities that come together in a translocational analysis. This breadth includes identities linked to: social categories (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, or religion); social roles (e.g., as a 'carer' or 'researcher'); experiences (e.g., as 'victim' or 'the homeless'); and actions (e.g., the 'criminal' or 'youth offender'). We argue that this breadth is rarely considered in an intersectional perspective.

Anthias' (2002) concept of translocational positionality, on the other hand, emphasises combinatory or complex articulations of social divisions, locations and processes, across time and contexts, which

are broader than those considered by intersectionality models. As such, applying translocational positionality requires a consideration of the differential power, and representations that inevitably shift across time and space (Koh and Sin, 2022; Rogers and Ahmed, 2017). Further, Anthias (2002) claims that translocational positionality has utility as a conceptual lens for projects which interrogate hierarchies and mobility in relation to social identities, marginalisation, and belonging.

Since Anthias' original thesis, translocational positionality has been applied to enhance understanding of marginalised communities including trans and non-binary people (Rogers and Ahmed, 2017), women in the military (Doan and Portillo, 2017), and Romani and Traveller communities (Allen and Hulmes, 2021). For example, using data from Rogers' doctoral study, Rogers and Ahmed demonstrated the agency of trans and non-binary people through processes of self-identification in different public and private contexts. One participant identified as a "trans woman" in her work role (an identity deemed to be more intelligible to their work colleagues), but as "butch genderqueer, who occasionally does girly femme" in her personal life (deemed by the participant to be more authentic, but less acceptable to their work colleagues) (See Rogers and Ahmed, 2017, p.7). In this example, a translocational lens enabled analysis of the reasons for and ways that identities were adopted in certain contexts to enable the individual to gain more power from a positionality seen as more/less acceptable or intelligible.

Core CRF concept 3: Epistemic privilege and its relationship to reflexive praxis in social work research

Reflexivity requires awareness of how the researcher's identities and positionalities are central to shaping the research agenda, data collection, analysis and, ultimately, co-constructed knowledge (Peake, 2017; Smith, 2009). The latter raises epistemological concerns which need careful consideration. Moreover, epistemic privilege, within the context of social work as a discipline that engages with vulnerable people, needs to be acknowledged as a potentially significant influence in knowledge production. Epistemic privilege is the philosophical concept that certain knowledge, such

as knowledge of one's own thoughts, can be utterly private and not known by others (Heil, 1998). Importantly, it also refers to the notion of having privileged access to broader knowledge about the social world. In the context of social work research, this broader knowledge relates to insights about practice-related issues such as the socio-cultural, political or legislative contexts in which social work takes place, or the formal frameworks that shape practice (for example, regulatory and professional standards).

To complement the more individualistic reflexivity described in core concepts 1 and 2, we propose that Bourdieu's (1994) conceptualisation of epistemic reflexivity is fundamental to the CRF as it promotes an analysis of epistemic privilege and collective knowledge. Epistemic reflexivity is the scrutiny of disciplinary knowledge production within an intellectual field (the field of social work). It seeks to advance understanding about the very conditions of knowledge production that, in our example of social work research, is then used to inform policy and practice. Epistemic reflexivity acknowledges that the production of disciplinary knowledge is not a neutral process. Moreover, Bourdieu argued "epistemic reflexivity provide(s) not only a means of developing richer descriptions of the social world but also the basis for a more practically adequate and epistemologically secure social science" (Maton, 2003, p.53). In other words, it enhances richness and integrity which are fundamental to high-quality research.

Acknowledging epistemic privilege relies on epistemic humility (Goetze, 2018), an intellectual virtue, requiring social work researchers to acknowledge their knowledge is always partial, and that it will require revision in light of new evidence. Goetze (2018: 84) argued that knowledge is interpreted, structured, and filtered by the researcher and this requires admitting the gaps in one's own interpretive tools "especially with respect to the experience of the marginally situated". Additionally, the reflexive attempt to acknowledge epistemic privilege moves away from individualised statements of identity and positionality (CRF core concepts 1 and 2) to consider how the collective body of social

work knowledge ascribes identity and positionality to people who interact with social work practice or research (for example, the 'service user' or 'service refuser'), and the ways that such ascription shapes people's engagement with social work services and, ultimately, the outcomes of intervention.

A Critical Reflexive Framework for social work research

The Critical Reflexive Framework (CRF) draws on the core concepts outlined above to advance a means of achieving critical reflexivity in social work research. The CRF requires reflection upon social identities and positionalities, and upon how these influence knowledge production for social work practice, to establish and reflexively consider the collective conditions of knowledge production (Maton, 2002). Through four key stages, the framework offers specific questions which align to the values of social work practice (IFSW, 2022) and support the 'doing' of reflexivity (see Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1

Stage 1 Research Design

First, the researcher must consider how the research design might affect the co-construction of knowledge. A well-informed rationale for the research needs to reflect the emancipatory aims of both social work research and practice. An inflexible commitment to aspects of the research design (e.g., data collection method, the interview structure or decisions about dissemination) can compromise epistemic humility and meeting those emancipatory aims. There are some fundamental questions that researchers should ask including: has the importance of the research questions been verified by people with lived experience? Indeed, reflexive action can be used to substantiate research questions, design, conduct and dissemination. From the outset, the involvement of people with lived experience in different stages of the research design can help to achieve these aims.

Applying the principles of Stage 1

An emancipatory element of any research design must first understand and contextualise the intersectional lived experience of inequalities, oppression and racism and the relationship that these influences have with other structural factors that exist outside of the control of many research participants. For example, consistent with the priorities of modern social work practice, the research design should prioritise those with a lived experience of inequalities, oppression and racism in research design, data collection and strategies for dissemination through participatory or co-constructed action: e.g., collaborating with people with lived experience through focus group discussions to agree research questions, or filming them speaking about their experience for vlogs to disseminate study findings.

Stage 2 Researcher influence

The CRF encourages deep analysis of how the identity and positionality, as well as underlying assumptions and values, of the researcher may influence knowledge production (Smith, 2009). Similar to the scrutiny of an ontological position, the researcher should consider how their identity, positionality and privilege influences the research design, data collection and analysis. Specifically, the researcher should examine their personal history, biography and positionality to scrutinise their decision-making, and actions. This requires an honest analysis of self and the influence of agency. A focus on similarity and difference should extend to identify specific actions needed to acknowledge and better understand the impact of identity associated with the dichotomous or overlapping locations of the researcher and research participant. This helps to facilitate a consideration of the needs of the research participant (Demartis, 2013). This level of reflexivity should minimise bias to promote accuracy, validity and/or an acknowledgement of the multiple versions of truth.

Applying the principles of Stage 2

As a cisgender, heterosexual researcher, Rogers set out to develop an understanding of trans and non-binary identities and experiences (Rogers, 2013). Her concerns over intrusion and cisgender privilege

(the privilege you receive when your gender identity matches your sex assigned at birth) were minimised through a sustained reflection on positionality and the adoption of epistemic humility. To begin, Rogers achieved trust and confidence by demonstrating openness about the motivations for the research. She talked to the research participants about the limits of her understanding and the differences in experiences and identity as a point of comparison. A candid discussion about the way that Rogers sees and knows the world as separate to the way that the research participant sees and knows the world was critical to co-constructing knowledge.

Stage 3 Participant Influence

The potential challenge to recognising the 'location' of the research participant in stage 3 is compounded in the shared or contrasting identities and positionalities of the researcher and the research participant. There are important questions about how the experiences of the research participant can be identified and interpreted by a researcher whose own identity, positionality, location and experience may unwittingly influence decisions about what matters most in the topic under investigation. We argue that combining epistemic reflexivity with more individualistic reflexivity solves the issue. Consider, for example, the description of a 'service user' who passively acquiesces to social work involvement, versus the 'service refuser' who resists or rejects the label of 'service user', and the interventions being offered (Boxall and Beresford, 2013). This illustrates how identity (and identity categories) can be determined by everyday discourses that emphasises the separation or interplay of similarity and difference. Although a social work researcher might refer to the 'service user' using terms that locate and maintain a sense of difference, it is unlikely that the person engaging with social work support will describe or perceive themselves in that way. It is for this reason that understanding and managing identity is integral to the researcher who should recognise the 'service user' as a person with whom to build a partnership to create new knowledge (Flynn, 2021). In addition, being mindful of the interplay of similarity and difference can help when developing relationships that enable research participants to articulate their experiences. Such mindfulness should also recognise,

and be responsive to, the weighting of power and privilege associated with identities that are similar and those that are different (Anthias, 2002).

Applying the principles of stage 3

Allen, a white British man, was visiting Mary, a Romani woman, in research exploring the lived experience of eviction (Allen, 2012). Mary was facing imminent removal from an unauthorised encampment on a supermarket car park. The first time they met, Mary pointed to Allen's bag, smart trousers and blazer and asked if he was a "tax collector", joking that there was no need for him to dress so formally. In preparation for the interview, Allen had not taken the time to consider and understand how the multiplicity of locations could be communicated and reinforced through dress choice and first impressions.

Mary talked about the experience of being accepted and rejected by society and what the experience of eviction meant to her. Then Mary asked if Allen had finished all of his questions. He replied "Yes" and thanked Mary for her time. Mary then turned to him, smiled and said, "Good, leave your recording machine on. Now you can now ask me questions about the things that really matter". At this point, Allen realised that his research strategy had been defined by presupposition. Allen approached the interview thinking his questions were valid and relevant, but instead, they represented a dominant narrative that was being imposed on Mary who expressed different priorities.

Stage 4 Structural Influence

At stage 4 the researcher examines how identities, positionalities and lived experiences relate to structural, historical and social processes framed by the past, present and future events (at micro- and macro-levels). For example, in research with older adults, it may be important to be aware of colonial histories or lived experience of war in connection with identity formation, norms and cultures. At the same time the researcher must not make assumptions; for some people their personal histories are

just that and it is their identity in the present (and future) that counts as important to them. For instance, trans people who have transitioned from one gender to another may view their previous gender identity, and transitioning history, differently depending on their experience of acceptance/transphobia and their perspective of ongoing debates and divisions around transgender rights. Facilitating the opportunity for research participants to make sense of past, present and future possibilities as a precursor for change can align with the emancipatory aims of social work research (IFSW, 2022).

At all times, the researcher should be alert to, and articulate, those structural inequalities and dominant narratives that exist to limit or preclude the involvement of research participants such as those based on racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, disablism, poverty or migration status. For example, in research with Roma people, it is imperative that a researcher demonstrates an awareness of the history of widespread socio-economic, political and academic hostility and racism faced by individuals, families and communities and how this continues to shape their everyday experiences of the social world (Allen and Hulmes, 2021). It is necessary to be mindful that communities are heterogenous, that intersecting factors can have further effects, and that a research participant's identities and lived experiences are contextually situated, and subject to different meanings and inflections (Anthias, 2008). Care should be taken to ensure that the location of the research participant is not defined, fixed nor imposed on them by the systematic enquiry, rather an analysis of structural influences can enable an environment that facilitates the full and meaningful participation of the research participant.

As research funding is shaped by socio-economic, political and academic forces that require evidence of impact or utility in order for funding bids to succeed, a critically reflexive researcher needs to be able to identify how their potential to generate new knowledge is regarded as having value and impact to those controlling research budgets. This is relevant from the start when preparing research

questions and thinking through research design, through to data collection and analysis and, importantly, when planning knowledge mobilisation. Using stage 4 of the CRF, a critically reflexive researcher will acknowledge the systemic and institutional factors that influence these processes in addition to the wider influences upon research participants as part of epistemic privilege.

Applying the principles of stage 4

Consider, for example, a person living with a long-term mental health illness. Their positionality can be conceived as an outcome of the mental health condition but also of their subjective agency, health and diagnosis (e.g., the decision to engage with treatment or not). The intersection of stigma, prejudice and discrimination means that this positionality is also determined by structural influences that affect their access to treatment, opportunities and experience of social exclusion. Their lived experience will be concurrently shaped by intersecting aspects of their identity such as gender, sexuality, age, or ethnicity. For example, there remains a stigma around men's mental ill health, and in relation to particular diagnosis such as personality disorders. Additionally, not every person living with a long-term mental health illness experiences the same outcome in health, assessment, treatment and recovery. Instead, individual positionality within the structure of mental health services differs according to the processes that enable or limit equal access and individual engagement. This example illustrates that positionality is dependent on both structure and agency.

Concluding comments

In this paper, we have fused the concepts of identity, translocational positionality and epistemic privilege in the CRF. This combined conceptual framework holds considerable potential as a reflexive tool in social work research to aid reflection upon the positionalities and subjectivities of the researcher and research participants that are enacted and operationalised during the co-construction of knowledge. Recognising the influence of epistemic privilege, we have sought to emphasise the value of reflecting upon collective disciplinary knowledge (Bourdieu, 1998; Wacquant, 1992). Epistemic

humility counters epistemic privilege as it requires an explicit and iterative analysis of covert and overt biases, motivations and values (Goetze, 2018). Therefore, epistemic reflexivity is vital as the third core concept of the CRF to prompt the scrutiny of disciplinary knowledge production within the field of social work. This means examining existing, as well new, co-constructed knowledge.

By maintaining the reflexive gaze on the interplay of a range of identities and positionalities, we argue that the framework draws attention to context, temporality and the situated nature of knowledge production. The CRF has utility for social work research particularly within a current context of multiculturalism, and increasing calls for the internationalisation of social work. Moreover, the CRF is a structured model requiring sophisticated levels of reflexivity which is needed to recognise that social work research takes place in the context of lived experience, centring the structural forms of disadvantage to help support the application of a more granular form of analysis. The emphasis here is on the interplay of micro-level factors (e.g., physical disability, or age) and macro-level factors (e.g., ableism, or age-based norms/ageism). This analysis should seek to understand how the lives of the research participants are located across multiple, but also fractured and inter-related social spaces (Anthias, 2008). Adopting the CRF in social work research can resolve some of the complex challenges associated with the different positionalities and subjectivities of the researcher/research participant. This will enable more cross-national social work research which speaks to the increased and widespread, intra- and international, effects of global social phenomenon.

It is important that researchers recognise how their identity and positionality within the research project spans several terrains such as social, political and value systems, as well as integrating multiple social categories and social roles (Anthias, 2008). Thereby attending to the multivocality and plural positioning of a research participant, the researcher stands a better chance of seeing the world through the eyes of the participant. Further, the centring of multiple positionality and polyvocality is

germane to social work research when considering the heterogeneity in professional and service user identities and experiences, practice settings and other relevant contexts.

The CRF addresses the gap that exists for social work researchers in terms of 'doing' reflexive research. We argue that reflexivity is a skill that is taken for granted in social science research *per se*, and rarely explored in practical terms (the 'doing' of reflexivity). Additionally, we recognise that reflexivity in social work research takes place under complex, uncertain and dynamic conditions (the environment of social work practice), and often in areas that are socially and politically sensitive. This necessitates a framework which is supported by a rich theoretical underpinning to reflect the complexity of lives, complicated nature of problems, and shifting, diverse structural contexts. Finally, the deeper, sophisticated level of reflexivity achieved by implementing the CRF, we argue, will enhance emancipatory and transformative social work research.

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