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From member checking to collaborative reflection: a novel way to use a familiar method for engaging participants in qualitative research

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ABSTRACT

The importance of engaging participants collaboratively in knowledge production is increasingly emphasised. We reflect on our use of a form of member checking to inform future research directions. We invited clinicians to participate in in-depth interviews to reflect on a plain language summary of the results and recommendations from an initial study in which they had participated. Our aim was not to modify those results, but to invite reflection, scrutiny, and insights into how results might be best communicated, translated, or implemented. We propose this *collaborative reflection* approach as a useful tool for engaging participants or other stakeholders more collaboratively within broader programs of research. We argue that *collaborative reflection* offers a novel way to engage participants or stakeholders in knowledge production in a way that can enable movement *toward* deeper collaboration and potential co-production, and conclude by identifying a range of ways in which this tool might be used.

KEYWORDS

Collaboration; member checking; member reflections; participant feedback; research design

There is an increasing emphasis that psychology or health research be conducted collaboratively, in-partnership, or co-produced with participants, consumers, or stakeholders. Such research is not without challenges, both conceptually (see Banner et al. 2019) and materially (e.g., in terms of feasibility, this can be time and resource intensive; Cassidy et al. 2021). Moreover, doing high-quality collaborative research requires a high level of skill many researchers have not been well supported to learn (Cassidy et al. 2021). Despite this, a wide range of engaged forms of research, including co-production, participatory research, and integrated knowledge translation are increasingly used in psychology and broader health contexts, each with strengths and weaknesses (Nguyen et al. 2020). Within qualitative research more broadly, various forms of member checking and iterative approaches to data and

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knowledge generation have been used across disciplines and approaches (Birt et al. 2016); and these can also be understood as forms of engaged or collaborative research. Member checking processes generally occur within a single project and also have various strengths and weaknesses, depending on how they are engaged and the broader research methodology in which they are being employed (Birt et al. 2016).

In this article, we describe our novel use of a form of member checking – that we call *collaborative reflection* – as a methodological tool for engaging stakeholders collaboratively across studies within a broader program of research. Collaborative reflection draws on existing member checking and reflection techniques but differs in that participants can directly speak back to previous research findings and contribute to shaping *ongoing* research directions, rather than commenting on data or an analysis-in-progress within a single study. We offer collaborative reflection as a tool researchers might consider that can 1) helpfully facilitate increased collaboration where this is, or was not, otherwise feasible; and 2) assist to move basic research (and especially critical inquiry) toward increasingly collaborative research and implementation, which is especially important in health research contexts.

We outline our use of collaborative reflection within an ongoing program of research and articulate how our approach differs from previous uses of member checking or reflection. We then provide a reflexive discussion that considers some specific challenges for collaborative reflection and describe opportunities this tool offers researchers for engaging participants and other stakeholders more collaboratively in research. We hope this article will serve as a starting point for ongoing discussion about the possibilities of reflexive collaboration as a useful methodological tool. To this end, we conclude by identifying how this tool might be extended or used in different ways in psychological research as well as the broader health, medical and social sciences.

Collaborative reflection as a follow-up study

We used collaborative reflection as the basis of a follow-up study (Study 2; Urry et al. 2023), to provide participants from an initial study (Study 1) opportunity to reflect on and discuss the final results generated. Study 1 explored Australian mental health clinicians' perceptions of sexuality and sexual health in their work (Urry 2020). We used a critical qualitative methodology grounded within a social constructionist approach, with an aim of developing a deep understanding of participants' understandings of sexuality and sexual health, and how they perceived (aspects of) these as relevant within their workplaces and professional practice. Ethical approval was granted by the School of Psychology Human Research Ethics Subcommittee at the University of Adelaide (15/107). Data were generated through once-off in-depth

interviews with 22 clinicians from three disciplines (psychology, psychiatry, and mental health nursing). Participants had the opportunity to review their de-identified transcript to ensure sufficient confidentiality, but no analytic input. At the end of the project, participants received a plain language summary of the results and recommendations for improving sexuality-related care in mental health settings based on those analyses and the wider literature (see Supplemental Materials). This process was planned from the outset of the project as an ethical process (Tracy 2010) and way to disseminate the research findings.

Our use of collaborative reflection (Study 2) was not planned from the outset of Study 1. It was borne out of a desire to understand how clinicians – and especially the clinicians whose data we had analysed in Study 1 – might react, respond, and engage with the findings and recommendations generated. The overarching aim of Study 1 was to contribute to improving sexuality-related care in mental health settings. Understanding how the results from Study 1 resonated (or not) with mental health clinicians, and how they perceived the recommendations generated might be best implemented to support clinicians to sustainably improve their practice, would help to direct further research and efforts to improve sexuality-related care in mental health settings. So, we amended our ethical approval and invited the same clinicians to directly reflect on, scrutinise, and even challenge summarised results and recommendations from Study 1. Participants received an invitation to participate in Study 2 when we disseminated the plain language summary in late 2018 (all participants had consented to receive the summaries). Six clinicians participated in a second interview (Study 2), conducted by Urry 18–24 months after the Study 1 interviews and lasting an average of 71 min. These participants were three psychologists, two nurses, and one psychiatrist. Three additional clinicians expressed interest but were eventually unable to participate due to time and scheduling constraints. Like Study 1, Study 2 was not remunerated in any way. Participants were again given the opportunity to review and approve interview transcripts for confidentiality, but again had no analytic input. A critical realist approach underpins Study 2, whereby participants' talk is understood as reflecting their own situated experience and understandings, as it is shaped by broader social, cultural, and institutional or professional contexts in which they are learn, work, and live (e.g., Willig 2016).

The collaborative reflection interviews were in-depth and participant-led, based on their reflection of the (brief) plain language summary which was present in the interview and served as the only 'interview guide'. These interviews were conversational, with participants and Urry reflecting together on the results from Study 1 and on participants' ongoing experiences and perceptions as they related to the summarised findings and the research topic more broadly. We found these interviews were grounded in a shared understanding

that had not always been obvious in Study 1; that there is a problem regarding sexuality-related care in mental health settings needing resolution. Participants and Urry talked together within this context to generate ideas about how that problem can be best approached and addressed or resolved, based on participant reflections. Urry also answered participants' questions and shared resources to support their practice in relation to topics being discussed, but only after prompting them to share their thoughts or ideas first (see Oakley 2016).

Locating collaborative reflection

There are a range of approaches to engaging participants to check, reflect on, or otherwise contribute in iterative ways to research processes taken up across disciplines with a goal to enrich qualitative data, qualitative analysis, or both. These can be underpinned by a range of philosophical frameworks guiding approaches to data generation and analysis, but what they have in common is that: 1) they generally occur *within* a particular study or project; and 2) culminate in an analysis that has incorporated – in some way – participants' perspectives of the data or the analysis itself during its production. Our use of collaborative reflection is reflected in a range of similar approaches to member checking and reflection other researchers have used; but also differs in some important ways. The primary distinction is that collaborative reflection involved participants reflecting on finalised – even published – analytic findings as the basis of a second study that, while related to the first and belongs to the same overarching research program, was separate from that initial study. Here, we provide an overview of some existing approaches to iterative participant engagement and then outline similarities and differences with our use of collaborative reflection.

Member checking, or participant validation, is a widely used and discussed process in qualitative research referring to researchers' attempts to 'check' or verify the accuracy of the data or the analysis itself against participants' experience, knowledge, or reality (e.g., Read 2018). The aim is generally to improve the credibility, validity, and trustworthiness of the results (Birt et al. 2016), though the way in which this is achieved through member checking processes is often not explicitly justified (Thomas 2017; Varpio et al. 2017). Member checking can be performed in different ways, including by returning interview transcripts, preliminary analyses, or a drafted report of the study to participants for comment or discussion. One of the most common approaches to member checking within interview-based studies is to have participants review and approve their interview transcript for accuracy (Birt et al. 2016; Thomas 2017). This process of having participants 'comment and/or correc[t]' their transcript is included on the COREQ checklist (Tong, Sainsbury, and Craig 2007) to which journal editors increasingly require authors of qualitative

research studies to adhere in academic publishing. This is despite critiques of the use of universal, checklist-style criteria for determining quality and rigour in qualitative research (Braun and Clarke 2021; Motulsky 2021; Smith and McGannon 2018; Thomas 2017).

Beyond transcript approval, researchers have also returned interim analyses of each participants' data or the entire dataset to participants to allow participants to 'check', add to, or even correct researchers' interpretations and therefore shape final analysis. For example, serial interviewing is used across a range of methodologies, including ethnography, and refers to interviewing participants on multiple occasions (with or without participant observation), allowing for participants and researchers to reflect on and talk about data and analysis as they are developed over time. Like other forms of member checking, this process is often understood as an opportunity to 'verify and cross-check information' as well as generating additional data, improving 'accuracy' (Read 2018). Birt et al. (2016) developed a 5-step Synthesised Member Checking process in which participants are invited to provide written feedback or comment on both data and interim analysis. Participants are asked to comment whether the summarised analysis resonates with their experiences, whether they want to change any part of the analysis and invited to provide any further comments. This process is intended to provide participants 'opportunity to influence the analysis' including by disagreeing with the interim results presented (Birt et al. 2016, 1808), and to enhance credibility by validating the accuracy of analysis in representing participants' experiences.

These approaches to member checking often (but not always) carry assumptions of an ontological truth or accuracy the researcher is attempting to capture, and that the data or analytic interpretation can approximate this truth (Birt et al. 2016; Braun and Clarke 2013; Varpio et al. 2017). This may be appropriate if consistent with broader research design or approach (Birt et al. 2016); but this assumption does not sit comfortably within all philosophical frameworks underpinning qualitative research types (Varpio et al. 2017). For example, in Study 2 our goal was *not* to test the 'truthfulness' of the findings from Study 1 – nor to validate findings in an objective sense – but rather to understand how clinicians might perceive and engage with or *make-sense of* the knowledge generated using their data. In both Studies 1 and 2, however, we did invite participants to 'check' transcribed data before analysis; but this was on ethical grounds, to ensure sufficient confidentiality and de-identification, and any additional comments provided during that process were included with consent in the dataset for analysis.

Some researchers who take up a more relativist approach to knowledge production have shifted from conceptualisations of member checking to member *reflection* (Braun and Clarke 2013; Tracy 2010). For example, Tracy (2010) discusses member reflection within a relativist approach – including relativist ontology – where this reflective process is not about verifying the

accuracy of an analysis but is instead ‘an opportunity for *collaboration* and reflexive *elaboration*’ (p. 844). From this perspective, the researcher’s process of sharing and discussing initial analytic interpretations with participants ‘provide[s] opportunities for questions, critique, feedback, affirmation, and even collaboration’ (Tracy 2010, 844). So, researchers might discuss preliminary analysis with participants to shape and deepen analysis (Braun and Clarke 2013, 284; Cavallerio, Wadey, and Wagstaff 2020; Tracy 2010). Importantly, member reflection tends to be understood as a process researchers engage within a study or project that contributes to shaping or refining the analysis, or knowledge, produced through *that* research and, in doing so, enhances the credibility of the findings produced (Braun and Clarke 2013, 284; Cavallerio, Wadey, and Wagstaff 2020; Tracy 2010).

Various processes of engaging participants in iterative data generation and analytic interpretation within a research study have been described by researchers working within critical and feminist frameworks. Brear (2019) and Harvey (2015) used dialogic member checking, where participants engage in a series of interviews that build on one another: crucially, after each round, the researcher develops analytic interpretations (generally based on the entire dataset) which participants then appraise in a subsequent interview as well as engaging in deeper conversations about the topic under investigation (Brear 2019; Harvey 2015). Dialogic member checking can allow researchers to explore how their analytic interpretations resonate with participants, and whether they think they are reasonable (Brear 2019; Harvey 2015). This approach emphasises co-constructedness of both data and analysis and creating space for participant empowerment to shape the research (Brear 2019). This is also seen in the way Doyle (2007) and Koelsch (2013) have described their member checking interviews, where participants directly engaged in reflecting on and responding to analytic interpretations of their own data generated in a previous interview. Motulsky (2021) identified the emphasis these approaches share on collaborative processes between researchers and participants for emancipatory ends, in contrast to a checklist-type approach to member checking, suggesting ‘reflexive participant collaboration’ as a more appropriate term.

Our use of collaborative reflection in Study 2 clearly reflects various aspects of many approaches to iterative data collection or analytic processes discussed above, but it is also distinct from these. In particular, our process of inviting participants to participate in a second interview to reflect on analyses generated in Study 1 and engage in deeper conversation about the topics under investigation resembles some forms of member reflection and reflexive participant collaboration. Furthermore, participant reflections in Study 2 will directly contribute to shaping the direction of future related research within our broader research program (despite analysis being generated without participant input). This is an

example of one way in which participants might have an opportunity to shape research through reflexive participant collaborations, though we do not claim collaborative reflection is participatory per se (discussed further in the next sections).

The primary difference between collaborative reflection and other approaches is how or when participant reflections were being engaged. In the wider literature, member reflections or reflexive participant collaborations usually give participants opportunity to reflect on data or analyses-in-progress, and therefore to shape or deepen the knowledge produced *within* a project. In our work, participants reflected on finalised analyses from Study 1 produced without their input and were not open to change. Rather, we sought participant reflections as data in themselves, using these to ‘springboard’ into a second study and to direct future research toward a broader goal. Therefore, what was being shaped by participants’ reflections was a new analysis in response to a unique research question *and* the direction of a broader research program in terms of how those findings from Study 1 might be used and what kind of knowledge might be produced through future research. Although we did not use collaborative reflection as a ‘credibility check’ for Study 1, Study 2 may also provide some credibility to the overarching research program of which both studies belong, in terms of the way it will contribute to shaping the research program trajectory (discussed further in *Opportunities for collaborative reflection*).

A challenge for collaborative reflection

Another way of conceptualising a major difference between others’ use of member checking or reflections and our use of collaborative reflection (not articulated above) is through power: in terms of when and how power relations between the researcher and participants may shift within the broader process(es) of knowledge production. Qualitative researchers across disciplines and paradigms tend to orient toward researcher-participant power relations in some way, often with an aim to acknowledge, trouble, redistribute, or equalise these relations compared with the very hierarchical relationship seen in many positivist research paradigms (Karnieli-Miller, Strier, and Pessach 2009). Increasingly engaged forms of (health) research demand increasingly careful attention to the dynamic power relations created within and shaping research at all stages. Member checking or reflection processes as used previously are one way researchers may engage in rethinking power distribution (Brear 2019; Karnieli-Miller, Strier, and Pessach 2009). But, this depends on how member checking is performed and whether the researcher is actually prepared to make changes to the dataset or analysis based on the member checking process (Morse 2015; Thomas 2017). Further, such

processes still position the researcher as the one to decide whether, when, and the extent to and constraints within which power redistribution will occur.

In our study using collaborative reflection, participants were asked to reflect on knowledge *already* produced and informed that these reflections would shape an ongoing research program, including how we might plan to design further research or design interventions to support clinicians to change their sexuality-related practice. This is somewhat aligned with the ‘transformative potential’ of dialogic member checking as argued by Brear (2019), where power relations are shifted because participants inevitably shape the research agenda and knowledge produced *within a project*. We propose inviting and encouraging participants to discuss their perceptions, positive or negative, of the research findings directly with the researcher may facilitate an ‘atmosphere of power equality’ (Karnieli-Miller, Strier, and Pessach 2009, 280) providing an opportunity for participants to contribute to a *conversation* about the research already conducted and related future research. So, power relations produced within our use of collaborative reflections are potentially different to those produced through more traditional member checking processes; but this does not mean they are equal or weighted in participants’ favour, either within the interview or the broader research project.

Below, we discuss several interrelated ethical questions related to power. Many are similar to challenges presented by existing forms of member checking and reflection (see Birt et al. 2016; Motulsky 2021 for deeper discussion), but may occur differently. Collaborative reflection does not necessarily solve or overcome all these dilemmas. Rather, we invite consideration of how this tool might be taken up with power relations in mind, and implemented in a way that acknowledges and redistributes these further even where co-produced research is not possible.

Can participants really challenge research findings presented?

Researchers inhabit positions of authority participants may not be able to challenge, even when invited to do so. In our study, there was little critique of the findings from Study 1 under discussion. At least one participant challenged aspects of the summarised findings (this critique was primarily focused on language choice to describe some key concepts); but interviews were generally dominated by focused discussion about why and how the Study 1 findings did resonate with participants’ experience, and their perceptions about how the findings could be leveraged to achieve change (Urry et al. 2023). This ‘finding’ that the results from Study 1 resonated with participants was affirming for us, and it is aligned with the reported experiences of other researchers who use various member checking processes. In fact, scholars have noted it is rare to find descriptions of participant disagreement with member checking processes more generally (Birt et al. 2016; Motulsky 2021; Smith and McGannon 2018).

Considering how power relations may shape interview interactions, however, this raises questions about to what degree participants are able to challenge, critique, or object to data or analyses presented within a member checking or collaborative reflection process.

Participants may *not* have been empowered to offer critiques of research findings. The participants were mental health clinicians, and so power relations were not unbalanced as they might be between researchers and other participant groups (e.g., mental health consumers). Power relations are rarely equalised or turned in the participants' favour, however, and a range of factors might have constrained participants' ability to respond to or reflect on the findings. For example, at the time of Study 2 interviews, Urry (who conducted all interviews in both studies) was nearing completion of her doctoral degree; but most participants did not hold a doctoral degree and had less research experience than Urry. Participants were also aware some of the findings being discussed had already been published in peer-reviewed academic journals. Within this context, participants may privilege researchers' perspectives over their own (see Birt et al. 2016). It may not be reasonable to expect participants feel comfortable enough to challenge research findings in this context, particularly when asked to do so directly in the primary researcher's presence and when they are not a researcher themselves.

The possibility participants feel coerced to agree with data or analysis being presented is also an ethical concern for other face-to-face member checking or reflection processes (Birt et al. 2016). Birt et al. (2016) have attempted to circumvent this issue by conducting member checking via survey, so participants do not need to challenge the researcher *directly* (as in an interview). For collaborative reflections, this approach would largely remove the collaborative, conversational aspect of this process. Instead, it could be useful to have a different member of the team conducting the reflective interviews in the follow-up. Participants might then feel more able to challenge or critique research findings – or even request clarification – if speaking with a researcher who is perceived to be more 'neutral' in relation to the findings under discussion.

Who chooses to engage in collaborative reflection?

It is also important to consider who chooses to participate in collaborative reflection as a follow-up study. In our study, not all the participants from Study 1 chose to participate in Study 2: 9 of 22 participants from Study 1 expressed interest, and six participated. In line with the philosophical underpinnings of our research, we were not anticipating that all participants would necessarily wish to re-engage – that is, we were not seeking a representative sample or attempting a replication. Those 9 participants who expressed interest in Study 2 may represent a particular subset of the original sample via

one or several variables. Comparatively, non-participating clinicians may have been satisfied with the results of the research or otherwise uninterested in commenting further the topic, perceived little value in Study 2, or (also) been impacted by time constraints. Yet, to the extent some of those non-participating clinicians may have disagreed with aspects of the summarised Study 1 findings, it is also important to consider perceived power inequalities and consequent discomfort with discussing concerns or criticisms with the researchers may act as a barrier to collaborative reflection. Participants' lack of interest and other barriers to participation, including sustained or repeated participation over time, is relevant for research and member checking approaches across paradigms (see Motulsky 2021), but is especially important to reflexively consider within research claiming to engage participants in some degree of collaboration: How much collaboration can we claim if only some (assenting) views are represented? It is therefore important to remain aware the Study 2 data may represent a limited range of (especially positive) participant perceptions, and this has implications for the kinds of claims we can make based on analysis of those data. Other researchers who take up reflexive collaboration will likely also encounter acts of non-responding and non-participating, and it will be important to explore this as part of a reflexive research practice.

How should researchers respond to critique within the reflection processes?

In contrast to concern participants may be coerced to 'agree' with research findings – or feel unable to participate if they do have critiques of the findings to raise – researchers must also be prepared to deal with the 'disconfirming voice' (Birt et al. 2016; Motulsky 2021). This is a potential outcome of all member checking processes, yet there is often little discussion about how researchers plan to respond to or deal with a situation where participants challenge or reject the materials being checked or reflected on (e.g., Birt et al. 2016; Thomas 2017). Researchers using member checking or reflection processes in relation to analyses-in-progress need to have a strategy or plan for how they will incorporate or deal with participants' challenge or critique. How this occurs will depend on approach to and aims of the process, and some scholars suggest participants' perspective of an analysis should not be privileged over the researchers' theoretical and methodological judgement to shape the analysis (Morse 2015). This is somewhat less of a concern for the iterative approaches Motulsky (2021) has labelled reflexive participant collaboration, primarily because these tend to be used in more participatory methodologies that explicitly aim redress power imbalances against participants who usually are not part of directing research agendas and outcomes. This was also less of a concern within our use of collaborative reflection because the findings being reflected on were not open to change. Rather, how we chose to think about and

move forward based on those findings could be shaped by participants' reflections. In this way, collaborative reflection is a methodological process open to seeking out 'disconfirming voices' and is well-positioned to navigate this (despite the relative absence of this within our Study 2 data).

Whose data—and new knowledge—is it?

Closely related to issues of interpretive authority, data and knowledge ownership is also important to consider in relation to our use of collaborative reflection. Although it would not be considered co-production because it does not involve collaboration across the full research process (Roper, Grey, and Cadogan 2018), the way we used collaborative reflections seeks to redress some of the power imbalances between researchers and participants. The data in Study 2 was generated collaboratively in that participants' reflections and ideas were centred, and the outcomes of this study will contribute to directing the way we move forward with planning and conducting future research. Yet, these data are again analysed without input from participants (Urry et al. 2023). The research team retains 'formal control and power' through the analysis and interpretation of the data we (Urry and participants) co-generated together, and of the final production of knowledge (Karnieli-Miller, Strier, and Pessach 2009, 283). While this ethical dilemma is not unique to our research or use of collaborative reflection (e.g., Motulsky 2021), it deserves consideration.

Though relevant to all research, researchers conducting qualitative research and especially those aiming to facilitate increased participant engagement in their research processes need to consider questions of data ownership. Some medical journals now seek patient commentaries to accompany published research findings (e.g., Johns and Johns 2022). This is an example of an effort to facilitate more engagement of participants or other consumer stakeholders in the process of knowledge production, working as a form of peer review. This does bring about the question of participant burden, where not all participants will be willing or able to be involved at this level. Collaborative reflection provides opportunities for increased participant or stakeholder engagement (compared with traditional research processes with no specific participant engagement) with lower participant burden, due to the episodic nature of the engagement. In this way, our tool can help to redress this issue, by increasing participant engagement without high burden; however, it still limits engagement to episodic and specific processes, with decision-making power remaining within the purview of the researcher.

Opportunities for collaborative reflection

Collaborative reflection also offers opportunities for conducting high-quality research meaningfully engaging participants. Below, we outline advantages

collaborative reflection may offer over more traditional forms of member checking for conducting high-quality research. We also discuss how collaborative reflection provides opportunities to meaningfully engage participants when other collaborative approaches have not been possible; and how this tool could be used as a methodological or translational ‘steppingstone’ to help researchers move from more basic (and often critical) research *towards* co-produced research in applied health contexts.

Enhancing researcher accountability and research quality

Collaborative reflection can facilitate high-quality research through enhanced researcher accountability to participants or other relevant stakeholders (Naidu and Prose 2018); particularly if the possibility of engaging this tool is acknowledged or planned from the outset of an initial research project. This is because the process of collaborative reflection goes beyond the relational ethical principle of ‘returning research’ (see Naidu and Prose 2018) by creating an opportunity for meaningful dialogue between the researcher and participants about research that will contribute to shaping ongoing or future research and research agendas. As a researcher, engaging with participants in this way could facilitate deeper reflexivity and enhanced care in the interpretation of data and production of knowledge (also see Karnieli-Miller, Strier, and Pessach 2009), as well as the communication of that knowledge.

Member checking processes as they have traditionally been used (particularly within realist paradigms) have generally aimed to enhance research credibility and trustworthiness by demonstrating accuracy or authenticity of data or analysis: yet there is little evidence such processes do – or can – achieve this (Morse 2015; Smith and McGannon 2018; Thomas 2017), especially when used in a way that lacks reflexivity (Motulsky 2021). Our work extends on this, suggesting collaborative reflection is valuable not because it helps the researcher approach an objective truth, but because it allows participants another way to engage in epistemic processes and knowledge production. In our approach, we do not think of credibility as something enhanced by a member checking process aimed at verisimilitude – rather, we think of credibility as increasing through the internal and external validity of a research program collaboratively shaped by researchers and those ‘researched’. That is, collaborative reflection does not ask participants to reflect on how accurately the results under discussion match their own experiences; but rather how they perceive those results overall, including how useful (or not) they think the results might be within the context of their own relevant experiences and how those results might be used to direct further research or translated to effect change. Depending on the research context and population or community involved in the research, this could also be conceptualised through Cho and Trent’s (2006) notion of ‘transformational

validity', where researchers purposefully engage or collaborate with participants in ways that challenges traditional power hierarchies with aim to promote social change. This will be context dependent given the multiple relevant stakeholder groups for any specific research topic, with credibility within or across research studies perceived differently across (or within) those groups. Our use of collaborative reflection may enhance the credibility of our research program for clinicians, researchers, professional bodies, and even funding bodies: but possibly not for health-care consumers themselves, who are an important stakeholder group not yet engaged within our research (discussed further in the next section).

Moving towards collaboration

Collaborative reflection may allow more participatory power over knowledge production than traditional member checking approaches because it creates space for participants to have episodic engagement in of the planning and development of a research program over time. Despite this, it is *not* an example of co-production because it does not in itself ensure stakeholders have agenda-setting and decision-making power over a study. The philosophy of co-production is based on collaboration in projects from start to finish, where stakeholders are involved in the planning and conceptualisation phases of research, conducting the project, and included in dissemination of research outputs and publications (Roper, Grey, and Cadogan 2018). This is a point of difference to some other approaches that seek involvement *after* research agenda and questions have been set, and do not seek ongoing collaboration after data are collected. Another principle of co-production is that power differentials should be acknowledged, explored, and addressed (Roper, Grey, and Cadogan 2018). These discussions and explorations of power will be different in each project. In the context of mental health, co-production with consumers requires significant consideration of the relative power held by mental health disciplines compared to consumers who have been stigmatised, had their knowledge co-opted, and have not had access to epistemic justice (Scholz et al. 2019). Research about service providers, in which service providers are participants, however, might involve smaller but different power imbalances to address.

Collaborative reflection could be understood as just one opportunity for participants to contribute more directly to knowledge production. One of the motivations for engaging in such an approach could be to engage in improvement of epistemic justice – whereby researchers do not just 'use' participant data, but use their role to engage in ways in which participants can shape how their knowledge is used (Groot, Haveman, and Abma 2022). This is important for all stakeholder groups, but some more than others. For example, participants in our work were clinicians: a group who are not marginalised or

experience epistemic *injustice*. Another main stakeholder group relevant to our research is mental health consumers, and this group does experience epistemic injustice. Collaborative reflection may offer a way to engage consumers in future research projects where resources cannot yet support more collaborative or co-produced forms of research. Indeed, future research within our own research program will need to meaningfully engage stakeholders, and especially mental health consumers (who have not yet been included in this research).

While collaborative reflection is not a replacement for co-production, it could provide a launchpad to start discussions about conceptualising and planning collaborative studies that *could* use co-production. We note there is a danger of collaborative reflection being used tokenistically, as an ‘easy way out’ from conducting more in-depth co-produced research or as evidence for shallow claims of trustworthiness and validity. On the other hand, as co-produced and collaborative approaches to research become more popular, there is already risk of those approaches being done inauthentically (e.g., Scholz 2022). Used appropriately, collaborative reflection can provide a more transparent, and therefore potentially more ethical, way to do ‘collaboration-lite’.

Collaborative reflection may also be a useful tool in health research knowledge translation more broadly. Despite critiques of contemporary knowledge translation practices as often positivist and unreflexive (Crosschild et al. 2021), some approaches have shifted to adopt an ‘underlying philosophy that implementing research into healthcare practice is complex, unpredictable and non-linear’ and relies centrally on working *with* stakeholders (Hunter et al. 2020, 574). Such approaches still rely on having ‘something to implement’, however, and so collaborative reflection could be a useful tool for moving from basic research towards the (collaborative) development and successful implementation of interventions into practice. This is particularly the case where relevant basic research is grounded in critical inquiry, which can be challenging to bring into conversation with knowledge translation traditions due to ontological and/or epistemological disparities (Reimer-Kirkham et al. 2009).

Future directions

Collaborative reflection offers researchers a novel way to engage participants or stakeholders in knowledge production in a way that can enable movement *toward* deeper collaboration and potential co-production in the future. We used collaborative reflection as a way to expand a body of research that was not initially collaborative or co-produced, by making space for participants to have more ownership over knowledge production – or, the potential uses of knowledge already-produced, and future knowledge production. We do not suggest our use of collaborative reflection

represents a static model for how this tool should be used; rather, we hope to contribute to the ongoing conversation about how we can approach participant engagement and collaboration in qualitative research. Collaborative reflection could be used or modified in a range of ways that are more appropriate or relevant for the specific research context to similar ends. For example:

- Planned from the outset of a study within a broader research program, rather than ad hoc. This may be especially useful where a project does not have the resources to support remuneration of participants' time in more long-term commitments that a co-produced approach would require, as was the case in within our work.
- Used as a form of consultative process that might be described in subsequent research outputs where relevant, rather than being used to generate a formal analysis and publication in its own right.
- Used to engage relevant stakeholders who were not the original participants, since reflecting on finalised results means there is no issue with confidentiality. This could be stakeholders from the same general group (e.g., different clinicians within the same professions) or even from a different relevant group (e.g., clinicians from a different but relevant profession, or health-care consumers where clinicians were the original participants).
- The specific processes through which collaborative reflection is conducted could be modified, for example conducting the reflective dialogue via focus groups instead of one-to-one interviews. Alternatively, researchers could send the final, published version of a manuscript to participants and invite them to respond to and critique this in their own time, their written or audio-recorded response providing new data. The latter approach would be less collaborative and more similar to Birt et al.'s (2016) synthesised member checking process, but could have specific advantages in overcoming some of the challenges related to power relations and participant comfort discussed earlier.

As a potentially flexible tool, collaborative reflection allows researchers to understand how participants or stakeholders might make sense of research findings. Rather than modifying (or simply confirming) the research findings under discussion, collaborative reflection can provide insight into how these could be leveraged or translated into practice in ways that 'make sense' or are appropriate within the context of participants' own relevant experiences and context. This can support researchers to navigate how to move forward with the research in terms of communicating or translating the findings in ways that contribute to positive change. To this end, we look forward to seeing how other scholars will take up and develop this methodological tool further.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Ethical approval

Ethical approval was granted by the School of Psychology Human Research Ethics Subcommittee at the University of Adelaide (15/107). All participants provided written informed consent to take part in this study.

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