To Bracket or Not to Bracket:
Reflections of a Novice Qualitative Researcher

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Abstract: Qualitative research is a useful method for social work research and continues to be part of the core curriculum in graduate social work education. This paper summarizes the author's engagement with an initial qualitative research project, which she undertook with four colleagues as part of their PhD research methods course. They used critical race theory as their theoretical framework and phenomenology as their methodology to explore aspects of racism in the classroom setting at their university. In this paper, the author reflects on her experiences and considers the impact of her personal epistemology as she grapples with the concepts of bracketing and reflexivity. The insight gained from this process would be useful for students and teachers in social work programs who are contemplating the use of qualitative research and/or group work in research projects.

Keywords: qualitative research, racism, epistemology, phenomenology, bracketing, reflexivity, critical race theory, intersectionality

Introduction

Mirror, mirror on the wall, can you tell us who we are?
When we go further into the researcher's parlour,
What is acquired, assimilated, excluded, rejected in our knowledge construction?
Race, Gender, Sexual Orientation, Religion, Ethnicity, Age, Nationality
Can we ignore our individual diversities--bracket our personal epistemology?

Who are those people looking back? Should we listen to their story?
Reflections, deflections, refractions, distortions
Pain, grief, anger, appropriation--aching afflictions!
Souls in turmoil to protect the story of their anguished history!

As we venture forward with our research call, what do we see?
Is it reproduction of knowledge with dominant epistemology?
Contradictions, conflicts, confutations, paradoxes,
Us and them and you and me: How can this be?
We are reflections of each other, are we not, dear mirror?

As part of a PhD course in applied qualitative research methods, my colleagues and I were required to complete a research project on a topic of interest that we thought could have some utility beyond the classroom. This project was shaped by course requirements and protocols, including university standards and our professor's specific guidelines. Although the professor left us with room for creativity, one of her stipulations was that we work in groups. Our group of five racialized students--with a range of identities and backgrounds spanning four continents--evolved around our interest in the topic of racism.

For our methodology, we decided on phenomenology, an approach that facilitates the study of experiences, structures, essence, and consciousness common to a group (Creswell, 2007). An exploration of racism based on our experiences as racialized students seemed to be a good approach for exploring the phenomenon of racism in the faculty. "Bracketing" is an essential tenet of phenomenology that requires researchers to set aside personal theories, research presuppositions, inherent knowledge, and assumptions as separate from what is observed in the research process (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013; Creswell, 2007). A challenge for me was thinking of bracketing juxtaposed with the highly encouraged practice of reflexivity in qualitative research, which requires researchers to be aware of their personal ontology and its impact on the research (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Berger, 2015; Creswell, 2007). How would our personal experiences of racism impact our decisions to engage in research using phenomenology? Would we bracket, given that we had all experienced racism on varying levels and in multiple contexts? As we undertook a project that involved a foundational part of our experiences, how would we set aside memories and knowledge that were embedded in our consciousness? Could we avoid reflexivity in this particular project of knowledge construction?

I found myself contending with the tensions between bracketing and reflexivity while simultaneously struggling with issues that surfaced for our group. Contemplating our differences, I imagined looking into a mirror and seeing my colleagues and myself as novice researchers occupying a space that was filled with uncertainty. How would we decide to "bracket or not to bracket" our unique diversities? What would be revealed to me through this process? What would be exposed to my colleagues about me? The verses above echo some of the struggles I encountered as I focused on myself as a researcher, as a colleague within the group, and as a participant in the research. I experienced the merging of these roles as I positioned and repositioned thoughts, feelings, anxieties, and concerns. Moving between my "self" and my work with the group generated an emerging awareness of my consciousness, grounded in experiences past and current, yet taken for granted that these experiences often evaded me.

My "Self" Within the Group

Since my immigration to Canada in 1982, I have experienced racism of varying intensity. I have often heard comments such as "Go back home!" and "You are in Canada now!" I presume this to be based on my appearance, made visible by my brown skin and my *hijab*. Other less subtle experiences that intensify when Muslims are unfavorably portrayed in the media included my home being egged and our community mosque being vandalized. Although such occurrences are sometimes overt in the community, they are more subtle and covert in academia.

My personal epistemology and ontology are rooted in religious beliefs and practices. I identify myself as Muslim. I am a student in a PhD program at a Canadian university worked on a research project with a group of colleagues. Our project employed qualitative research, a method that accepts (even embraces) a researcher's personal opinions and attitudes in the process of knowledge production (Lambert, Jomeen, & McSherry, 2010). Considering my personal epistemology and ontology, coupled with the diversity within the group, I grappled with the idea that we may be ill-equipped to engage in research using the phenomenological approach because

of the embedded nature of our experiences with racism. Further, I worried that we may be incapable of separating our participants' experiences from our own as we reviewed the data. Then there was the question of reflexivity: How would we engage in reflexivity? Despite these concerns, I felt a sense of safety as part of the group because of our identities as racialized students.

For the first time since I had been in Canada, I was in a classroom with a majority of racialized students; of the seven students in our class, five were minoritized. Although we differed in social, cultural, religious, professional, biographical, and personal attributes, I felt a sense of belonging. Our group came together after an in-class brainstorming session during which students were articulating what might be of interest for their research project. I suggested that, given the ongoing media coverage of racism and the Equity Survey (Dunn, Hoang, Landry, McKean, & Granke, 2013), racism would be a suitable phenomenon to research. In retrospect, I wonder what prompted me to make that suggestion. From a social work standpoint, the xenophobic climate in North America was a compelling academic incentive to explore racism, but was it the only reason? Does my desire to grasp perspectives on racism go further back in time? Would I uncover unanticipated connections to my past?

In addition to myself, four minoritized students from our cohort were interested in the opportunity to work on the project--we all had our personal experiences to draw from and contend with, as racism had touched all our lives. However, the group ended up larger than anticipated. I sensed some hesitancy from colleagues about the group size, particularly given that the other group consisted of only two members, and based on my personal experience with large groups, I had my concerns, too. Additionally, the literature on group work recommends three or four members as appropriate (Csernica et al., 2002) and suggests that challenges including participation and conflict among members are associated with working in larger groups (Burke, 2011). My ambivalent feelings about the group size caused me to develop a lingering sense of anxiety.

The first challenge for us was to establish defined roles and expectations. We were unable to successfully negotiate this, and it became unclear about who would take the lead. As a result, we experienced some degree of what Burke (2011) describes as "group dissonance" arising from a situation where groups "lack motivation, strong leadership or simply have personality conflicts" (p. 98). This initial incident was significant enough to affect subsequent interactions within the team. Moreover, personality differences surfaced, and, eventually, the group fragmented. I experienced discomfort with the conflict that surfaced. Was there conflict or was I looking for it? Did this only exist in my mind? My personal albatross!

My aversion to conflict emerges from my personal and professional life. I migrated to Canada from Guyana at a time when my homeland was fraught with conflict. Interracial and political unrest was abundant and manifested in plutocracy and civil war, with severe consequences for the majority of the population. Poverty was ubiquitous. Family conflict led to violence that plagued much of the society. Poverty. Racial tensions. Conflict. *Avoid conflict*. Professionally, the adversarial role of a child protection worker further developed my aversion to conflict: child welfare is saturated with situations in which conflict is pervasive and child protection workers

are frequently at the center of conflict. Child welfare. Addictions. Family violence. *Avoid conflict.*

I see myself. Both feet anchored with big weights. Attached by heavy chains. Chained. Immobilized. Conflict has grounded me. I struggle to move--forward, backward--but I am riveted. Can I escape? That was long ago, far away. Now I must find a way to engage with conflict, redefine the word, do some unlearning. What can I pull from my past? What is too heavy? What is useless? Here I am in a new place. Much time has gone. Time and space--temporal things--inform my consciousness, contribute to the shaping of my being, yet I often ignore them. My past is here with me. I cannot escape myself!

"No Matter Where You Go, There You Are."
-Confucius

There I was, engaging in research with colleagues. My peers seemed to accept the situation as safe and reasonable, yet I experienced discomfort. I theorized that failing to establish well-defined individual assignments for group members and a clear communication process had in some ways impeded our progress. Davis (1993) uses the word "slacker" to describe group members who are not participating and engaging adequately with the group. I felt like the slacker, not because I did not want to engage, but because I wanted to avoid conflict. Previous debates with colleagues had been productive, intellectually stimulating, and inspirational, yet I felt powerless, incapable of speaking up.

Why was this experience different? I was at an impasse. However, as I reflected on my understanding of conflict and the way it shapes my thinking, I realized that there could be something positive to it; after all, none of my colleagues voiced concerns. I eventually realized that our individual approaches to conflict hinged on our personal epistemology. Maybe some in the group saw it as something to be sought. I, however, remained paralyzed by the thought of conflict. How would this paralysis impede me? When conflict surfaced previously, there were deleterious consequences. What would happen now? The voice in my head made me cower!

There are the voices from within. I want to tell the group that bracketing won't work with racism, at least not for me. Conflict! My fear of conflict rises again. I am safe here, right? After all, we are five minoritized students drawn to our research topic because of a systemic power/privilege issue. Could power be an issue among our group of five? Hierarchy in racism? Intersectionality? No!--That voice screams--It's a reflection of your weakness, your lack of courage. The mirror reflects distortions.

My experiences within the group and the thoughts and feelings it evoked reflect the realities of minoritized students in many universities. Although some Canadian universities have anti-racist or anti-oppressive policies in place, a number of institutions continue to perpetuate structural racism (Drolet, 2009; Dhamoon & Chan, 2011). Further, the literature on racism in academia points clearly to various forms of racism experienced by minoritized students. For example, Dhamoon and Chan (2011) report a variety of racist experiences such as linguistic racism, curriculum silences, and stereotypes. My personal experiences are in line with the research.

Based on my appearance, assumptions about my accent and level of competence in English are made before I even speak. I recall a memorable conversation with a professor during my master's program. He commented on the privileged position of minority students who had made it into the master's program. The underlying opinion that the "higher you go, the less you are discriminated against" was made clear.

While I agree that education is a means of social mobility, it has been my experience that barriers faced by minoritized students can impact their educational endeavours and outcomes. I think of our first epistemology course and remember that despite the professor's attempts to be inclusive in readings, there were mostly the dominant Euro-Western perspectives presented. I wondered about how I know what I know and realized that Islam was central to my personal epistemology, yet it was absent from the curriculum.

Wait, I hear the voices again! Or is it the woman in the mirror? What about before you came to Canada? Did you not know of racism before? Had you not experienced civil strife that resulted in chaos? I go back to my childhood. Growing up in Guyana in the 60s. The white man left. Racism did not leave with him. We got our independence. That did not change our conditions. The fault line of the two major political parties was race. PPP. Indian. Coolie. Sons and daughters of indentured servants from India. PNC. African. Black. Sons and daughters of slaves from Africa. We were united against the white man. Coolie man and Black man. Brothers in the struggle for independence. No longer. Now fighting for power. Dichotomized. Even though my best friend was a beautiful soul housed in an Afro-Guyanese body, and even though we shared everything, we could not agree on this. Yes, we were children who did not care about ruling parties and race, but somehow it was there. Fuelled by colonization, by politics, by institutions, by systems, by poverty. It was everywhere. Racism.

Theoretical Directions

As I wrestled with my memories, our project took shape. We had consensus in some areas and were able to refine the research topic to "experiences of racism within the university classroom." We decided that our faculty would be the research site. Working with the group became more complex as deadlines loomed and personal anxieties about the group size and our ambiguous role assignment lingered, but we made crucial decisions about theoretical perspective and methodology to guide our project.

Given the topic, we all agreed that critical race theory (CRT) would be the best fit for our project. CRT evolved from the civil rights movement and critical legal studies; it examines the centrality of race in perpetuating oppression (Harris, 2012). Race and racism are used by the dominant culture to support their interests and are experienced by people of color, such that material benefits are lost to them and usurped by the dominant group in a system of "white over color ascendency" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 7). Focusing on a tenet of CRT that critiques structures that systemically exclude voices and histories of racialized people (Quinn & Grumbach, 2015) would help us understand the experiences and impact of racism by our faculty on graduate students.

The decision to focus on CRT was supported by our combined experiences and available literature on racism in higher education (Cabrera, 2014; Harper, 2012; Pilkington, 2011). We started off on the premise that racism in the classroom is likely to affect racialized students' program completion and career advancement, and it also causes psychological harm. Our discussions included concerns about curriculum content and classroom dynamics. After brainstorming a number of research questions that we could address, we decided to focus on the effects of racism in the classroom on racialized students. Nevertheless, there was an inherent challenge in the general use of "racialized" as a category. Considering my own identity (Guyanese immigrant, woman, older, citizen), how was my experience different from my colleague who was young, male, Christian, Ghanaian, and an international student?

I decided to consider the above question in the framework of intersectionality, an area of CRT developed by Crenshaw (1989, 1991). Intersectionality as an analytical tool allows one to examine oppression based on intersections of identity, including race, gender, and class, taking into account historical, social, and political contexts in which the multiple biological and social categories of personal identities operate to create axes of differentiation (Cole, 2009; McCall, 2005). Given the diversity of our group, intersectionality became useful in my understanding of how experiences of oppression and racism differed for all of us. Overlapping structures of oppression and the intersecting aspects of my identity caused me to reflect on the limitations of my own inclusion.

Using intersectionality to analyze my experience, I realize that the most significant factor for me is being Muslim; I attribute this to the current sociopolitical atmosphere. The addition of "religion as racism" is highlighted by the fact that racism can exist in situations where the reality or concept of race is not present (Zempi & Chakraborti, 2014). As a Muslim woman who wears *hijab*, race is present in the fact that I live in a brown body and also in the reality that I am covered. Stemming from orientalist ideas that are aptly captured in Razack's (2008) analysis of Muslims being "othered" and effectively evicted from social and political participation, I consider my circumstances and see the reasoning behind Kundani's (2014) suggestion that *hijab* is a racial signifier.

I am sitting in a café working on my computer with books and papers on the table. Concentrating on the idea of cultural hegemony. Grappling with questions. How does cultural hegemony work? What does it have to do with racism? I hear a voice. Oh, the dreaded voice in my head. This time it is pleasant. "Good morning." I look up to a middle-aged white woman and respond, happy to take a break and engage in social conventions. She has a question for me. In her pleasant, confident, paternalistic demeanor she asks, "Are you trying to learn English?" Yes, I suppose I am, because if you are culturally or religiously different, you are by default uneducated. Again, what is cultural hegemony?

Methodological Approach

We agreed on phenomenology as an appropriate methodological approach to our study and anticipated that it would assist us in developing a reflexive understanding of racism as a phenomenon through comparisons of our lived experience. However, the approach brought on

the debate of bracketing. Bracketing requires the researcher to deliberately put aside beliefs and experiences of the phenomenon before and during the research process (Carpenter, 2007). By doing so, a researcher is able to "mitigate the potential deleterious effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the research and thereby to increase the rigor of the project" (Tufford & Newman, 2012, p. 81). How could any of us--five visible minority students, personally struggling with issues of racism--put aside our positionalities and subjective experiences? Even more complicated, how could we bracket while interviewing fellow students who were sharing this very experience of racism?

The idea of racism is not an abstract academic topic that we, who have experienced it, can detach ourselves from or objectively observe. Creswell (2007) points to a difficulty with implementing bracketing, as "interpretations of the data always incorporate the assumptions that the researcher brings to the topic" (p. 83), and Parahoo (2006) discusses the idea that researchers' unaware assumptions unintentionally influence their concept of the phenomena. Another complicating factor for me was my professional experience. Being a social worker was a defining part of my identity. I was trained to be emphatic and engaging, and I saw every interview (sometimes every interaction) as an intervention. Would this impede my success as an objective researcher? Would I be able to take off my social worker hat and put on a researcher's? Given the intersections of my identity and the topic, I anticipated struggles to remain objective in the role of researcher. Crucial questions surfaced for me: How would my assumptions/experiences influence my research? Would being a racialized student make me too close to the topic, and, therefore, disqualified to continue with this inquiry? Would my contribution be biased by my insider status, or would this be considered authentic knowledge?

Qualitative research uses the ontology of the researcher in the process of knowledge production by engaging reflexivity (Berger, 2015). Researchers, therefore, need to focus on their personal knowledge and develop awareness of their social positioning to facilitate the understanding of the role of the "self" in knowledge production (Berger, 2015). Aside from the theoretical, ideological, and political influences pertinent to the researcher's social positioning are matters such as race, gender, immigration status, language, beliefs, and personal biases (Hamzeh & Oliver, 2010). In tandem with the researcher, the participants' lived experiences and their perceptions of their experiences are honored in the knowledge production process.

In addition to the awareness of a researcher's role, reflexivity includes the concept of cocreation of knowledge. The researcher and the participant are engaged in a mutually constructive process that is continuous (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Pillow (2003) questions the capacity of researchers to truly understand an experience (outside of their actual experiences) even when practicing reflexivity. We thought this gave us an edge, as we were all minoritized students facing racism and discrimination and were, therefore, able to share our perspectives. However, we faced the challenge of being on both sides of the research dyad and, therefore, in the center of the insider/outsider debate.

Through the process of the research, I began to think more about the dual role we had taken on as researcher-participants. Upon reflecting on myself as a researcher within the group, I realized that my underlying assumptions on racism, though impacting my life, were somewhat latent. As

I thought more about it, the ways in which I was different from other racialized students became more evident. I experienced some anxiety around my visibility as the only Muslim student in our group, an aspect of my identity that could easily hinder anonymity. Although the implications were not necessarily concerning, I was guarded about the information I divulged because of the social, political, and cultural context of our faculty, which was a microcosm of society. I experienced similar levels of ignorance and stereotypes of Muslims in other institutional and social contexts. I consider myself to be particularly cautious in general, as the constant burden of having to interact with people judging me based on who they think I might be has taken its toll. It remains a challenge to wear a particular hat as a researcher, which is divorced from being a Muslim.

Insights Gained

This project gave me the opportunity to experience the research process, increased my appreciation for the complexity of group dynamics, and improved my understanding of personal experiences of racism. To begin, I was intimidated by my lack of experience in using qualitative research, an inherently complicated system that allows for innovation with an emphasis on the researcher as an important tool in data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2007; Russell & Kelly, 2002). I had to work through my inhibitions as a racialized person from a colonized country who now works in Western academia. My epistemology included silence and acceptance; as such, it was a challenge to find my voice and use it, even with colleagues within my research group. As a novice researcher with no previous exposure to reflexivity in academic work, I found the process daunting in many ways. Maybe part of this is inherent in my experiences of racism that systematically erases voices of color from history, a tenet of CRT discussed by Salas, Sen, and Segal (2012). I also found it to be a liberating and exhilarating process that allowed me to find my voice, albeit a very tentative voice, and to hear it and listen to it.

Another important learning that emerged for me was the challenge to my concept of reflexivity and bracketing as binaries. I came to appreciate that bracketing is also a process that attempts to access a researcher's level of consciousness through different phases of research. It could be considered "a process of self-discovery whereby buried emotions and experiences may surface" (Tufford & Newman, 2012, p. 85). To bracket, I had to bring into awareness my experiences, feelings, and emotions and consider their impact on the research process. I found that thinking about bracketing itself allowed for reflexivity; it required me to contemplate assumptions embedded in my consciousness. The memories that surfaced for me resulted from both bracketing and reflexivity. In tandem, these two practices allowed me to interrogate the impact of my past on my present and speculate about the future as I continue to think about a point raised by Savin-Baden (2004) about the relationship between a researcher and her research as it pertains to her past, present, and future.

I also gained a better understanding of myself and why I am interested in researching the impact of racism. I have been socialized to accept racism, or at least live with its consequences, both in my past in Guyana and here in Canada. I found that people who are affected by racism have a genuine interest to make improvements in the system, not only for themselves but also for others who are exposed to racism. This became evident when research participants made references

about "others" more likely to suffer, such as international students or visible minorities with English language difficulties. I am left with more questions: Will research result in actions that lead to changes? What action can I take on the issue of racism in higher education?

And in the End

Mirror, mirror on the wall,
Show your reflection to us all.
Researcher, researched, emic, etic,
Participants, colleagues--whatever we call,
Those who help us in our knowledge search.

Your story, my words, my story, woven into one,
Narrated, told, retold, divulged, never shunned.
Reflection, replication, reproduction,
Revisited, reviewed, reworded until we are done.

Your story, you… expressing your word,
Epistemic violence: excluded, eliminated.
Researcher's findings, participant's voice.
Knowledge production--we have the choice.
To build knowledge that represents us all.

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