

ARTICLE

Bracketing in Qualitative Research

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ABSTRACT

Bracketing is a method used in qualitative research to mitigate the potentially deleterious effects of preconceptions that may taint the research process. However, the processes through which bracketing takes place are poorly understood, in part as a result of a shift away from its phenomenological origins. The current article examines the historical and philosophical roots of bracketing, and analyzes the tensions that have arisen since the inception of bracketing in terms of its definition, who brackets, methods of bracketing, and its timing in the research process. We propose a conceptual framework to advance dialogue around bracketing and to enhance its implementation.



KEY WORDS:

bracketing
phenomenology
preconceptions
presuppositions
qualitative
methods

INTRODUCTION

Qualitative methodology is increasingly used within the field of social work research as a means to harness and explore the lived experience of the participant. Conversational encounters, while they afford unique

opportunities to construct understanding from the perspective of the informant, also mark an inherently subjective endeavor. The researcher is the instrument for analysis across all phases of a qualitative research project (Starks and Trinidad, 2007). This subjective endeavor entails the inevitable transmission of assumptions, values, interests, emotions and theories (hereafter referred to collectively as preconceptions), within and across the research project. These preconceptions influence how data are gathered, interpreted, and presented.

Bracketing is a method used by some researchers to mitigate the potential deleterious effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the research and thereby to increase the rigor of the project. Given the sometimes close relationship between the researcher and the research topic that may both precede and develop during the process of qualitative research, bracketing is also a method to protect the researcher from the cumulative effects of examining what may be emotionally challenging material. A lengthy research endeavor on an emotionally challenging topic can infuse the researcher with its inherent challenges, render continuing research an arduous endeavor and, in turn, skew the results and interpretations. While bracketing can mitigate adverse effects of the research endeavor, importantly it also facilitates the researcher reaching deeper levels of reflection across all stages of qualitative research: selecting a topic and population, designing the interview, collecting and interpreting data, and reporting findings. The opportunity for sustained in-depth reflection may enhance the acuity of the research and facilitate more profound and multifaceted analysis and results.

We begin by delineating the historical and philosophical roots of bracketing, which help to shed light on current confusions and inconsistencies in the field. Following an examination of the various definitions ascribed to the bracketing process, we present an analysis of the tensions that have arisen since the inception of bracketing in terms of its definitions, who brackets, methods of bracketing, and its timing in the research process. A conceptual framework is presented along with research examples that address various types of bracketing across the research trajectory. Lastly, the value that bracketing can bring to the research process is discussed, along with its particular relevance to social work.

TENSIONS IN BRACKETING

The evolving and amorphous nature of bracketing has given rise to a number of tensions following Husserl's introduction of the phenomenological reduction. These tensions include the definitional aspects of various bracketing elements; a lack of consensus as to when bracketing should occur; who should engage in bracketing: participant, researcher or both; and how bracketing should be conducted. Yet in order to advance legitimacy as a research method, Beech (1999)

asserted that researchers need to be ‘explicit about the process of bracketing so that others can observe and understand the rules of the game so the researcher can legitimately use the word’ (p. 44). Explicitness about the process of bracketing should be included in the writing phase of the research process, whereby the researcher outlines the method and contribution of bracketing to the research endeavor. Alternatively, should a researcher elect to follow a more Heideggerian position and reject the concept of the reduction, it is important to maintain transparency around this decision as well, and to articulate the researcher’s reasons for following this course of action, and describe the researcher’s chosen methods.

HISTORICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS

Bracketing originated within the phenomenology tradition. Although hundreds of years old (Small, 2001; Spiegelberg, 1965), phenomenology gained credence as an established philosophical movement with the publication of Husserl’s *Ideas* (1913/1931). For Husserl, the essence of understanding the lived experience entails *das unmittelbare sehen* or direct seeing, which surpasses sensory experience. Direct seeing ‘looks beyond constructions, preconceptions, and assumptions (our natural attitude) to the essences of the experience being investigated’ (Gearing, 2004, p. 1430; Husserl, 1931). Caelli (2000) purports that for Husserl, the ‘return to philosophical questioning [involved] a way to see the world anew as it really is rather than as it is constructed’ (p. 371), which constituted the essence of phenomenology. The process of tapping this essence of experience and looking beyond preconceptions became known by various interchangeable terms: phenomenological reduction, *epoche*, or bracketing.

Many phenomenologists who worked under Husserl went on to develop their own ideas and approaches. Heidegger, one of these students, rejected the concept of phenomenological reduction. Rather, he argued that fully comprehending the lived experience was, in essence, an interpretative process and that bracketing out preconceptions was neither possible nor desirable (Cohen and Omery, 1994; Heidegger, 1962; LeVasseur, 2003). Heidegger instead, adopted the position of being in the world, where contextual interpretation and meaning were sought and valued (Gearing, 2004).

Findley and Marias, contemporaries of Heidegger, also rejected the concept of bracketing (Smith and Smith, 1995), thus contributing to an enduring philosophical tension between those who believe that looking beyond preconceptions is possible and desirable, and those who reject the notion that humans even have the capacity to bracket out preconceptions. The Dutch school, consisting of various theorists from the Netherlands, sought to integrate components of Husserl’s and Heidegger’s approaches, specifically retaining elements of Husserl’s concept of bracketing (Kockelmans, 1987; van Hazewijk et al., 2001).

The French school, under the direction of Merleau-Ponty, similarly sought not to turn away from the world but to set aside personal preconceptions to reveal lived experience (Ashworth, 1999).

In rejecting the concept of bracketing, Heidegger (1962) centered on engagement as a means of knowing. Heidegger's concept of engagement may be particularly salient in application to emerging qualitative methodologies, such as participatory action research (Ladkin, 2005; Stringer, 1999). This methodology stresses the importance of researcher subjectivity given the tight relationship between researcher and participant, who both function as decision makers in all aspects of the research process. The impact of subjectivity in participatory action research encourages researchers to understand, embrace and surface the frames of reference they bring to an inquiry such as their political, racial, cultural, and gender influences (Ladkin, 2005; Stringer, 1999). Thus, developments based on Heidegger's conceptualizations of being in the world, where contextual interpretation and meaning were sought and valued, may be particularly apropos for a range of participatory qualitative research methods.



The debate over the appropriateness of bracketing as a method to more clearly and accurately construct participants' perspectives and phenomena under investigation will and should continue. Such debate is integral as new research methodologies emerge and are adopted into the paradigm of qualitative research. The purpose of the article is not to arbitrate between Husserlian and Heideggerian perspectives; however, the historical and philosophical context helps to situate current discussion and debate around bracketing.

DEFINITIONS

The lack of a uniform definition of bracketing has led many authors to speculate as to its constitutive essence. Drew (2004) posits bracketing as 'the task of sorting out the qualities that belong to the researcher's experience of the phenomenon' (p. 215). Gearing (2004) explains bracketing as a 'scientific process in which a researcher suspends or holds in abeyance his or her presuppositions, biases, assumptions, theories, or previous experiences to see and describe the phenomenon' (p. 1430). Starks and Trinidad (2007) note that the researcher 'must be honest and vigilant about her own perspective, pre-existing thoughts and beliefs, and developing hypotheses... engage in the self-reflective process of "bracketing", whereby they recognize and set aside (but do not abandon) their a priori knowledge and assumptions, with the analytic goal of attending to the participants' accounts with an open mind' (p. 1376). Within the grounded theory research tradition, Creswell and Miller (2000) note the importance of researchers' acknowledging their beliefs and biases early in the research process to allow readers to understand their positions, and then 'bracket or suspend those

researcher biases as the study proceeds . . . individuals reflect on the social, cultural, and historical forces that shape their interpretation' (p. 127).

This litany of definitions illustrates one of the core challenges of bracketing as a qualitative research methodology, deciding how, when and if to use bracketing as a qualitative research method. Grappling with lack of uniformity around the definitions of bracketing is the fodder of qualitative research in which being comfortable with ambiguity is an ongoing challenge. The lack of uniformity in bracketing acknowledges the complexity and nebulousness of the bracketing process and yet allows researchers to both grapple with and locate themselves on what is in effect a continuum of what is bracketing.


The absence of a precise definition and a singular method of bracketing thus also may be a strength within qualitative research as it can support an array of approaches. A singular approach to bracketing and a rigid set of rules for implementation might be counterproductive in an inductive research endeavor. A systematic exploration of the various facets of bracketing will better help researchers identify their preconceptions and how best to address these within their selected qualitative research methodology.

What Constitutes Bracketing

The lack of uniformity in the term 'bracketing' is evidenced in different authors positing that **bracketing encompasses: beliefs and values** (Beech, 1999); **thoughts and hypotheses** (Starks and Trinidad, 2007); **biases**, (Creswell and Miller, 2000); **emotions** (Drew, 2004); **preconceptions** (Glaser, 1992); **presuppositions** (Crotty, 1998); and **assumptions** (Charmaz, 2006) about the phenomenon under study. Gearing (2004) **delineates bracketing as the internal suppositions of the researcher – including history, knowledge, culture, experience, value or academic reflections, such as orientation and theories – and external suppositions of aspects of the phenomenon under investigation, with both internal and external suppositions being bracketed concurrently**. However, the lack of consensus over what is to be held in abeyance continues.

With the lack of consensus on the elements of bracketing, there is a danger that these constitutive elements will be treated as a homogenous group. Although Gearing (2004) dichotomizes the elements into internal and external suppositions, elements within each type of supposition, for example, internal emotions and biases, can diverge greatly. Depending on the researcher's level of self-awareness, some researchers will access certain elements of their emotions and cognitions more easily than others. For example, some researchers may possess greater awareness of their emotions at a given time than of their cognitive biases; and this awareness may vary depending on the substantive issues to be addressed. Bracketing is comprised of a multilayered process that is meant to access various levels of consciousness. It is precisely these internal levels that may be more difficult to access in the **throes** of conducting qualitative research.



Bracketing is not simply a one-time occurrence of setting preconceptions in abeyance, but a process of self-discovery whereby buried emotions and experiences may surface (Drew, 2004). The self-discovery process need not be solitary and in fact may be facilitated by engaging a colleague or co-researcher (Rolls and Relf, 2006). Bracketing has the potential to greatly enrich data collection, research findings and interpretation – to the extent the researcher as instrument, maintains self-awareness as part of an ongoing process. Alternately, emotional reactions and past experiences or cognitive biases of the researcher have the potential to **obfuscate**, distort or truncate data collection and analysis. 

The Timing of Bracketing

There is a lack of consensus among qualitative research scholars as to **when bracketing should occur within the context of research**. **Giorgi (1998) advocates limiting bracketing to the analysis phase**. In his view, **bracketing should not take place while interviewing, as engagement with the participant takes precedence over holding preconceptions in abeyance**. **Glaser (1978, 1992) advocates developing an awareness of preconceptions at the start of the research endeavor**. **Other authors encourage bracketing at the start of the research process when the project is first conceptualized and continuing with the process of bracketing throughout the research** (Rolls and Relf, 2006).

Ahern (1999) and Rolls and Relf (2006) note the importance of surfacing preconceptions prior to undertaking the research project, but suggest this is an ongoing process throughout the research endeavor. The danger of truncating bracketing to a selected aspect of the research process, such as the interview or analysis stage, lies in the cascading nature of qualitative research. The formation of research questions proceeds to data collection, which in turn proceeds to data analysis. In some traditions, such as **grounded theory**, **initial data analysis is used in an iterative process to inform additional data collection as well as theoretical sampling** (Charmaz, 2006). **Preconceptions arising at any one stage may filter to other stages and thereby affect the entire research process**. It is particularly important that initial preconceptions arising from personal experience with the research material are surfaced prior to undertaking the research project; they also should be monitored throughout the research endeavor as both a potential source of insight as well as potential obstacles to engagement.

Who Brackets: Participants, Researcher or Both?

The next tension in bracketing involves who in the research dyad should bracket their preconceptions. The literature on bracketing denotes the importance for the researcher to bracket; but **must the participant bracket as well?** **Crotty (1996) appears to be an advocate of simultaneous bracketing by both the researcher and participant, but also acknowledges that the researcher cannot ensure that the participant brackets his or her preconceptions**. This perspective may be

problematic given that participants' bracketing out preconceptions may be the antithesis of what is desired in qualitative research and may hinder the participants' frank engagement with the phenomenon under focus and engagement with the interviewer. However, it is important to consider that many participants do bracket during interviews; and often without the awareness of the researcher. Despite this presumption about participant bracketing, the researcher should assume, when conducting the interview, that the participant brings their preconceptions or displays their intentionality towards the phenomenon (Crotty, 1996).

Methods of Bracketing

One method of bracketing is writing memos throughout data collection and analysis as a means of examining and reflecting upon the researcher's engagement with the data (Cutcliffe, 2003). Memos can take the form of theoretical notes which explicate the cognitive process of conducting research, methodological notes that explicate the procedural aspects of research, and observational comments that allow the researcher to explore feelings about the research endeavor. Glaser (1998) describes the process of memoing as one of freedom, as opposed to one of constraint, which may lead to important insights on the part of the researcher. These insights may include acknowledging and foregrounding one's preconceptions. Perhaps paradoxically, memoing one's hunches and presuppositions, rather than attempting to stifle them in the name of objectivity or immersion, may free the researcher to engage more extensively with the raw data.

Another method of bracketing is engaging in interviews with an outside source to uncover and bring into awareness preconceptions and biases (Rolls and Relf, 2006). Bracketing interviews held with a non-clinical and non-managerial colleague or research associate, constitute a negotiated, supportive relationship, which serves as an interface between the researcher and the research data. This process is sometimes formalized through payment of a fee and scheduling of meetings, and should entail agreement on the confidentiality of material discussed. Bracketing interviews conducted prior to, during, and following data collection can uncover themes that may hinder the researcher's ability to listen to respondents or trigger emotional responses in the researcher that may foreclose on further exploration. Bracketing interviews can increase the researcher's clarity and engagement with participants' experiences by unearthing forgotten personal experiences; it also can protect researchers and participants in emotionally charged research topics, and simultaneously develop the researcher's capacity to understand the phenomena in question (Rolls and Relf, 2006).

Another method of bracketing is a reflexive journal begun prior to defining the research question, in which preconceptions are then identified throughout the research process (Ahern, 1999). The maintenance of a journal can



enhance researchers' ability to sustain a reflexive stance. Aspects to explore in the reflexive journal include: the researchers' reasons for undertaking the research; assumptions regarding gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status; the researcher's place in the power hierarchy of the research; the researcher's personal value system (Hanson, 1994); potential role conflicts with research participants; feelings such as blame or disengagement that may indicate presuppositions (Paterson and Groening, 1996); and whether the researcher chooses to write in the first or third person (Porter, 1993).

The multiple techniques for accessing researcher preconceptions outlined above suggest that a solitary manner of bracketing may not be recommended across the board. Qualitative researchers need to consider what type of bracketing is an appropriate method for themselves and for the research area they wish to investigate; furthermore, the methods of bracketing are not mutually exclusive and may complement one another. Underlying the various bracketing approaches of memoing, engaging in interviews with an outside source, and journaling is the researcher's commitment to surfacing his or her preconceptions both before and during the research process; and to maintaining the process as a priority that is fundamental to effective and meaningful qualitative research. The choice of bracketing method may be influenced by the anticipated emotions or cognitions the investigator may encounter while undertaking a particular research endeavor. For example, a researcher wishing to investigate the experience of childhood cancer who himself or herself experienced cancer at an earlier age may wish to utilize an outside source for bracketing interviews as a means of both managing and engaging with the potentially powerful presuppositions and emotions born of lived experience. Conversely, for a researcher embarking on a new research topic with no personal history of the topic, an appropriate primary approach to bracketing may be more akin to Ahern's (1999) method of starting a reflexive journal prior to undertaking the research. Maintaining a reflexive journal may raise the researcher's awareness of the topic in daily life and bring it to a level of consciousness prior to undertaking the research endeavor.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The proposed conceptual framework (see Figure 1) elucidates the multifaceted nature of bracketing and advances a systematic approach that may aid researchers in mapping out bracketing as an ongoing part of their research strategy in a qualitative project. The conceptual framework depicts the personal and professional selves of the researcher. Bracketing is positioned between the researcher and the research project as a mechanism to both protect and enhance the research process.

The framework details the methodological progression of research in order to conceptualize how bracketing may be integrated into each of the

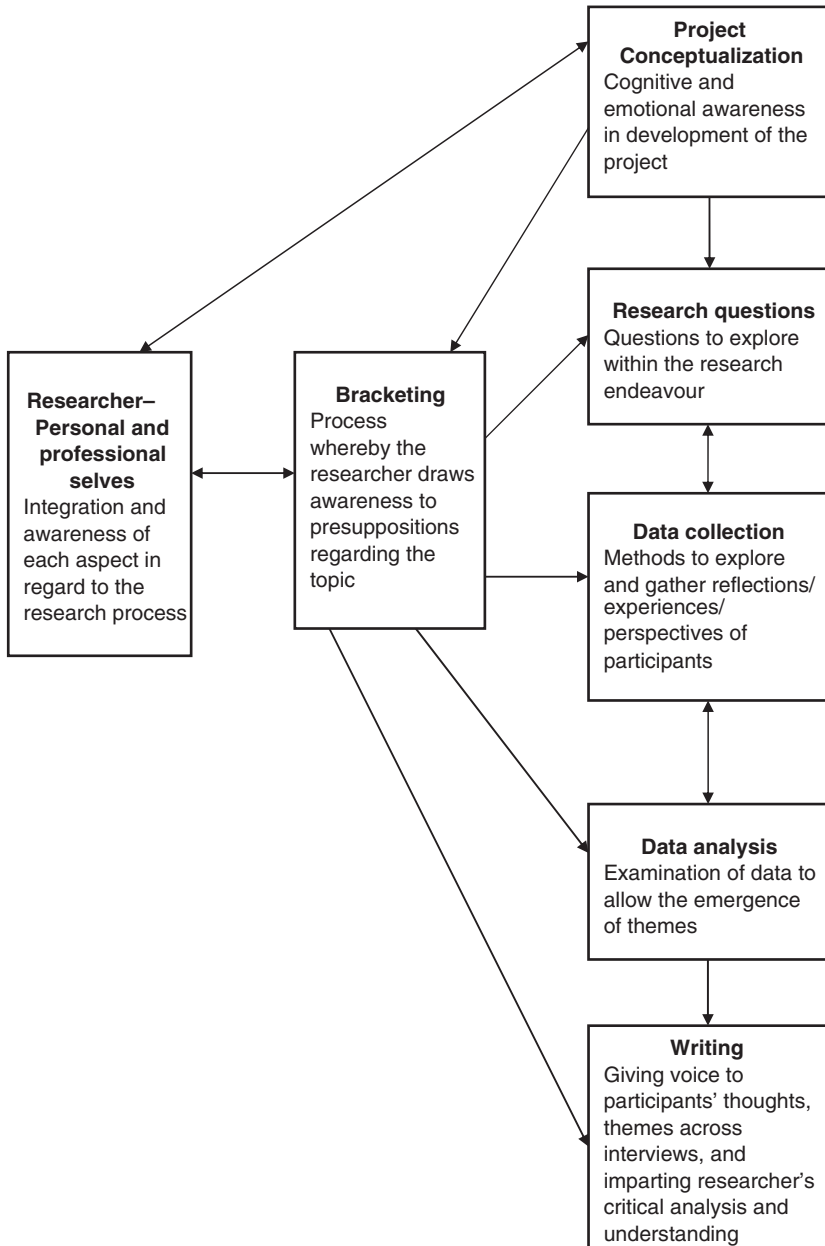


Figure 1 – The Integration of Bracketing into Qualitative Methodology.

various stages of the research process. The double-sided arrow between the researcher and bracketing signifies the repetitive process of analytical bracketing whereby the researcher enters and withdraws from the data and the bracketing process in order to obtain a clearer picture of the phenomenon, as well as to compare the research data with the overall cultural context (Gearing, 2004). Additionally, the double-sided arrows between Research Questions and Data Collection, and Data Collection and Data Analysis signify the iterative nature of qualitative research, in which one may begin analysis during data collection and may hone or add questions based on emerging data and interpretations. The iterative process of bracketing does not purport that the researcher holds pre-conceptions in a systematic or linear fashion; various concerns and issues may arise at any stage of the research process.

Project conceptualization represents the first stage of the research endeavor with the primary challenge being to identify how unacknowledged pre-conceptions may influence the process before the research begins. Holding preconceptions is an inevitable by-product of being human; however, preconceptions emanating from social location, such as class, race, gender and age, does permeate the analysis without the researcher's awareness (Charmaz, 2006).

To surface preconceptions during the project conceptualization phase, the researcher may elect to begin a reflexive journal and maintain this journal throughout the research process. Beginning a reflexive journal at the start of the research endeavor may allow the surfacing of previously hidden memories or unconscious preconceptions that do impact the research process. The researcher may realize through engaging in this process, that these memories or preconceptions need to be explored and examined prior to beginning as well as during the research. The researcher's own experience, when used in a reflexive manner, also may foster helpful insights during project conceptualization that may enable deeper engagement with the participant and the data.

Articulating the research question follows as one of the chief challenges the researcher faces. This involves formulating questions to actively engage the participant in exploring the depths of his/her perspectives, while not foregrounding the researcher's preconceptions which interfere with this process. In many cases, the qualitative researcher may have hunches or even full-blown hypotheses – although the researcher's consciousness about this may vary. For example, research questions may unintentionally predispose participants towards a certain perspective or outcome, based on the unexplored perspective of the researcher. In the above domain of child maltreatment, questions that appear to presume the gender of perpetrators or particular emotional or developmental experiences of the interviewee, as well as cultural stereotypes, may covertly or overtly impart what answers are expected or normative and may prematurely truncate exploration and discussion.

While formulating the research questions, the researcher may elect to engage in bracketing interviews with a trusted colleague to explore his/her perspectives and possible preconceptions. A colleague who does not have a particular investment in the research project may help to identify research questions which are biased or unclear and would consequently pose barriers to exploration. The researcher may also elect to continue a reflexive journal to further clarify his/her emerging perspectives throughout the research process.

During data collection, many challenges may surface that may be amplified by the possible intensity of the researcher's emotions in regard to the research topic. Bracketing may assist with managing intense emotional reactions, for even subtle differences in the questions posed to informants or the interviewer's body language may influence the response. Increasingly, qualitative research delves into social problems of a sensitive nature. Research questions on issues such as bereavement, mental illness, infertility or risk behaviors may elicit strong, emotional reactions in the participant, which may be displayed during the interview process. In addition to maintaining awareness of his or her own body language, the researcher's task is to remain aware of the participant's body language, which may signify discomfort or distress as well as reveal added layers of meaning in their responses. Consecutive interviews on sensitive and emotion-laden material may have a cumulative, adverse effect on the researcher (Rolls and Relf, 2006) who may subconsciously adopt the sadness or despair of the participant. Bracketing one's preconceptions can assist with the cumulative effects of intense emotional reactions arising in the researcher as well as immediate reactions to participant narratives.

Bracketing also may support the iterative process of qualitative research whereby emerging data collection may raise additional questions to be pursued (e.g., progressive focusing) (Schutt, 2006). Bracketing can aid the researcher in maintaining a focus on the research questions, while using cues from the researcher's experience and emerging interpretations during data collection to augment questions for further data collection. During the data collection phase, the researcher can engage in a process of bracketing by writing observational comment memos and theoretical notes, which denote the researcher's feelings and thoughts. Diligence in writing these memos and notes following interviews can surface cognitive and affective preconceptions and enable deeper engagement with the data. The subjective nature of qualitative research also may give rise to responses by some participants that seem to be at odds with researchers, participants, and readers. In qualitative research, the participant who holds a differing perspective can illuminate untapped areas in need of exploration and open new directions in thinking as well as provide a negative case example for a particular phenomenon in question. The ability to explore such differing perspectives, however, is predicated on the openness of the researcher to hear and give credence to these responses (Morse, 1995). Holding in abeyance one's

preconceptions may engender sensitivity to alternate perspectives thus permitting additional avenues of exploration and allowing apparent contradictions to emerge.

Data analysis constitutes the next stage in the research process, or part of an iterative process with data collection in which the researcher moves back and forth between the two in developing understanding and achieving saturation. A failure to examine one's preconceptions can unconsciously influence what the researcher hears or not within the voices of the participants in analyzing the data. Bracketing one's preconceptions can render audible the nuances and subtleties of participants' responses while protecting the researcher from the potential trap of simply categorizing responses into preordained slots or filtering the participant's lived experience through the researcher's own personal experience. Returning to the example of child maltreatment, a researcher holding preconceptions in this area may fail to give credence to the culturally diverse views of immigrant parents regarding how they discipline their children. More generally, a researcher from a dominant ethnocultural group or of relatively higher socio-economic status may fail to appreciate how structural and social constraints shape the worldviews and behavior of participants whose social location is different from that of the researcher, if participants' experiences are unreflexively filtered and interpreted through the researcher's social location and life experience.

Data analysis poses particular challenges for the qualitative researcher engaged in a process of bracketing. Specific researcher tensions may arise between bracketing preconceptions and using them as insight; and between openness and criticality (Finlay, 2008). These tensions become apparent during data analysis when the researcher strives for a balance that allows for the foregrounding of both overarching themes and subtle nuances of the participants' views. Achieving this balance may look different from researcher to researcher and from project to project; however, balancing these tensions allows the researcher to fully engage in an iterative process whereby he or she may draw from the tensions between the general and the particular. Engaging in bracketing interviews during the data analysis phase may assist the researcher in balancing these tensions, and help to surface both dominant themes and negative cases. For example, a researcher focusing on new immigrants' employment experiences should remain open to hearing participants' views, both positive and negative, but also examine these views critically, including the researcher and the participant's social location and the social structures within which the participant's experiences are situated.

Writing comprises the final stage of the research process where the researcher attempts to bring participants' voices alive. Bracketing one's preconceptions can sensitize a researcher to how those voices are portrayed in the process of writing and how the depth of pain or feeling is captured. Bracketing can also protect the researcher from the temptation to foreground

certain voices while relegating others to a background position, particularly as these voices may confirm or not the researcher's preconceptions about the phenomenon under study. Written accounts may vary widely even in application to the same results from a particular data analysis. The researcher's choices around ordering of themes, selection of participant quotations, providing context for participant narratives and application of particular theories to explain or understand the data may be influenced by preconceptions, which if brought to light may enable more nuanced, thoughtful and innovative write-ups.

For example, a write-up of a study of the experiences of Canadian Aboriginal women living with HIV might through various devices – theory applied; literature reviewed; ordering of themes presented; selective use of participant narratives; researcher interpretation and stated implications – acknowledge a variety of narratives, which may include victimization and hopelessness, as well as empowerment and resilience, while still giving voice to the impact of poverty, racism, sexism, colonialism and other harsh realities. The researcher's perhaps unreflexive imposition of a grand narrative of victimization, which might include empathizing with participants' struggles and pain, and feeling guilty about ongoing injustices, might obscure alternate narratives in the data that foreground empowerment, resilience and self-reliance. Bracketing via a reflexive journal and through bracketing interviews may help the researcher to make conscious his or her choices in writing up such a study and to explore alternatives, even as there is no one 'correct' outcome. The researcher also might be advised to include both their methods and experiences vis-a-vis bracketing as part of the write-up, as well as challenges in interpretation, in order to enable the reader to evaluate the results and interpretations for herself.

The diverse methods of bracketing outlined in each stage of the research process illuminate bracketing as a means to promote dynamic and fluid engagement with both participants and data. The methods of bracketing will vary from researcher to researcher, from topic to topic, and will depend on the stage of the research. Bracketing is neither a mechanized nor a manualized process that ensures if a researcher does X, he or she will obtain Y. However, if a researcher conducts bracketing in a careful, thoughtful and honest manner, this will promote deeper engagement with the material and increased reflexivity on the part of the researcher.

SOCIAL WORK AND BRACKETING

The commitment to view the participant from a shifting center, allowing new voices to rise and shape the discourse, is consonant with the practice of social work, which is anchored in the educational, political, medical, and economic structures whereby social work practitioners intervene and mediate to effect change (Denzin, 2002). Clients' personal struggles and challenges are woven

into the fabric of these various structures through poverty, homelessness, violence and discrimination (Reamer, 1998). Social work research mediates the private, sometimes tumultuous lives of individuals within the public structures of society; its close relationship to qualitative inquiry has positioned the qualitative social work researcher closer than ever to the participant. The diminishing conceptual border between researcher and participant shows no signs of returning to its previous characterization of the distant, objectification of the 'other'; rather it may be characterized as a joint, co-constituted partnership between researcher and participant (Poindexter, 2003). A researcher's ability to hear previously silenced voices and shifting centers of oppression relies on the ability to silence, for a time, his or her own voice and give precedence to the voice of the participant.

Bracketing as a reflexive process can assist social work researchers to gain awareness of power differentials between themselves and research participants, to hear participant resiliencies in the face of classed and racialized challenges, to develop a new appreciation for the context or person in environment, as well as for their own social location and the impact of this location on research.

CONCLUSION

The tensions around the implementation of bracketing, including the who, what, when and how of bracketing, as well as its constitutive elements can be a hindrance in the lack of uniformity of conceptions and methods of bracketing; however, this lack of uniformity also may afford qualitative researchers a range of choices and methods, and the opportunity to interject their own perspectives and embark on their own research journeys. The extent to which researchers develop their understanding of bracketing before embarking on a research project, and both explore and strategize around the particular challenges they may face as a result of their personal history and experience with the topic at hand, may increase the effectiveness of bracketing in supporting the research investigation.

In addition to developing knowledge about bracketing and exploring the challenges one may face both personally and professionally in undertaking a particular project, a commitment to the process of bracketing throughout the research trajectory will enable the researcher to more fully realize its benefits. Bracketing enables a deeper level of researcher engagement and integration throughout all aspects of the qualitative research endeavor. An eminent physicist has observed that a form of bracketing underlies all of the major discoveries in the physical sciences (Hut, 2001). Galileo, for example, had to bracket the widespread belief that the Earth was unmovable to make the then radical assertion that it was the Earth that moved around the sun. As bracketing may have supported Galileo in unleashing the binds of geocentrism, similarly bracketing

can support social science researchers in stretching beyond the constraints of egocentrism and ethnocentrism to facilitate innovation and renewed insights into the pressing social phenomena of our time.

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