

Is Bracketing Realistic without Reflexivity? A Conversation Between Doctoral Students

Carly Charron and Samina Singh

Abstract: This paper offers a narrative of two doctoral students' understandings of the relationship between bracketing and reflexivity, building on Baksh's 2018 reflection on the tensions between them. Sharing our personal experiences led us to recognize our assumptions and challenge each other to unlearn and reconceptualize our initial understanding of bracketing. We emphasize the importance of reflexivity as an ongoing process and point out the dangers of attempting to bracket without first recognizing the impact of our own positionalities and experiences. We conclude our paper with tips for reflexivity to provide support for researchers who are navigating similar tensions.

Keywords: qualitative research, bracketing, reflexivity, positionality, identity, reflection

It is our second semester of our first year of the PhD program in social work at the University of Windsor, a small cohort of three. We have had an unconventional start to the program as we had no choice but to attend all of our classes online due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Although we missed the physical environment of the classroom and human connection, Zoom became the lyceum for our many passionate discussions about research and the search for truth. It was the conversation we had in our "Qualitative Data Analysis" course that would eventually lead us to write this paper.

Learning about the underlying tenets of qualitative research left me (Carly) feeling conflicted. In alignment with qualitative epistemologies, I had simultaneous and seemingly contradictory viewpoints about how to receive these methodological approaches. As a practicing social worker with a passion for understanding people's authentic experiences and stories, the idea of qualitative research was fascinating. On the other hand, my background in psychology and coinciding quantitative research portfolio made certain qualitative standpoints more difficult to embrace. I recognized the importance of reflexivity and transparency, but the ideas did not exactly sit comfortably with me. Throughout the course, I was continually challenged to confront personal biases that I was previously unaware of. We were asked to read an article surrounding a novice researcher's reflections about navigating the tensions between bracketing and reflexivity (Baksh, 2018); I could not help but relate to Baksh's perspectives. Thankfully, I knew I would be able to discuss my own personal tensions at our weekly Zoom lyceum.

I (Samina) could not help but realize the similarities between Carly's understanding of bracketing and reflexivity. Our backgrounds in psychology had taught us that there was a "right way" to do things and fix problems. With respect to research, the university I attended, McMaster University, focused heavily on quantitative research. I have always felt that quantitative research tends to coincide with the positivism paradigm, where there is one truth that needs to be obtained by objective measures (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). This meant the process of bracketing was significant, as the researcher needed to be objective and neutral to the research process. This belief was transferred into my education as I subsequently entered law school,

where I learned a good lawyer was a skilled analytical agent who was able to transform social issues into legal problems. Thus, lawyers actively restrained their emotions, as they are irrelevant to the legal process, a concept mimicked by bracketing in research.

However, being in the social work program I have been continuously reminded that there is not always going to be a “how-to-guide,” and that is okay. Instead, what is important is being transparent about the research process and practicing reflexivity in order to process and account for the biases and assumptions held by the researcher. I had to become comfortable with that idea again and have learned to appreciate the freedom and flexibility it allows.

This paper shares a reflection of our reactions and responses to Bibi Baksh’s (2018) paper, “To Bracket or Not to Bracket: Reflections of a Novice Qualitative Researcher.” We were interested in expanding on Baksh’s personal experience of “contending with the tension between bracketing and reflexivity” (p. 46). We agree with Baksh’s recognition that the relationship between bracketing and reflexivity is not binary as we had initially perceived it to be, and we further reflect on the dangers of isolating the two concepts. We argue that reflexivity is not only necessary for effective bracketing, but that they interact within a cyclical pattern that requires ongoing critical engagement by the researcher. We close our reflection by offering tips on how to engage in reflexivity to offer support to researchers navigating similar tensions.

Exploring Reflexivity and Bracketing as Binary Concepts

As we take a seat at the table, I (Samina) am reminded again of how grateful I am for the people in my life. It has been over a year since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, our usual workplaces have been inaccessible to us. I chuckle in amusement as not even a pandemic could stop Carly from creating the perfect workspace for us, from the coffee bar to the plate of chocolate chip cookies on the table and the essential lo-fi playing in the background. It is in this welcoming space that we start to reflect and discuss our experiences of bracketing and reflexivity.

To allow for later reflection, we decided to record our conversation and have included several excerpts verbatim throughout our paper.

What is Bracketing?

Bracketing has been described as intentionally separating personal theories, research presuppositions, inherent knowledge, and assumptions about the phenomenon from observations made before and during the research process to achieve an objective framework (Baksh, 2018; Carpenter, 2007; Chan et al., 2013; Creswell, 2007). The concept of bracketing has origins in phenomenology, a common methodology of qualitative research analysis developed in the early 1900s by Edmund Husserl (Smith, 2013). The purpose of phenomenology is to identify the “essence” (i.e., universal commonality) of experience and to understand the world as it is interpreted by human consciousness. To do this, it was necessary for researchers to set aside personal judgments to avoid bias that would interfere with their research questions. Bracketing has since evolved and gained attraction as a more generalized technique to increase the rigor and

validity of research (Tufford & Newman, 2010), and so we believe it is important for researchers and students like us to be clear about what bracketing is and how we can accomplish it in our own research endeavors.

We proceeded to have a conversation about the ways in which we tried to bracket in the past.

Samina: *How did you do it?*

Carly: *It's hard to explain. Theoretically I understood what I was supposed to do, but I don't really think I did it...*

Samina: *Okay, how did you know you were being objective?*

Carly: *I guess I just tried to be very specific about my process. It was more about what I did than who I was. When I was designing and writing up the results of my [honors thesis], I focused on the methodological details of the experiment and the characteristics of the participants I was working with... I didn't talk about who I was except for describing myself as a psychology student and mentioning who my supervisor was. Most of my effort was focused on replicability and there was an assumption that the data spoke for themselves and my influence as a researcher was irrelevant.*

Samina: *So you hid behind the sample?*

Carly: *I suppose you could say that, but I was just doing what I was taught. To "bracket," I just did my best to avoid making inferences and report the data as it was presented. How about you, what was your process?*

Samina: *I essentially tried to become a robot and pretended that I didn't have feelings. I embodied John Locke's (1689/1996) "blank slate of mind" where I tried to make my mind empty and formless. I compartmentalized all my feelings, assumptions and influences about the process and topic. I tried to take the "human" out of it.*

Carly: *But when you were pretending to be a "robot," how did you know whether or not it [bracketing] was working? You asked me if my efforts were effective... I honestly can't say for sure that they were.*

Samina: *I think it's possible to do, but it comes at a cost. Just as you mentioned, you hide behind a technique. So, if you're doing a study on racism, you're focusing on the priming technique you'll be using. It might be how fast or slow somebody taps a key, not whether the actual person participating is racist or not. You view people as objects that you are obtaining data from instead of a person who has thoughts, feelings, and unique experiences. It's like lawyering; clients often lose their identities and are assigned labels such as applicant and respondent, which allows lawyers to engage in steely analysis.*

Carly: *I think you're right about it coming at a cost. More often than not there's more to the picture. You can't bracket what you aren't aware of... how would you? You have to be aware to have a chance of being able to set something aside. If you don't, you're at risk.*

What is Reflexivity?

Reflexivity is the practice of engaging in ongoing internal dialogue and critical evaluation of the self. This helps to increase awareness of one's positionality surrounding a research topic and how it impacts both the research process and outcome (Berger, 2015). More specifically, it requires a researcher to examine their own beliefs, assumptions, and biases to present the role of the "self" in knowledge production (Berger, 2015; Hamzeh & Oliver, 2010; Howell, 2013). There are several relevant positioning characteristics that may influence the research process such as gender, race, age, and sexual orientation (Berger, 2015; Hamzeh & Oliver, 2010). If positionality refers to what we know and believe, then reflexivity is concerned with what we do with this knowledge (Howell, 2013). As social workers we have been engaging in reflexive practice for several years. Below are examples of our positionalities we have previously used in our respective research projects.

Carly

For my qualitative data analysis course, I interviewed my (two) classmates on a topic related to my eventual dissertation research topic. The research question was: How do women embody their perceived roles in supporting men's mental health?

The parts of my identity that influence my research approach are that I am a White, European Canadian, middle-class, woman, and a practicing social worker. These characteristics impact my comfort level and how I conceptualize mental health, as well as my ability to access services. Due to my personal experiences and relationships with men (family, friends, and service users) who have experienced mental health challenges, I have a strong passion for men's mental health advocacy. I have my own strategies for assisting men, so I may have anticipated certain responses and asked questions related to my own beliefs. Throughout the interview process, I found myself identifying with my colleagues' words and did my best to remain curious instead of jumping to conclusions. While I took an inductive approach to this project, my previous engagement with academic literature, preconceived notions about gender roles, and personal strategies for supporting men inevitably influenced the types of questions I asked in the interviews and the lens through which the data was analyzed. To minimize bias, I kept a reflexive journal throughout the project to keep a record of different thoughts I had. I also engaged in member checking by sharing my interpretations with my participants to ensure accuracy.

Samina

The research question guiding the project for the qualitative analysis course was: How do people perceive the law and the legal profession?

My main identity is that of a young, South Asian, cisgender, female Canadian. In this study, I brought my personal and working experiences with the legal profession. I graduated law school in April 2020 and am in the midst of articling to become a licensed lawyer. As a social worker entering law school, I always assumed that the legal profession was a helping profession. My experiences in law school, summer law employment and, presently, articling, told a different story. It seemed students and lawyers were more interested in how to apply legal principles and rules than how to build rapport with clients. Although these were my experiences and I did find fellow students and lawyers who had similar understandings, I had no empirical data to support this. I wanted to learn more about the worldviews of the legal profession and where these beliefs and attitudes arise from. Instead of relying on my experiences, biases, and assumptions, I chose to take an exploratory path to comprehend the perspectives of others. I decided to pursue my PhD in social work, as it would allow me to explore this topic more and understand people's perceptions of lawyers in hopes of transforming it into a helping profession.

Reflexivity was achieved by engaging in and reflecting through memos and journals to jot down any thoughts I had throughout the process. Additionally, I myself answered the interview questions that I used. This was to recognize my own assumptions and biases regarding the topic. Reflexivity was also important in creating a transparent trail to understanding the collection of data and its analysis (Joffe, 2011). More importantly, it was used to establish trustworthiness and authenticity for the researcher, participants, and readers (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

Contemplating the Impact of Identity

After we shared our examples of reflexivity with each other, like the true students we are, we ended up being pulled into another discussion about what the experience was like for us and what it meant to us. It became clear that our different experiences and identities impacted the way we approach research in general, much less the different topics that we chose to engage with. For example, as a woman of color, Samina has experienced the effects of marginalization and being invisible in Canadian society. Therefore, she has always been cognizant of racial inclusion when reading others' research and during her own research endeavors, to ensure the visibility of racialized individuals in academia. Carly, as a White woman, entered the research with a passion for understanding and mitigating the negative impact of gender inequities after recognizing the impacts of sexism in her own life, as well as hearing the experiences of men that she knew. Below is an excerpt from that conversation that we feel showcases the importance of reflexivity despite vulnerability in research:

***Carly:** Honestly, bracketing feels safer than reflexivity. It's easier to bracket because you don't have to expose yourself... You don't have to acknowledge that you can influence the outcome of your research findings. It's also easier because you don't have to be vulnerable. For example, since the positionalities that we used above were from our qualitative data analysis course, I felt safe to write about personal topics because it wasn't a public forum. In class, we talked about navigating decisions around how much to disclose... I wouldn't necessarily feel as comfortable to share openly with something that could be published. I didn't want to be that raw. So yes, I realize that there are certain parts of my identity that could be impacting the research, giving me passion to do the research, and influencing how I heard things that were said in the*

interviews, but... just making those decisions about how much I wanted to put out there and was I willing to be real. It can be uncomfortable.

Samina: *That's interesting because I feel the exact opposite. I enjoy reflexivity because it gives me my voice. It gives me that power back. I don't have that with bracketing. In both situations you're assuming control. As a researcher, you have power whether you're practicing reflexivity or bracketing. With bracketing, you're not acknowledging the power that you have and what that power does to your research and the participants. Whereas reflexivity acknowledges that and gives a piece of that power back to the participants and the readers. It tells people this is where I come from, this is my narrative, and this is how it could influence my project... If you're a researcher, your identity might influence it differently. It's so nice to be able to see that and do that. That's why for me it wasn't about being vulnerable... that thought never crossed my mind.*

Carly: *I don't think I'm completely opposite of you. The vulnerability is there, but I don't think it's a bad vulnerability. It's a good vulnerability. It's a willingness to expose those parts of yourself for the participants and for your research... To highlight different outcomes that could have happened based on who you are. You're being more honest about the outcomes by saying the findings could have been impacted by x, y, z, and then pointing out limitations of the research and discussing areas to explore in future research. Because this is one viewpoint, well maybe not one viewpoint, it's co-constructed by one group of people... with qualitative research, you don't have the same generalizability, but that's the beauty of it—you aren't forcing a single narrative. There's more freedom to be real. Still, it's important to be clear about your methodology, because it helps people to understand how you got where you got to.*

Samina: *Agreed. I think it's important to discuss because of the different viewpoints of reflexivity. For some people, it might be that they're taking control of their voice because society hasn't given them the opportunity. Others may experience reflexivity as vulnerability where they've never had to share that piece of themselves, but having to now put themselves out there and give others that information, there is a vulnerability to it. I think in this case, race does play a huge factor into it because a lot of the times when I walk into a room, I am already judged. My story has been established and dictated for me. So, I'm always having to prove myself and to others that there's more than meets the eye. That's why I like reflexivity because it gives me the power back.*

Carly: *Right, and even in this discussion, we're showing the importance of reflexivity. In this conversation alone we've shared two completely different experiences of the tensions between bracketing and reflexivity...*

The conversation quickly turned into a debate: Is bracketing truly realistic? Can human beings really set aside their experiences, assumptions, and values to depict unbiased and objective representations of study participants' realities? And even if this is possible, how does one go about manifesting self-awareness?

The Interconnected Nature of Bracketing and Reflexivity

When we were introduced to the concepts of bracketing and reflexivity, we understood them as being separate and disconnected entities. This is not to say that they are perceived that way in the qualitative research community, but because we had learned about these concepts separately, our minds did not automatically understand their connection. While doing research to write this paper, we ran into other students' posts in online forums asking how to apply reflexivity and bracketing simultaneously; we were clearly not the only ones who initially understood bracketing and reflexivity as opposite ends of a spectrum (i.e., binary). Baksh (2018) initially had the same perspective, but when attempting to bracket without being reflexive, she found the task almost impossible to do. Through her research experience she found that the relationship between reflexivity and bracketing were in fact, not binary:

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 requires me to contemplate assumptions embedded in my consciousness. (Baksh, 2018, p. 52)

After discussing her experience, we started to think about the dangers of thinking of these concepts as separate, especially engaging in bracketing without reflexivity.

How can one bracket if they are not aware of what they should be bracketing? This question kept arising over and over again for us as we read Baksh's (2018) article. We saw her grapple with the expectations to ignore parts of her identity and experiences, as bracketing continuously reminded her they were not relevant to her research. Although, her research topic was on the experiences of racialized students; how was she then expected to ignore her race and the impact it has had on her life? She found that she could not, as it was an essential part of her that did impact her research.

Our conversation about how to bracket and whether it's realistic led us to a much larger reflection about the importance of reflexivity and the standpoint that it needs to be an ongoing process at *all* stages of research. Once again, we provide an excerpt of that conversation below:

Samina: *What are the risks of bracketing without reflexivity? Isn't it easier to compartmentalize if you're not aware of your biases and assumptions?*

Carly: *Maybe it's easier to present the "image" of bracketing... being reflexive can be vulnerable, and you want to be able to say that you're doing it to make it look clean. But just because you don't acknowledge something doesn't mean that it's not affecting your research.*

Samina: *In Baksh's example, she knew her identity... the essential parts of herself... she had insight into her assumptions and biases, but yet she didn't necessarily believe she was able to bracket.*

Carly: *Maybe you can bracket some, but not necessarily all of it. It comes to being reflexive and*

presenting in your writeup about who you are and providing that context for the readers. That way, they can acknowledge the findings have been influenced by personal aspects, the relationship with the participants, and even the setting where the interviews took place. In class we were saying things like... if you don't acknowledge those things or aren't aware of them, then there's a danger of unintentionally imposing your views. The reader might not be aware of it if it's presented as truth or fact, especially in qualitative research where it's about one perspective or one set of experiences... it feels like you're imposing a positivist framework on qualitative research. If there's subjectivity, it needs to be recognized... it needs to be explored and presented so that it doesn't do harm.

Samina: *If you aren't cognizant of your power and privilege before beginning a research project, then you're going to ignore that and harm individuals. You're not going to see how your privilege and power impacts your research, the research question, who you choose as participants, and the write-up... it's all connected. I think you lose that richness and complexity that comes with qualitative research. I think that's a huge danger. It comes back to having a genuine, authentic, and empathetic researcher. If you know where the researcher is coming from and you understand their position with respect to the research, then [the participants] are going to be more likely to participate freely in the research project.*

Carly: *Has that happened to you as a participant? We've talked about this as researchers, but we've also been participants in studies. Has there been a time when you reacted differently to a researcher?*

Samina: *I think I generally avoid [participating in] qualitative research. It's because when I'm in an interview situation, I feel like there's a power imbalance. I'm giving you information about myself and it's putting me in a vulnerable position. I don't know what you're going to do with the data, I don't know if you're going to use it against me... There's so much you can do with my voice and my words and essentially make it your own. You're going to tell your own story, not necessarily mine. So, I avoid that. Especially when I see a White researcher. I don't want to give you that power, and I don't want you to fuck up my story. So, I have [chosen to] participate more in quantitative research because I don't feel comfortable being a participant in qualitative research. How about you?*

Carly: *One time I participated in a study that involved counseling. I was being asked really personal questions and I was like, oh boy... I had met her before, but she didn't recognize me. I realized the importance of the research, so I let it go, but I felt awkward and I'm sure that it impacted how much I shared. So, it's relevant even when it's not about somebody's identity but just previous experiences. We aren't always aware... we're talking about being reflexive about our emphasis on the research, but each and every participant in our study brings their own identities, experiences, and feelings. We might not be able to fully access theirs, but if we can access our own then at least it provides information about the lens that we are using to look at the data.*

Samina: *I think it's just about creating a safe and open space for participants, right?*

Carly: *Yeah, but is that totally in our control?*

Samina: *As a researcher? 100%.*

Carly: *I don't think it is.*

Samina: *Mhm - it is.*

Carly: *I think we can try to make it safe...*

Samina: *Yeah!*

Carly: *But if the participant doesn't feel comfortable, that's not our... we don't have control over somebody else. We can do everything in our power to make that possible, but I don't think we can force it.*

Samina: *Agreed, but I think reflexivity helps to create that safe environment.*

Carly: *Absolutely.*

Samina: *Trying to create a safe environment is important. If you don't, you're going to get more participants who don't feel comfortable or protected. With reflexivity, you're decreasing that number to maybe one or two versus all the participants.*

Carly: *That's true, not only at the beginning, but also when working with participants. For example, you might have different rounds of data collection where you are revising your questions or asking different probing questions. Your experience is different each time you enter that room and talk to somebody new. So, it can affect how you are looking at the data... maybe something one participant before had said now changes how you're viewing something else that another participant is saying.*

At this point in our discussion, it was apparent that our previous experiences and diverse aspects of our identities led us to reflect differently upon our research experiences both as researchers and participants. We recognized that various parts of our identities as researchers were delicately entwined with those of our participants. Desmond (2016, p. 325–326) wrote, “my identity opened some doors and closed others.” This has been true for us, too, with opportunities as well as relationships. Across all stages in qualitative research, researchers can be seen as instruments for analysis (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007); since we are all unique, however, we see the world through our own individual lens. Reyes (2020) argued that researchers actively and strategically utilize personal characteristics and resources to achieve research goals, pointing out both visible (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, etc.) and hidden traits (e.g., social capital) that influence our interactions with other stakeholders in our research endeavors. While we believe that an inevitable power dynamic exists between researcher and participant, there are certain things that will support or hinder our development of rapport; depending on situational and

relational contexts, we may be seen as insiders or outsiders (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Huang, 2015).

We found Reyes' (2020) ethnographic toolkit extremely helpful when considering how the complexity of our own intersectional identities has impacted and will influence our doctoral research projects. It challenged us to consider how we have actively (even if subconsciously at times) used our unique traits to understand and gain access to information and people in our fields of interest by drawing attention to our intersectional identities including race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, appearance, backgrounds, education, citizenship, and social networks. These traits and their related experiences had surely influenced our choice of research topics, but how might they influence our methodological approaches, our engagement with participants, and how we collect and analyze our data? Recognizing that our identities are made up of so many diverse elements, it would be impossible to discuss the influence of all of the intersectional pieces in a single paper. Still, we practiced being reflexive with a few dominant intersectional identities in reference to our own research topics below

Samina: My visible identities are that of a young, South Asian female. These pieces will impact my research in various ways. Specifically, it can affect my ability to recruit both social work and law participants. The field of social work is infamous for its prevalence of young female workers. There are also strong social justice values affiliated with the profession. Thus, being a young, racialized, female individual may have a positive influence in recruiting participants in the field. Whereas the profession of law is notorious for being dominated by White older males. My visible identities in recruiting lawyers could lead to a negative predisposition as I initially may be perceived as inexperienced, uninformed, and an outsider. My hidden identities include my education and experiences in both law and social work, and at the present moment not being a parent. My second invisible identity of not being a parent may present difficulties when interviewing clients. My research project revolves around the child welfare system, and I will be interviewing parents who have had child protection court proceedings. As I am a young female, clients may question my own family dynamic (e.g., if I have children of my own). If I do choose to reveal personal facts, clients may begin to doubt my ability to understand and relate to their experiences. This could result in clients ultimately feeling uncomfortable in truthfully or fulsomely engaging in the interview. My education and work experiences in both fields will be a beneficial and important asset that I will utilize throughout various stages of my research process. Particularly, it will provide me with a deeper understanding of the different or similar perspectives of social workers and lawyers. As I am familiar with both professions and have networks and connections with both fields, the recruiting process will be less challenging for me.

Carly: For my research, I plan to interview men about their decisions to seek help for mental health challenges. As I mentioned before, I am a White, European Canadian, middle-class woman, and a practicing social worker. These intersecting identities will inevitably influence my research as I approach the topic as an insider and an outsider simultaneously. As a woman, I have no experience living in the body of a person under the societal pressure of hegemonic masculine stereotypes. Yet, men have also been known to share more openly with women (McKenzie et al., 2018). All men are unique individuals and depending on each participant's

own intersectional identities and life experiences, they will perceive me in different ways. Certain aspects of my identity are visible. For example, I am privileged by my White skin which gives me power stemming from an unjust colonial history on the land where I will conduct research. I am also relatively young, which may cause others to doubt my experience and expertise. Whether or not I make my education and profession known, men may perceive me differently. One example of this would be if participants knew that I am a therapist, they might feel like I am trying to convince them to go to therapy, when in reality I believe that help is available in many alternative formats and am respectful of individuals' decisions to not seek help. Hidden aspects of my identity will also influence my research by allowing me to have insight into participants' experiences that I may not otherwise have noticed. I can also share pieces of my identity to build rapport and hopefully increase men's sense of safety in talking about their experiences. However, I will have to be careful not to invite response bias by making participants think that I want them to say certain things over others.

The Evolution of Bracketing in the Research Community

The suggestion that bracketing and reflexivity were somehow connected was beginning to take shape in our minds. Still, a wave of cognitive dissonance left us feeling unsettled. If these concepts were not binary, how did they fit together? We proceeded to look beyond Baksh and into the broader qualitative research community to further understand the relationship between bracketing and reflexivity. The results of our fruition indicated that the philosophical understanding and implementation of bracketing had transformed over the years.

We learned that phenomenology has generally been divided among two streams: descriptive and interpretive. Because it was initially developed in a time period when positivism was the prevailing epistemological framework (Dörfler & Stierand, 2020), the concept of bracketing was applied within the assumptions underlying this positivist paradigm (i.e., impartial researcher searching for an objective truth). As a result, the coinciding terminology that came to be associated with bracketing (e.g., suspending refraining, holding back, stepping out of, etc.) influenced how it was perceived within the research community (Dörfler & Stierand, 2020; Sorsa et al., 2015). At its outset, bracketing was not naturally associated with reflexivity; the two constructs were viewed as binary. However, as alternative epistemological frameworks became more prominent, researchers' understanding and approach to bracketing evolved accordingly, and reflexivity is now seen as an important component to its implementation.

Over time, researchers came to recognize and accept the impossible nature of setting aside their inherent biases. The focus of bracketing instead changed to raising awareness of biases and assumptions to call attention more effectively to their impacts on the research process and subsequent outcomes. The purpose of bracketing was and still is to increase the validity/rigorousness of research (Tufford & Newman, 2010); the only part that has changed is the process of getting there.

Through discussions in our qualitative data analysis course and exploring existing literature, we would ultimately conclude that true bracketing could not exist without critical reflexivity.

Bracketing and Reflexivity as a Cyclical Process

Carly: Having conversations with other people to try to access those parts of you that you're not aware of can be helpful. Based on our conversation, it seems like not only are reflexivity and bracketing not binary, but they work best as a cyclical process.

We hope that at this point we have been able to demonstrate that reflexivity and bracketing are not competing interests and separate entities. Instead, we view the relationship as a complementary cyclical process. Figure one illustrates our understanding of the bracketing and reflexivity relationship. We argue that this process *must* begin with reflexivity. This is essential, as it is not possible to bracket what you are not aware of. Thus, the initial reflexivity process allows a researcher to identify any biases and assumptions they may have.

We believe that bracketing may not be realistic. However, if a researcher decided to attempt to engage in bracketing, then we suggest that reflexivity should be an ongoing practice. This is important as bracketing calls for self-knowledge, sensitivity, and reflexivity to unveil the researcher's subjectivity towards the interpretation of the data and an ability to articulate them (Gearing, 2008; Sorsa et al., 2015). Particularly, reflexivity should be engaged during the beginning of each step throughout the research process, including but not limited to formulating the research question, designing the research methods, recruiting participants, collecting and analyzing the data, and writing the report. Moreover, it is critical to acknowledge that reflexivity is a never-ending process requiring continuous engagement where ideas, beliefs, and experiences cannot be simply "set aside."

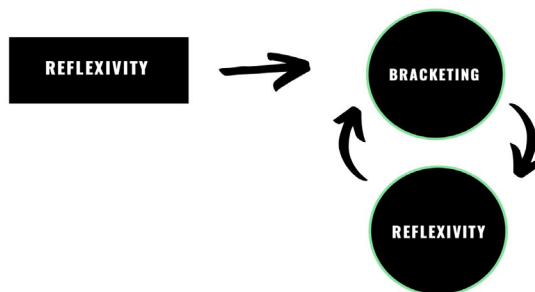


Figure 1. The cyclical process of reflexivity and bracketing.

Tips for Being a Reflexive Researcher

Reflexive practice has been defined as “some of the most challenging and important work in qualitative research” (Mitchell et al., 2018, p. 673). As a part of our process in becoming reflexive researchers, we have collected the following tips and tricks to engage in reflexive practice. We acknowledge that it is not an all-encompassing list and the strategies that worked for us may not work for everyone.

- Understanding that your viewpoint is ultimately subjective and diverse perspectives may all hold truth. This can be done through the following ways:
 - Educating yourself and engaging in open conversations with people who have different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives (Roddy & Dewar, 2016)
 - Embracing equity, showing respect, and valuing diversity (Cunliffe, 2016),
 - Practicing critical consciousness to become aware of alternative views and better understand your own standpoint (Hanson, 1994; Howell, 2013)
 - Fostering humility to accept the existence of multiple truths and recognizing that your current understanding may not be complete (Yeager & Bauer-Wu, 2013)
- Exploring impacts of the intersectionality of your different identities with respect to the privilege or oppression they hold. Examples of personal identities include gender, race, culture, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, sexuality, physical ability, socio-economic status, immigration status, language, religion, spirituality, personal experiences, beliefs, biases, preferences, theoretical/political/ideological stances, emotional responses, etc. (Berger, 2015; Reyes, 2020)
- Engaging in ongoing reflection about your feelings, biases, assumptions, thoughts, and any other relevant details of the research process through memoing, journaling, and/or jotting down notes (Ahern, 1999)
- Create a Social Identity Map to identify and reflect on your intersectional positionality (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019)
 - Create an open and safe environment for participants by stating your positionality and being present throughout the interview (Soedirgo & Glas, 2020)
 - Include a positionality section in your write up so readers and researchers understand your interests in the project and how they may have influenced the process. It is important to move beyond the statement and highlight how different aspects of your identity may have impacted the project at each stage (Reyes, 2020)
- Answering the interview question(s) yourself to increase awareness of your assumptions and biases surrounding the research question (Bazeley, 2013)
- Member-checking to increase the likelihood that participants' voices are being accurately represented (Birt et al., 2016; Candela, 2019)
- Debriefing with your research team or others and initiating reflexive dialogues about different ways to approach the research process to draw out alternative perspectives of the data and their meaning (Ahern, 1999)

Conclusion

This paper started with a simple discussion of reflexivity and bracketing during a study session. It unfolded into a complex debate about the relationship between reflexivity and bracketing. After defining the two concepts, we reflected on whether bracketing was truly realistic and its undeniable reliance upon reflexivity. In agreement with Baksh (2018), we believe that the two concepts are not binary. We take it one step further and argue that they constitute a cyclical relationship. As two novice doctoral research students, we shared our personal understandings and offered tips that we have found helpful. We hope that our reflections will encourage other researchers to continuously practice reflexivity in their own endeavors with bracketing in qualitative research.

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About the Authors: Carly Charron, PhD Candidate, MSW, BA[H] Psychology is Registered Social Worker, School of Social Work, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario (charron7@uwindsor.ca); Samina Singh, PhD Candidate, MSW/JD, BSW, BA[H] Psychology is Barrister and Solicitor/Social Worker, School of Social Work, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario (singh1g2@uwindsor.ca).