# Reflection and reflexivity

### What is the difference between reflection and reflexivity?

Reflection and reflexivity are related but not the same. Reflection is the iterative act of looking back or seriously thinking about a situation in the moment so as to understand or improve it. Reflexivity is reflection about oneself, with the willingness to change oneself or let oneself be changed by the project. It involves thinking about one's own normativity (see *Normativity*) and actions; how and why the work is challenging, expanding, or otherwise changing one's own thoughts, attitudes, and actions as a participant in the process. Reflexivity can involve reflecting on what to let go of, or what skills and ways of being to foster. Reflexive processes can be conducted either individually or as a team as a process to support pluralism in practice.

### What is the conceptual relevance of reflexivity to TDR?

The practice of reflection is central to TDR, as projects tend to be iterative, adaptive, and context-dependent rather than linear and fixed. Reflexivity is fundamental to being able to support diverse teams to develop social learning and an experimental approach to complex and dynamic social-ecological challenges, especially when a goal of the project or program is to facilitate transformation. Both reflection and reflexivity are critical practices and commitments in TDR projects, and ultimately lead not only to better projects but to changing oneself as a researcher.

### What are the implications of reflexivity for TDR practice?

Although reflexivity can be understood to be a central element of good TDR practice, it can be overlooked in research design and planning. Good reflexive practice means developing and maintaining a systematic and regular process for checking in with oneself and the team, and can also be useful in planning for different functions of reflection and reflexivity as projects progress. In early stages, an individual may reflect on their motivations, intentions, and positionality toward or within the topic and actor networks. This may also involve reflecting on their preferred or intended role(s) [see "Role(s) of researchers"] and aspirations for change with regard to the topic or issue. For example, for a team conducting a theory of change process to identify the assumptions they are bringing to a process, collectively reflecting on the origins of those assumptions can be a central part of "testing" them to determine their plausibility.

As a project matures, structured times and spaces for reflection can help all team members:

- Consider the functionality of the earlier project design (including research questions, methodology, and methods) toward their stated goals or vision;
- Assess and potentially re-assess those goals and whether they still fit under changing contextual conditions;
- Clarify how understanding of the problem and potential solutions is changing as the project progresses, and how that may challenge earlier assumptions;
- Identify any emerging societal partners who may need to be connected to the project; and
- Check in on collaborative processes, how team members are experiencing the project and their role in it, how the team is functioning, and whether the skills and expertise required are adequately covered.

Reflexivity in the closing stages of a project can also consider issues around responsibility and control, or difficulties of letting go or closing and handing over. Sharing the emotional dimensions of closure can help all participants appreciate their role and contribution, and harvest the lessons to take forward to the next project.

### *Further reading:*

- Knaggård, Åsa, Barry Ness, and David Harnesk. 2018. Finding an Academic Space: Reflexivity among Sustainability Researchers. *Ecology and Society: A Journal of Integrative Science for Resilience and Sustainability* 23 (4).

- Minna, Kaljonen, Johanna Jacobi, Kaisa Korhonen-Kurki, Jani P. Lukkarinen, Anna Ott, Juha Peltomaa, Flurina Schneider, Theresa Tribaldos, and Julie G. Zaehringer. 2024. Reflexive Use of Methods: A Framework for Navigating Different Types of Knowledge and Power in Transformative Research. *Sustainability Science* 19 (2): 507–21.

- Moore, Michele-Lee, Per Olsson, Warren Nilsson, Loretta Rose, and Frances R. Westley. 2018. Navigating Emergence and System Reflexivity as Key Transformative Capacities: Experiences from a Global Fellowship Program. *Ecology and Society: A Journal of Integrative Science for Resilience and Sustainability* 23 (2).