

Reflexivity

10 Articles on the Role of
Reflection in Qualitative Research

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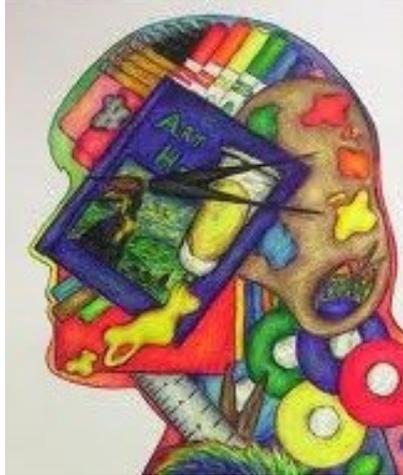
The contents of this compilation include a selection of 10 articles appearing in [Research Design Review](#) from 2012 to 2019 concerning the critical role of reflexivity in qualitative research data gathering & analysis. Excerpts and links may be used, provided that the proper citation is given.

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Interviewer Bias & Reflexivity in Qualitative Research

A challenge to any research design is the pesky issue of bias or the potential distortion of research outcomes due to unintended influences from the researcher as well as research participants. This is a particularly critical issue in qualitative research where interviewers (and moderators) take extraordinary efforts to establish strong relationships with their interviewees (and group participants) in order to delve deeply into the subject matter. The importance of considering the implications from undo prejudices in qualitative research was discussed in the April 2011 *Research Design Review* post, “[Visual Cues & Bias in Qualitative Research](#),” which emphasized that “there is clearly much more effort that needs to be made on this issue.” Reflexivity and, specifically, the reflexive journal is one such effort that addresses the distortions or preconceptions researchers unwittingly introduce in their qualitative designs.



Reflexivity is an important concept because it is directed at the greatest underlying threat to the validity of our qualitative research outcomes – that is, the social interaction component of the interviewer-interviewee relationship, or, what Steinar Kvale called, “the asymmetrical power relations of the research interviewer and the interviewed subject” (see “[Dialogue as Oppression and Interview Research](#),” [2002](#)). The act of reflection enables the interviewer to thoughtfully consider this asymmetrical relationship and speculate on the ways the interviewer-interviewee interaction may have been exacerbated by presumptions arising from obvious sources, such as certain demographics (e.g., age, gender, and race), or more subtle cues such as socio-economic status, cultural background, or political orientation. Linda Finlay, in [her 2002 article](#), identifies five ways to go about reflexivity – introspection, inter-subjective reflection, mutual collaboration, social critique, and discursive deconstruction – and discusses utilizing these techniques in order to understand the interviewer’s role in the interview context and how to use this knowledge to “enhance the trustworthiness, transparency, and accountability of their research.” An awareness of misperceptions through reflexivity enables the interviewer to design specific questions for the interviewee that help inform and clarify the interviewer’s understanding of the outcomes.

It is for this reason that a reflexive journal, where the interviewer logs the details of

how he or she may have influenced the results of each interview, should be part of a qualitative research design. This journal or diary sensitizes the interviewer to his or her prejudices and subjectivities, while more fully informing the researcher on the impact of these influences on the credibility of the research outcomes. The reflexive journal not only serves as a key contributor to the final analyses but also enriches the overall study design by providing a documented first-hand account of interviewer bias and the preconceptions that may have negatively influenced the findings. In this manner, the reader of the final research report can assess any concerns about objectivity and interpretations of outcomes.

Reflexivity, along with the reflexive journal, is just one way that our qualitative research designs can address the bias that most assuredly permeates the socially-dependent nature of qualitative research. Introspective reflexivity – along with [peer debriefing](#) and [triangulation](#) – add considerably to the credibility and usefulness of our qualitative research.

Reflections on “Qualitative Literacy”

In March 2018, [Mario Luis Small](#) gave a public lecture at Columbia University on [“Rhetoric and Evidence in a Polarized Society.”](#)

In this terrific must-read speech, Small asserts that today’s public discourse concerning society’s most deserving issues – poverty, inequality, and economic opportunity – has been seriously weakened by the absence of



“qualitative literacy.” Qualitative literacy has to do with “the ability to understand, handle, and properly interpret qualitative evidence” such as ethnographic and in-depth interview (IDI) data. Small contrasts the general lack of *qualitative* literacy with the “remarkable improvement” in “*quantitative* literacy” particularly among those in the media where data-driven journalism is on the rise, published stories are written with a greater knowledge of quantitative data and use of terminology (e.g., the inclusion of means *and* medians), and more care is given to the quantitative evidence cited in media commentary (i.e., op-eds).

Small explains that the extent to which a researcher (or journalist or anyone involved in the use of research) possesses qualitative literacy can be determined by looking at the person’s ability to “assess whether the ethnographer has collected and evaluated fieldnote data properly, or the interviewer has conducted interviews effectively and analyzed the transcripts properly.” This determination serves as the backbone of “basic qualitative literacy” which enables the research user to identify the difference between a rigorous qualitative study and a study that applied weak or less rigorous standards. And it is this basic literacy – which has advanced the public discourse of *quantitative* data – that is needed in the *qualitative* realm.

One of the ways users of qualitative research can effectively assess the quality of a reported study, according to Small, is the show of “cognitive empathy.” Small’s definition of cognitive empathy is not unlike the message from many articles in *Research Design Review* that discuss a central objective among all qualitative researchers; that is, understanding how people think*. Essentially, cognitive empathy boils down to the researcher’s ability to record the participant’s lived experience from the *participant’s* not the *researcher’s* point of view by way of understanding how the *participant* not the *researcher* thinks about a particular experience or situation.

Small does not discuss reflexive journals and the important impact they can have on aiding the qualitative researcher to gain the cognitive empathy the researcher seeks. Yet reflexivity and the reflexive journal play an important role in rigorous qualitative research designs. The reflexive journal has been discussed many times in *RDR* as one component (of many) to a quality approach to qualitative design. One such article is [“Interviewer Bias & Reflexivity in Qualitative Research”](#) which discusses the concept of reflexivity and how a heightened awareness of reflexivity “enables the interviewer to design specific questions for the interviewee that help inform and clarify the interviewer’s understanding of the outcomes” from the interviewee’s perspective. A subsequent article on the reflexive journal – [“Reflections from the Field: Questions to Stimulate Reflexivity Among Qualitative Researchers”](#) – offers specific questions or issues that encourage qualitative researchers to think about how they may be unintentionally influencing (biasing) their data and how they might modify their approach.

Without this reflection – without this true grasp of cognitive empathy – researchers weaken their studies by failing to internalize their participants’ lived experiences. With respect to public discourse, this failure in cognitive empathy can cripple our ability to comprehend, as Small says, “why people at the opposite end [of the political spectrum] think, vote, or otherwise act the way they do.”

* A few of these articles can be accessed in [this 2014 post](#).

Image captured from: <https://scholar.harvard.edu/mariosmall/about>

Reflections from the Field: Questions to Stimulate Reflexivity Among Qualitative Researchers

In November 2012, *Research Design Review* posted an article titled, “[Interviewer Bias & Reflexivity in Qualitative Research](#).” This article talks about why self-



reflection is an important and necessary step for qualitative researchers to take in order to address “the distortions or preconceptions researchers’ unwittingly introduce in their qualitative designs.” Although the article focuses on the need for reflection as it relates to the potential for bias in the in-depth interview (IDI) method, the relatively¹ intimate, social component of qualitative research generally and other methods

specifically – focus groups, ethnography, narrative – make them equally susceptible to researcher biases and suppositions.

The outcomes from a qualitative study are only as good as the data the researcher returns from the field. And one of the biggest threats to the quality of the research data is the ever-present yet rarely examined assumptions and prejudices inadvertently contributed by the researcher.

This is why personal reflection is an important part of qualitative research design. To motivate and capture this reflection, the earlier RDR article discusses the use of a reflexive journal or diary by which the researcher provides a subjective account of each research event with details of the influences that may have affected results. The journal “sensitizes the [researcher] to his or her prejudices and subjectivities, while more fully informing the researcher on the impact of these influences on the credibility of the research outcomes.”

But what exactly are the particular questions the researcher should be addressing in this journal? That is, what exactly is the researcher reflecting *on*? A reflexive exercise that is totally open and non-directional can be good, but it is also useful to consider particular questions that help stimulate reflective thoughts. Here are a few key questions for the researcher’s reflexive journal:

Broad Takeaways from the Research Event (e.g., the IDI, the focus group, the observation)

- What do I think I “know” from this/these participants?
- How do I think I “know” it?
- Will this knowledge change the course of the research, in terms of objectives, methods, line of inquiry; and, if so, how?

Specific Reflections on the Experience

- Assumptions
 - What assumptions did I make about the participant(s)?
 - What assumptions did I make about comments/responses to my questions?
 - How did these assumptions affect or shape: the questions I asked, the interjections I made, my listening skills, and/or my behavior?
- Values, beliefs, life story, social/economic status
 - How did my personal values, beliefs, life story, and/or social/economic status affect or shape: the questions I asked, the interjections I made, my listening skills, and/or my behavior?
- Emotional connection with the participant(s)
 - To what degree did my emotions or feelings for the participant(s) affect or shape: the questions I asked, the interjections I made, my listening skills, and/or my behavior?
 - How will my emotions or feelings for the participant(s) affect the analytical process and my ability to draw valid interpretations from the data?
- Physical environment & logistics
 - How did the physical setting/location of the research event alter how I related to the participant(s), and how the participant(s) related to me?
 - How did the physical setting/location impact data collection?
 - What were the logistical issues (e.g., in gaining access) that contributed to the “success” or weakness of the outcomes?

¹Compared to quantitative research.

Image captured from: http://photography.nationalgeographic.com/photography/photos/patterns-nature-reflections/#!/sandhill-cranes-sartore_1516_600x450.jpg

In-the-moment Question-Response Reflexivity

There are lots of articles discussing question design, focusing on such things as how to mitigate various forms of bias, clearly communicate the intended meaning of the question, and facilitate response. Survey question wording is discussed in this [“tip sheet”](#) from Harvard University as well as in [“Questionnaire Design”](#) from Pew Research Center, and a recent article in *Research Design Review* discussed the not-so-simple “why” question in qualitative research (see [“Re-considering the Question of ‘Why’ in Qualitative Research”](#)).



Getting the question “right” is a concern of all researchers, but qualitative researchers need to be particularly mindful of the responses they get in return. It is not good enough to use an [interview guide](#) to ask a question, get an answer, and move on to the next question. And, it is often not good enough to ask a question, get an answer, interject one or two probing questions, and move on to the next question. Indeed, one of the toughest skills a qualitative interviewer must learn is how to evaluate a participant’s answer to any given question. This goes way beyond evaluating whether the participant responded in line with the intention of the question or the potential sources of bias. Rather, this broader, much-needed evaluation of a response requires a reflexive, introspective consideration on the part of the interviewer.

Reflexivity is central to a qualitative approach in research methods. It is a topic that is discussed often in *RDR* – see [“Interviewer Bias & Reflexivity in Qualitative Research,”](#) [“Reflections from the Field: Questions to Stimulate Reflexivity Among Qualitative Researchers,”](#) and [“Facilitating Reflexivity in Observational Research: The Observation Guide & Grid”](#) – because of its role in qualitative research design. There are many wonderful papers and studies on reflexivity. A few of the most recent examples can be found in the August 2017 issue of *Qualitative Psychology* which is devoted to reflexivity and includes such thoughtful and insightful articles as Shari Goldstein’s [“Reflexivity in Narrative Research.”](#)

Most accounts on reflexivity focus on the reflexive journal and, specifically, the researcher’s recording of his/her observations related to the participant and the

research environment as well as the researcher's assumptions and beliefs that may have affected the outcomes. These after-the-fact considerations are essential to the integrity of the research. However, equally essential is the reflexive exercise that researcher's practice in situ, i.e., during an in-depth interview (IDI) or group discussion. This in-the-moment reflection, while in the research environment with the participant(s), is the time when the researcher must think carefully about *what* is being said, the extent to which the researcher *understands* what is being said, and the degree to which this understanding actually *mirrors the participant(s) true intent*.

Here are a few of the questions the researcher might contemplate throughout an IDI or group discussion:

- Can I explain, in my own words, what was said?
- Can I explain, in my own words, the meaning of what was said as it relates to the research question?
- How much of what I think I understand stems from the participant(s) rather than something I heard from other study participants?
- How much of what I think I understand stems from the participant's meaning rather than my subjective assumptions, beliefs, or personal experiences?
 - What are the words or phrases that I may be misinterpreting because I am contaminating them with my own assumptions, beliefs, or personal experiences?
- Have my emotional reactions to the participant's responses affected (biased) my understanding?
- Can I conclude the research event confident of what I learned from this/these participant(s) or do I need to prolong the event to ask clarifying questions?

It is this kind of in-the-moment reflexive exercise that ensures the integrity and the ultimate usefulness of the qualitative data.

Image captured from: <http://futureofcio.blogspot.com/2015/02/reflection-in-design-thinking.html>

Facilitating Reflexivity in Observational Research: The Observation Guide & Grid

Observational research is “successful” to the extent that it satisfies the research objectives by capturing relevant events and participants along with the constructs of interest. Fortunately, there are two tools – the observation guide and the observation grid – that serve to keep the observer on track towards these objectives and generally facilitate the ethnographic data gathering process.

Not unlike the outlines interviewers and moderators use to help steer the course of their in-depth interviews and group discussions, the **observation guide** serves two important purposes: 1) It reminds the observer of the key points of observation as well as the topics of interest associated with each, and 2) It acts as the impetus for a reflexive exercise in which the observer can reflect on his/her own relationship and contribution to the observed at any moment in time (e.g., how the observer was affected by the observations). An observation guide is an important tool regardless of the observer’s role. For each of the five observer roles* – nonparticipant (off-site or on-site) and participant (passive, participant-observer, or complete) observation – the observation guide helps to maintain the observer’s focus while also giving the observer leeway to reflect on the particular context associated with each site.

As an adjunct to the observation guide, it is recommended that ethnographic researcher also utilize an **observation grid**. The grid is similar to the guide in that

Observation Grid: Train Travelers Example			
Site location:	Date:	Start time:	Stop time:
	Research Issue		
Area of Observation	Waiting	Delays	Boarding
Behavior (what, by whom, where)			
Conversation (what, by whom, where)			
Context (What else is going on? What is the weather? Is it a holiday?)			
Type of traveler (alone, families, business companions)			
General mood (what, how conveyed, by whom)			
Other areas of observation:			
Reflexive comments:			

Adapted from Roller & Lavrakas, 2015. Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach. New York: Guilford Press.

it helps remind the observer of the events and issues of most import; however,

unlike the guide, the observation grid is a spreadsheet or log of sorts that enables the observer to actually record (and record his/her own reflections of) observable events in relationship to the constructs of interest. The grid might show, for instance, the relevant constructs or research issues as column headings and the specific foci of observation as rows. In an observational study of train travel, for example, the three key research issues related to activity at the train station might be: waiting for departures, delays in departures, and boarding; and the key areas of observation would pertain to behavior, conversations heard, and contextual information such as the weather and the general mood. Like the guide, the observation grid not only ensures that the principal issues and components are captured but also encourages the observer to reflect on each aspect of his/her observations and identify the particular ways the observer is influencing (or is being influenced by) the recorded observations.

*Roller & Lavrakas, 2015. [*Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach*](#). New York: Guilford Press.

Paying Attention to Bias in Qualitative Research: A Message to Marketing Researchers (& Clients)

Researchers of all ilk care about bias and how it may creep into their research designs resulting in measurement error. This is true among quantitative



researchers as well as among qualitative researchers who routinely demonstrate their sensitivity to potential bias in their data by way of building interviewer training, careful recruitment screening, and appropriate modes into their research designs. It is these types of measures that acknowledge qualitative researchers' concerns about quality data; and yet, there are many other ways to mitigate bias in qualitative research that are often overlooked.

Marketing researchers (and marketing clients) in particular could benefit from thinking more deeply about bias and measurement error. In the interest of “faster, cheaper, better” research solutions, marketing researchers often lose sight of quality design issues, not the least of which concern bias and measurement error in the data. If marketing researchers care enough about mitigating bias to train interviewers/moderators, develop screening questions that effectively target the appropriate participant, and carefully select the suitable mode for the population segment, then it is sensible to adopt broader design standards that more fully embrace the collecting of quality data.

An example of a tool that serves to raise the design standard is the reflexive journal. The reflexive journal has been the subject (in whole or in part) of many articles in *Research Design Review*, most notably [“Interviewer Bias & Reflexivity in Qualitative Research”](#) and [“Reflections from the Field: Questions to Stimulate Reflexivity Among Qualitative Researchers”](#). A reflexive journal is simply a diary of sorts that is utilized by the qualitative interviewer or moderator to think about (reflect on) how his/her assumptions or beliefs may be affecting the outcomes (i.e., the data). It enables the researcher to re-assess (if necessary) his/her behavior, attitude, question wording, or other aspects of data collection for the purpose of mitigating distortions in the data.

The reflexive journal appears to be a particularly vague or foreign concept among qualitative marketing researchers (and marketing clients) given the absence of discussions concerning this tool in their research designs. Why is this? Is there a belief that interviewer/moderator training sufficiently guards against potential bias? Is there a belief that all qualitative research is biased to some degree – because, after all, it isn't survey research – so any attempt at mitigation is futile (which, of course, begs the question, ‘Why bother with qualitative research at all?’)? Is there a head-in-the-sand (i.e., not-wanting-to-know) mentality that refuses to think of the interviewer/moderator as someone with assumptions, beliefs, values, and judgments but rather as a “super human” who is able to conduct a semi-structured in-depth interview (IDI) or focus group discussion devoid of these human qualities (i.e., lacking humanness)?

The humanness in all of us is worthy of reflection. And in qualitative research design this reflection can be put to good use mitigating bias in our data. As the interviewer considers how certain behavior may have elicited responses that were not true to the participant, or the moderator reflects on how his/her favoritism and attention towards a few focus group participants over others shifted the course of conversation and the outcomes of the discussion, these researchers are using their introspection to improve the research by moving data collection (and data outcomes) to a higher standard. This is how interviewers learn to adjust the interview guide or consciously alter their behavior during an IDI to gain more accurate data, or the moderator comes to understand his/her own prejudices and finds corrective techniques to become a more inclusive moderator and ensure an even-handed approach to the discussion.

Two important and [unique attributes to qualitative research methods](#) are the “researcher as instrument” component, i.e., the researcher is the data collection tool, and the participant-researcher relationship. These attributes speak to the humanness that both enriches and complicates the social-exchange environment of the IDI and focus group discussion. And it is this humanness – embedded in qualitative research – that should obligate marketing researchers to consider its import in achieving quality outcomes. If marketers care enough about the integrity of their data to adopt high standards in training, recruiting, and mode, why not care enough to mitigate bias in data collection by utilizing tools – such as a reflexive journal – to seriously examine the human factors that potentially increase inaccuracies and error in the final data?

Image captured from: <https://gone-fishin.org/2012/01/31/burying-ones-head-in-the-sand/>

“Did I Do Okay?”: The Case for the Participant Reflexive Journal

It is not unusual for an in-depth interview (IDI) or focus group participant to wonder at some point in an interview or discussion if the participant “did okay”; that is, whether the participant responded to the researcher’s questions in the manner in which the researcher intended. For instance, an interviewer investigating parents’ healthy food purchases for their children might ask a mother to describe a typical shopping trip to the grocery store. In response, the mother might talk about the day of the week, the time of day, where she shops, and whether she is alone or with her children or someone else. After which she might ask the interviewer, Is that the kind of thing you were looking for? Is that what you mean? Did I do okay in answering your question? The interviewer’s follow up might be, Tell me something about the in-store experience such as the sections of the store you visit and the kinds of food items you typically buy.



It is one thing to misinterpret the intention of a researcher’s question – e.g., detailing the logistics of food purchasing rather than the actual food purchase experience – but another thing to adjust responses based on any number of factors influenced by the researcher-participant interaction. These interaction effects stem, in part, from the participant’s attempt to “do okay” in their role in the research process. [Dr. Kathryn Roulston](#) at the University of Georgia has written quite a bit about [interaction in research interviews](#), including an edited volume *Interactional Studies of Qualitative Research Interviews*.

The dynamics that come into play in an IDI or focus group study – and in varying degrees, ethnographic research – are of great interest to qualitative researchers and important considerations in the overall quality of the research. This is the reason that a lot has been written about the researcher’s reflexive journal and its importance in allowing researchers to reflect on their contribution to the data gathered. Many articles in *Research Design Review* – such as [“Interviewer Bias & Reflexivity in Qualitative Research”](#) and [“Reflections from the Field: Questions to Stimulate Reflexivity Among Qualitative Researchers”](#) – and elsewhere – including an August 2017 issue in *Qualitative Psychology* devoted to reflexivity

and a host of articles such as Shari Goldstein's [“Reflexivity in Narrative Research”](#) – have discussed reflexivity and the role of the reflexive journal in the validity of the outcomes.

And yet, with the exception of scholars such as Kathy Roulston, relatively little has been discussed concerning the participant's actual experience of the research event (i.e., the interview or group discussion) and its potential to undermine the validity of qualitative data. In particular, it would be of interest to understand how the participant's actual experience *from the participant's perspective* shaped the outcomes. That is, a participant reflexive journal. Not unlike the reflexivity practiced by researchers, *what if* participants were asked to reflect on their role in the research process. *What if* participants were asked to reflect on introspective questions such as:

- What affect did the interviewer's race or ethnicity have on my responses?
- How did the physical space in which the interview was conducted affect my responses?
- Did the moderator's handling of the group dynamics stifle ideas and experiences I wanted to share?
- The interviewer didn't seem to like me, how did that alter the veracity of my responses?
- How did the differing opinions expressed in the focus group change my own opinions?
- Did I agree or disagree with certain ideas to simply go along with everyone else in the group discussion?

In this way, the participant reflexive journal empowers participants to answer the question so often asked – “Did I do okay?”

Image captured from: <https://www.pexels.com/search/reflection/>

Giving Voice: Reflexivity in Qualitative Research

[Homegoing](#), the debut novel by Yaa Gyasi, is a moving tale of slavery and its



translation across generations. At one point, we read about a descendant in Ghana who teaches history and on the first day of class stumbles on a lesson concerning “the problem of history.” The problem he refers to is that history is constructed from stories that are handed down over time yet “We cannot know which story is correct because we were not there.” He goes on to say to his students

We believe the one who has the power. He is the one who gets to write the story. So when you study history, you must always ask yourself, Whose story am I missing? Whose voice was suppressed so that this voice could come forth? Once you have figured that out, you must find that story too. From there, you begin to get a clearer, yet still imperfect, picture. (pp. 226-227)

The month of February seems like an appropriate time to reflect on power and what we as researchers are missing in our studies of vulnerable and marginalized segments of the population. After all, with the exception of participatory research, we are typically the ones who control the design and implementation of data collection along with the analysis, interpretation, and reporting of the findings.

Reflection on our role in the research process should be common practice. But our reflection takes on new meaning when our participants are those with the weakest voice. As we sit down with our reflexive journal and consider our prejudices and subjectivities (by asking ourselves the kinds of questions outlined in [this RDR article](#)), researchers might do well to pay particular attention to their assumptions and beliefs – What assumptions did I make about the participant(s)? and How did my personal values, beliefs, life story, and/or social/economic status affect or shape: the questions I asked, the interjections I made, my listening skills, and/or my behavior?

Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett (2003) address this in their discussion on interviewing Black women on sensitive topics. As Black women themselves, they felt no less obligated to reflect on their status.

As Black feminist qualitative researchers, we are particularly attuned to how we become the research instruments and the primary sieves of re/presentation in our exploration of Black womanhood. (p. 213)

By way of this reflection, the authors make recommendations toward the interviewing of Black women on sensitive topics, including such concepts as “contextualizing self in the research process.” The authors also come to the realization that “the diversity of Black experience has been misrepresented [by] traditional family studies orientations,” asserting that “the persistent matrix of intersectionality that Black women endure, succumb, and overcome” cannot be fully addressed if “researchers debate and deconstruct out of existence the ‘critical essences’ (i.e., race, class, and gender) that matter to Black women’s existence and survival in this world” (p. 213).

So, take another look at your reflexive journal. Take another look at your research with the vulnerable and marginalized. And, if not already there, consider adding these queries – so well put by Gyasi – to your journal: Whose story am I missing? Whose voice has been suppressed? Whose story do I need to seek out to help me gain a clearer, more complete picture of the people and the phenomenon I hope to illuminate through my research? How, indeed, have I used my power as a researcher to give center stage to the “critical essences” of society’s minority voices?

Few, A. L., Stephens, D. P., & Rouse-Arnett, M. (2003). [Sister-to-sister talk: Transcending boundaries and challenges in qualitative research with Black women](#). *Family Relations*, 52(3), 205–215.

Image captured from: <https://jennymackness.wordpress.com/category/connectedcourses/>

Resisting Stereotypes in Qualitative Research

One of the most meaningful concepts in qualitative research is that of “Othering”; that is, the concept of “us” versus “them” that presents itself (knowingly or not) in the researcher-participant interaction. Othering is an important idea across all qualitative methods but it is in the in-depth interview (IDI) – where the intensity of the interviewer-interviewee relationship is pivotal to the quality of outcomes – where the notion of Othering takes on particular relevance. As discussed [elsewhere](#) in *Research Design Review*, the interviewer-interviewee relationship in IDI



research fosters an “asymmetrical power” environment, one in which the researcher (the interviewer) is in a position to make certain assumptions – and possibly misperceptions – about the interviewee that ultimately play a role in the final interpretations and reporting of the data. It is this potentially uneven power relationship that is central to the reflexive journal (which is discussed repeatedly in this blog).

In 2002, *Qualitative Social Work* published an article by [Michal Krumer-Nevo](#) titled, [“The Arena of Othering: A Life-Story with Women Living in Poverty and Social Marginality.”](#)¹ This is a very well-written and thought-provoking article in which Krumer-Nevo discusses the “sphere of power relationships” in IDI research, an environment in which the interviewer and interviewee are continuously swapping their power status – “One minute I was the ‘important’ interviewer, with power and status...and the next minute I would find myself facing a closed door” (p. 307). In this way, the Other (or “us”) in Othering moves back and forth, with both interviewer and interviewee attempting to socially define and/or control the other.

From the perspective of the interviewer, it takes more than keen listening skills (something discussed many times in this blog, esp., in [October 2013](#) and [April 2011](#)) to delve beyond unwarranted assumptions concerning the interviewee, it *also* takes a keen sense of one’s own stereotypical “baggage.” In her IDI research with women “living in poverty,” Krumer-Nevo found herself in a stereotypical trap

by way of “seeing [the interviewee] as a victim” rather than seeing the strengths and contributions made by the impoverished participant. By succumbing to the notion of victim, Krumer-Nevo was defining this interviewee in a flat, one-dimensional, stereotypical way instead of perceiving the complex, multi-dimensional character she was.

Krumer-Nevo is right when she talks about the need to resist Othering in IDI research and, particularly, the tendency to define our research participants by our own socio-economic or theoretical framework which blinds us to the reality of the very subject matter we want to know more about. Shedding our stereotypes means putting “aside the normative knowledge acquired from one’s membership in a society, a family, an educational system of values [because] the values, positions, and attitudes acquired in the process of socialization...work against the ability to understand those who live in poverty [or in situations unfamiliar to us]” (p. 316).

Resisting stereotypical beliefs – resisting being the Other to the other – is one critical step all researchers can take in their IDI research towards achieving quality data outcomes and credible, useful interpretations of the findings.

¹Krumer-Nevo, M. (2002). The arena of othering: A life-story study with women living in poverty and social marginality. *Qualitative Social Work*, 1(3), 303–318.

Image captured from: <http://glamdollteaston.wordpress.com/2013/07/02/what-are-the-dangers-of-stereotyping-people/>

Lessons in Best Practices from Qualitative Research with Distinct Cultures

[Janette Brocklesby](#) recently wrote an article in *QRCA Views* magazine concerning the conduct of qualitative research with the Māori population of New Zealand.



Specifically, she addresses the issue of whether “non- Māori researchers have the cultural competency, expertise and skills to undertake research with Māori.” Brocklesby makes the case in the affirmative, emphasizing that non- Māori qualitative researchers are “well equipped to undertake research with Māori and to convey the Māori perspective.”

In making her case, Brocklesby discusses many of the best practices mentioned repeatedly in *Research Design Review*. As for all qualitative research, a researcher studying Māori groups must place a high importance on:

Reflexivity – Continually questioning and contemplating the researcher’s role or impact on research outcomes is a critical step towards quality results. In March 2014, [an article in RDR](#) talked about using a [reflexive journal](#) to think about the assumptions, values, and beliefs that researchers bring to their fieldwork that potentially threaten the integrity of the data. Likewise, Brocklesby emphasizes the need for non- Māori researchers to reflect on and ask themselves questions such as, “How do I identify with New Zealand and how am I the same as and different from Māori?”

Complexity – Important to understanding another culture is the ability to delve into the complexity of personal meaning as it relates to the research participants. As discussed in [this RDR article concerning social constructionism](#) (as well as other posts throughout this blog), the human experience is defined (and complicated) by the interconnections of life’s facets. That personal meaning – even within a distinct culture – may vary greatly. In this respect, Brocklesby asserts that researchers must “make no assumptions about what being Māori means to people.” Qualitative researchers embrace the complexity of personal meaning.

Context – Context is king in qualitative research, and a topic discussed throughout *RDR*, e.g., [context in observational research](#). Context, like complexity, is particularly important when studying a unique culture. In the Māori culture, for

instance, it is essential to provide the necessary time for introductions to gain an understanding of personal identity which serves as the context that will ultimately shape research outcomes. Personal identity lurks as context in all qualitative research; a context that, unfortunately, is too often ignored and unexplored in less culturally-oriented qualitative studies.

Flexibility – A unique quality of qualitative research is flexibility. This quality manifests itself in many ways, including the researcher's ability to adjust the research design as appropriate during the course of the field period. Brocklesby emphasizes this point when she mentions the need, for example, to include family members in research with Māori, as well as the probability of having to reschedule and respecting local customs.

These four attributes – reflexivity, complexity, context, and flexibility – are important to conducting meaningful research with Māori, yet equally important in the design of all qualitative research. Research with distinct cultures offers a useful lesson in why and how to implement best practices in qualitative research design.

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