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Reconceptualizing Bias in Teaching Qualitative Research Methods

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Abstract

Researchers who have been prepared in positivist traditions to social research frequently equate "subjectivity" with "bias," which is viewed as both a problem to be managed and a threat to the credibility of a study. Teachers of qualitative research methods are familiar with questions about "subjectivity" that invoke "bias" from newcomers to qualitative research. This article revisits the methodological literature to examine how bias has been understood in qualitative inquiry. We argue for an approach to teaching qualitative research methods that assists students to make sense of long-standing and new debates related to "bias" and reconceptualize it in relation to their work. We provide recommendations for how teachers of qualitative inquiry might do this and illustrate these strategies with examples drawn from methodological reflections completed by a graduate student taking qualitative coursework.

Keywords

subjectivity, reflexivity, bias, objectivity, teaching qualitative research methods, doctoral education

Although the concepts of "subjectivity" and "reflexivity" as they relate to qualitative inquiry are well entrenched and much discussed in methodological literature (e.g., Barad, 2007; Breuer & Roth, 2003; Finlay & Gough, 2003; Hsiung, 2008; Krieger, 1985; Lynch, 2000; Macbeth, 2001; Peshkin, 1988; Pillow, 2003; Preissle, 2008; Wilkinson, 1988), researchers new to qualitative inquiry are frequently challenged in first encounters with these ideas. This is particularly so because positivist assumptions about research are omnipresent in society. Think, for example, of the daily reports on the latest research findings to which we are all exposed. Thus, when learning about qualitative research methods, students routinely ask questions about researchers' biases—expressing concerns about the manipulation or distortion of data, and how to go about eliminating personal bias. In the introductory qualitative methods course that the first author teaches, students' questions and comments usually reflect a range of views concerning "bias," including bias as a lack of objectivity, as a threat to a study's credibility, as an ethical issue, and as potentially hidden from a researcher's knowledge of self (see also Mehra, 2002).

Teachers of qualitative research methods will be familiar with conversations in which students equate subjectivity with bias, which is viewed as both a problem to be managed and a threat to the credibility of a study. Perceived as a threat, any demonstrations of bias on the part of the researcher (e.g., expressions of ideological positions, or sympathies that lie with particular participant groups) are frequently viewed as indicators of a poor quality study. Both newcomers to qualitative research and founding scholars such as Barney Glaser (e.g., Glaser, 2002) may see the elimination of bias as both possible and good, implying positivist assumptions about social research.

Anthony Paré's (2010) discussion of how doctoral students enter the conversation in their various discourse communities is instructive. Paré argues that part of doctoral education involves learning about current debates in ways that appreciate "their chronological and conceptual development—the defining moments, the schisms, the fallow periods, the years of rapid theoretical growth" (p. 34). Learning how to apply qualitative methods involves coming to understand how various concepts have been debated and discussed in the literature—and joining that conversation. In this article, we reprise conversations about "bias" in ways that we hope invite new students into the discourse community of qualitative methods. We argue that by encouraging students of qualitative research to think about and reconceptualize their assumptions about bias in qualitative inquiry, teachers of qualitative research can engage students in rich discussions about ontological and epistemological assumptions about research and how quality is assessed by scholars working from different theoretical viewpoints.

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As scholars, we use different theoretical tools to do research. The first author has used perspectives that draw on ethnomethodology to examine data. As a teacher of qualitative methods, however, she aims to introduce newcomers to multiple ways to do qualitative inquiry in a way that respects difference and encourages students to think through the implications of their theoretical decisions for the design and conduct of their studies. The second author, Stephanie, draws on feminist queer theories for her doctoral research and took a qualitative course with the first author. Although we use different theoretical perspectives to inform our work, we argue, as does Tracy (2010) in her proposal for "Big-Tent" criteria for doing excellent qualitative research, that there are some common strategies that we might use as teachers and learners to enrich our understandings of "bias" and "reflexivity" in qualitative inquiry. Thus, we illustrate what this might look like by using examples from Stephanie's reflections.

Literature Review

Defining Terms

The entry on bias in the *Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* suggests that in qualitative inquiry, the key "imperative is for researchers to be aware of their values and predispositions and to acknowledge them as inseparable from the research process," noting that "social scientists should acknowledge their own subjectivity in the research process" (Ogden, 2008, p. 61). That values are inherent to a constructivist paradigm has long been recognized by qualitative methodologists (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Similarly, the idea that bias is an aspect of subjectivity and needs to be recognized is well accepted. For example, one of the three explanations provided by Schwandt (1997) with respect to the term subjective is that it refers to "(1) the personal view of an individual; (2) unwarranted or unsupported (or unwarrantable, insupportable); and (3) biased or prejudiced" (p. 147).

Noted ethnographer, Alan Peshkin, has outlined strategies for managing "subjectivity." Rather than striving to accomplish objectivity, Peshkin (1988) argued that problems with subjectivity arise not so much because of the ways in which one's "class statuses, and values [interact] with the particulars of one's object of investigation" (p. 17) but with failures to recognize and account for these, and thoughtfully shape a project in ways that manage subjectivity. Other scholars, however, have challenged the idea that the presence of subjectivity—or "an individual's feelings, opinions, or preferences"—is always problematic (Siegesmund, 2008, p. 843), and have questioned the continued use of the concepts of subjectivity and objectivity. Writing over 20 years ago, Thomas Barone (1992), for example, has argued that the concepts of objectivity and subjectivity are no longer meaningful and are already dead. As a further example, Bruno Latour (2000) questions the idea that objectivity and subjectivity are opposites, and asserts that

> [o]bjectivity does not refer to a special quality of the mind, and inner state of justice and fairness, but to the presence of objects which have been rendered "able" . . . to *object* to what is told about them. (p. 115)

What we see here is that researchers have called into question dichotomized notions of subjectivity/objectivity and their relevance to research. Yet, even though scholars such as those cited above have cogently argued for the abandonment of the idea of the neutral and independent researcher, and have called for reconceptualizing and redefining terms such as subjectivity and objectivity, many novice researchers still come to qualitative inquiry with unexamined assumptions about the role of the researcher. Key among these are that subjectivity is equated with bias, which is construed as a problem to be eradicated; that objectivity is a worthy and plausible goal; and that qualitative research should be apolitical and non-ideological. Notwithstanding the immense proliferation in paradigms used in qualitative inquiry that has occurred in the last two decades (e.g., Lather, 2006), and that newer, heated debates abound in the methodological literature (e.g., Saldaña, 2014; St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014), new researchers may find it helpful to become acquainted with some of the conversations that have preceded their entry into the field. We begin with the idea of "reflexivity."

Reflexive Practices

Strategies that may be collectively labeled as "reflexive practices" abound in qualitative methodological literature. These focus on examining one's subjectivity and reflecting on how this shapes the research process, and include subjectivity statements (Preissle, 2008), interviews that aim to explore the researcher's underlying assumptions about topics (Maso, 2003; Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997), researcher journals (Janesick, 1999), and reflexive writing (Luttrell, 2010b). Such reflection on practice and self-examination throughout the life of a project is thought to constitute what has widely been conceptualized as "reflexivity," which Linda Finlay and Brendon Gough (2003) assert involves:

> thoughtful, self-aware analysis of the intersubjective dynamics between researcher and the researched. Reflexivity requires critical self-reflection of the ways in which researchers' social background, assumptions, positioning and behaviour impact on the research process. (p. ix)

Reflexivity, though, is not without critiques. Linda Finlay (2002, 2012) has developed a typology of pathways to reflexivity evident in qualitative research and reflexive lenses that might be used in qualitative interviewing, while also expounding on the potential problems inherent in each. Wanda Pillow (2003) has problematized the use of "reflexivity" in qualitative inquiry, questioning the strategies used by researchers to (a) recognize themselves, (b) recognize the Other, (c) authorize the text in "getting it right" (pp. 186-187), and (d) transcend their own subjectivities and cultural contexts. Pillow calls for "interrupting comfortable reflexivity" in favor of "uncomfortable reflexivities" in "messy texts" (pp. 187-188), providing examples that employ post-structural theory.

More recently, Karen Barad (2007), a feminist physicist and philosopher identified with new materialist writing, takes up Donna Haraway's critique of reflexivity in the social sciences as a practice that "mirrors the geometrical optics of reflections," getting "caught up in geometries of sameness" (pp. 71-72). Barad offers instead the concept of "diffraction"—drawn from physics—as a tool for a diffractive methodology that attends and responds "to the effects of difference" (p. 72), as well as examining the "entanglements" that differences make (p. 73). Barad compares key differences involved in examining "questions of reflection" (pp. 86-90) to using the ideas of diffraction in research, a method that she argues involves understanding the "world from within and as part of it," rather than "reflecting on the world from outside" (p. 88). To sum up, she argues that diffractive analysis focuses on accounting for "how practices matter" (p. 90), while reflection involves "reflecting on representations" viewed as mirrored objects (pp. 89-90).

The proliferation of writing on reflexivity—whether in introductory methods texts (e.g., Rossman & Rallis, 2012), theoretical overviews (e.g., Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011), writing on criteria for good qualitative research (e.g., Tracy, 2010), or dedicated texts (e.g., Etherington, 2004; Finlay & Gough, 2003)—shows it to be a core tenet of doing qualitative inquiry. Yet reflexivity has also been questioned (e.g., Barad, 2007; Lynch, 2000). To sum up, while an alternative set of terminology has been developed in qualitative inquiry (i.e., "subjectivity," "reflexivity," "subjective positions," "positionalities," "inquirer posture," "voice") to deal with the researcher's role, position, and actions in relation to a project and participants, debate about "reflexive practices," "subjectivity," and "bias" continues. Rather than having "died" as Barone (1992) suggests, debates about objectivity, subjectivity, bias, and reflexivity continue unabated.

In both quantitative and qualitative research methods literature, we have found that bias is defined in multiple ways that are not clearly understood (Burton-Jones, 2009; Hammersley & Gomm, 1997; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). The challenges of learning about bias and reflexivity for new qualitative researchers are exacerbated when trying to publish qualitative studies in fields in which quantitative methods have predominated. Reviewers frequently use positivist criteria to judge the merit of work that has clearly been conducted from post-positivist perspectives (here, we use the term *post-positivist* in a broad sense as used by Patti Lather, 2004). We argue that it is especially important, then, for qualitative scholars to develop a good understanding of the various ways that "bias" and "subjectivity" have been conceptualized to design quality studies in their own disciplines. In short, we take up Barad's (2007) advice for a diffractive methodology, which advocates for an approach that attempts "to be rigorously attentive to important details of specialized arguments within a given field without uncritically endorsing or unconditionally prioritizing one (inter)disciplinary approach over another" (p. 93). Accordingly, we begin by briefly re-examining the roots of the conceptualization of bias as problematic in quantitative methods. We include this brief review because many of our students and peers come to qualitative methods having learned these lessons well.

Bias as a threat to validity. Looking first to methodological literature on quantitative methods, there are numerous forms of bias that are perceived to threaten the validity of studies, resulting in findings that misrepresent phenomena examined (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, Sechrest, & Grove, 2001). In experimental research, "**selection bias**" occurs when randomization of subject assignment in various treatment groups is obstructed. "**Experimenter bias**" occurs when the researcher "contaminates" the data collection by affecting subjects' responses or reactions to an experimental treatment (Best & Kahn, 2003, pp. 168-169). "**Observer bias**" ensues when the researcher's prejudicial perspectives impact observations of a particular setting (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003, pp. 264-265). Other scholars have examined the idea of bias beyond the sampling of participants and collection of data. Nickerson (1998), for example, discusses "**confirmation bias**," which occurs when researchers selectively collect and interpret data in ways that support existing beliefs or hypotheses. Quantitative research methods literature indicates that bias is viewed as a source of error that may originate in numerous ways, including the

- design of a study, for example, sampling (selection bias);
- researcher's personal characteristics (investigator bias);
- participants' responses to the research process (reactive bias);
- research process, for example, data collection or flaws in instruments used (response bias); and
- analysis and interpretation of data (confirmation bias).

Bias in quantitative research, then, is a potential source of error throughout the design and conduct of study, and later in analysis and representation of findings. Consequently, since from a foundationalist perspective it is seen as both possible and necessary to reduce bias, much has been written on strategies that pursue this end (e.g., Campbell & Russo, 2001).

Bias and qualitative research. Looking to methodological literature in qualitative inquiry, it is evident that some treatments of bias draw conceptually on positivist assumptions about research. This may be seen in the use of terminology cited above (e.g., "validity threats," "error," "confirmation bias," "researcher bias"). Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007), for example, propose a "qualitative legitimation model" to assess the validity of qualitative research and propose strategies to lessen the effects of validity threats. This model relies on understandings of bias as involving errors that threaten the validity of research similar to those reviewed earlier relative to quantitative research (i.e., observation bias, selection bias, researcher bias, confirmation bias). For example, "checking for representativeness" (p. 241) is a way to guard against sampling bias and observation bias. Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) draw on Miles and Huberman's (1994) 16 strategies for avoiding the effects of bias stemming from the researcher's effects on the site ("Bias A") and the effect of the site on the researcher ("Bias B"; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007, pp. 241-242). Likewise, Creswell and Miller (2000) mention many of these strategies, although delineating between "validity procedures" used in different paradigms (post-positivist, constructivist, and critical).

Turning to other qualitative methodologists, Hammersley and Gomm (1997) discuss three forms of writing on bias in social research in their review:

a. a particular angle of vision that may either illuminate or obscure vision of a phenomenon;
b. a systematic source of error that may favor particular kinds of results in line with prejudgments or political or ideological persuasions, or may be generated through the research process (in the conduct of research, for example, "going native"; in data generation, for example, asking leading questions; or in the analytic and representation process, for example, omitting data that does not support a particular position); and
c. a negative feature found in a research design that should be avoided (i.e., sampling or measurement bias).

In these three groups, we again see threats to the quality of a study generated by the researcher or the research design. Hammersley and Gomm argue that the ways in which bias is construed in both quantitative and qualitative methodological literature rely on foundationalist assumptions about research. St. Pierre (2000) describes the establishment of foundationalism in the 17th century with the philosophy of René Descartes (1596-1650), whose famous dictum, *I think, therefore I am*, encapsulated the idea that "there is indeed a reality 'out there' that the mind can discover, describe, and know" (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 494). St. Pierre (2000) describes the continued hold that Descartes' philosophy has on modern-day science:

> [Descartes'] search for metaphysical foundations; his privileging of the intellect over the material; his belief that the essence of man centers on the God-given faculty of reason; and his description of man as a rational, detached agent who can subdue unruly emotions and uncover true knowledge continue to make him a central figure in modern Western philosophy. (p. 494)

Notice that the view of "man as a rational, detached agent" is critical in a foundationalist epistemology and positivist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). If researchers apply these assumptions to qualitative research, the elimination of bias becomes paramount. Clearly, any research relying on foundationalist assumptions, in which the researcher *is* the instrument, will be subject to accusations of bias, given the difficulties of controlling for the personal attributes of researchers in interaction with participants. Indeed, Schwandt (2001) comments that two major criticisms of qualitative inquiry in relation to bias relate to (a) a researcher's inability to exclude prejudice in the conduct of a study and (b) presentation of interpretations based on non-neutral positions. What, then, do methodologists commenting on qualitative research designs propose? Answers will depend on the epistemological and theoretical positions from which researchers work.

An anti-foundational approach to bias. Lincoln et al. (2011), in their update of paradigmatic controversies, define "anti-foundational" as "a refusal to adopt any permanent, unvarying (or 'foundational') standards by which truth can be universally known" (pp. 119-120). In their delineation of a constructivist paradigm that they align to an anti-foundational perspective, the inquirer's posture of neutral and "disinterested scientist" is disbanded in favor of "co-constructor of knowledge" (Lincoln et al., 2011, p. 110; see also Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Lincoln et al. (2011) discuss the development of criteria for quality rooted in the "epistemology/ethics nexus" (p. 123; see also Lincoln & Guba, 2013, pp. 70-71). These approaches emphasize relationships between researcher and research participants that are dialogic, reciprocal, ethical, and involve critical self-awareness on the part of the researcher. From this stance, a key issue for researchers is to recognize their "inquirer posture" and the implications for whose "voices" are represented in texts, and how those representations are constructed.

Critical perspectives and bias. Researchers pursuing action agendas, including critical, feminist, and race-based perspectives, engage with foundational assumptions in new ways. Critical researchers "tend to locate the foundations of truth in specific historical, economic, racial, gendered, and social infrastructures of oppression, injustice, and marginalization" (Lincoln et al., 2011, p. 119). For researchers pursuing emancipatory agendas, the "foundation" is a "duality": social critique for the purpose of social change (p. 119). For example, feminist standpoint theorist, Sandra Harding (1993), argues for the concept of "strong objectivity." Harding (2007) views foundational approaches to research that seek to be bias-free as dangerously laden with unacknowledged weaknesses, partly because researchers trust their methods to negate the inevitable human elements of any research. Michelle Fine (2006) comments that strong objectivity is "achieved when researchers work aggressively through their own positionality, values and predispositions, gathering as much evidence as possible, from many distinct vantage points, all in an effort *not* to be guided, unwittingly, by predispositions and the pull of biography" (p. 89, italics in original). Thus, some researchers who take critical stances in research advocate for positions demanding a form of "strong objectivity" in which researchers deliberately interrogate the unfolding interactions and impacts of their subject positions in research projects.

Post-foundational approaches to bias. Yet researchers working from post-structural perspectives have long been critical of what St. Pierre (2011) calls "conventional humanist qualitative methodology" (p. 611) and writing on subjectivity, reflexivity, and voice (Pillow, 2003). As Lincoln et al. (2011) comment, post-modern representations recognize that "[w]ords, and therefore any and all representations, fail us" (p. 125). Similarly "post-qualitative" and new materialist approaches to inquiry (Barad, 2007; Coole & Frost, 2010; MacLure, 2013; St. Pierre, 2011) decenter, rewrite, subvert, and resist foundationalist assumptions about scientific inquiry and dismiss quests for certainty and neutrality, replacing these with entanglements (Barad, 2007, p. ix), assemblages (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp. 22-23), mangles (Hekman, cited by Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 123), and diffractive readings (Barad, 2007; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). From these perspectives, "bias" is a concept that makes little sense, or as Lincoln and Guba (2000) put it, involves "questions that have no meaning because the frames of reference are those for which they were never intended" (p. 175).

A non-foundational approach to bias. Other scholars of qualitative inquiry question critical and post-foundational approaches to research. For example, Hammersley and Gomm (1997) dismiss radical epistemological positions in dealing with bias, proposing instead a "nonfoundationalist interpretation of bias," which they define as

> systematic and culpable error; systematic error that the researcher should have been able to recognize and minimize, as judged either by the researcher him or herself (in retrospect) or by others. This then allows us to distinguish between motivated and unmotivated bias, according to whether it stems from other goals than the pursuit of knowledge. (¶ 4.13)

Arguing that it is not possible to be "fully reflexive," Hammersley and Gomm (1997) posit that given that "there is always the potential for systematic error," researchers must endeavor to avoid those errors for which they are culpable—that is, "they can be judged to be culpable on the grounds that they did not take proper methodological precautions to avoid error, for example by assessing the relative validity of alternative interpretations" (¶ 4.11). In Hammersley and Gomm's view, the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake is crucial, as they argue that "advocacy" and the "promotion of some practical or political cause" are motivated biases that "threaten to destroy the operation of the research communities on which the pursuit of scientific knowledge necessarily depends" (¶ 4.14, ¶5.4). This position poses particular problems for researchers working from particular ideological positions, such as critical, decolonizing, or standpoint theories, because this kind of research seeks to promote particular agendas (e.g., Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008; Fine, 2006; Smith, 1999).

To sum up then, various post-positivist, new-paradigm, and post-foundational approaches conceptualize the researcher's role and "bias" differently. Yet given the extensive writing on these topics in the field of inquiry, what are ways forward for new researchers joining these conversations?

Reconceptualizing Bias

A decade ago, Pillow (2003) called for the interruption of "comfortable reflexivities." We propose stepping back and considering that for some newcomers to qualitative research, it might first be necessary to reconceptualize the idea of "bias" in qualitative inquiry. Bias conceptualized as a "problem" is inextricably entwined with epistemological questions concerning how knowledge about the social world is produced, what counts as research, and how the quality of research is assessed. Definitions of bias borrowed from foundationalist approaches to inquiry along with checklists of strategies for how to "manage," "minimize," or "avoid" bias in qualitative inquiry are not helpful.

We suggest two ideas to assist with reconceptualizing bias. "Bias" (Brown, 1993, p. 223) refers to the form of a bowl used in lawn bowls, which causes it to move in an arc-shaped trajectory. In dress-making, the cutting of woven fabric at a 45° angle across the grain (or warp threads) is referred to as "bias." By equating these definitions with "subjectivity" in qualitative inquiry, bias might be understood as a characteristic quality unique to a particular researcher. Thus, subjectivity or "bias" may not only "unbalance, and limit endeavor" in particular ways but "also motivate and illuminate inquiry" (Preissle, 2008, p. 844). We propose three strategies that might be used in teaching qualitative inquiry to assist in reconceptualizing bias: (a) interrogation of the relationship between theory and method, (b) examinations of researcher roles, and (c) analyses of the researcher's work. We illustrate these approaches with examples taken from the second author's research.

Interrogating the Relationship Between Theory and Method

First, forms of "bias" (observation bias, selection bias, researcher bias, confirmation bias) may only be understood in relation to foundationalist assumptions about research. For researchers using what Lincoln et al. (2011) refer to as "new-paradigm" approaches—which take in critical, constructivist, interpretive, participatory, and post-modern paradigms—bias is not necessarily equated with "error," and the elimination of bias is not possible. As an example, Mason (2002) comments that the eradication or control of bias in interviewing assumes "a stimulus-response model . . . [in which] any variations seen in responses will be a true measure, rather than a product of the methods" (p. 65). Mason (2002) argues,

> But if interviews are always social interaction, however structured or unstructured the researcher tries to make them, then it is inappropriate to see social interaction as "bias" which can potentially be eradicated . . . It is better to try to understand the complexities of the interaction, and to try to develop a sense of how context and situation work in interview interactions, than to pretend that key dimensions can be controlled for. (p. 65)

Therefore, questions about the role of bias can only be understood in relation to a researcher's theoretical assumptions about knowledge production. Thus, in teaching qualitative research methods, instructors might pose the following questions when students construe subjectivity as "bias":

- Are authors transparent about their theoretical allegiances?
- Do authors discuss how the epistemologies and theoretical paradigms that they use are implicated in the design of a study?
- Given the theoretical assumptions of a study, what research designs, methods, and strategies are appropriate to shed light on the phenomenon under examination?
- What methods were overlooked? Why?

What might engagement with these questions look like in practice? Here, we include an example from a reflection written by Stephanie, as part of qualitative coursework concerning research interviews that she had conducted. She considered how her theoretical commitments as a feminist queer researcher played out practically in the conduct of interviews for her research project.

> *In relation to my concern over how to phrase my question for [my research participant] Miranda, I find myself more and more thoughtful about how I interact with, listen to, and respond to my participants. I do believe that as a feminist queer researcher who interviews female self-identified feminist teachers about sensitive issues of sexuality in their classrooms, they and I do highly value our interactions, and they and I feel that it is extremely important that they feel listened to and acknowledged (DeVault, 1990). I do worry, though, that I over-identify with and over-encourage them during the interviews. (McCorkel & Myers, 2003)*
>
> *I found in Miranda's interviews, especially because the previous one had not gone well, that I was overly complimentary of her responses. When she described her classroom environment, I responded, "I think it's a good answer." Following her description of her efforts to get students' buy-in, I responded, "Well said" and "I like it. I like it a lot." While responding to and encouraging her were not necessarily problematic, I cannot help but feel like I was treating her as if I was the teacher and she was the student (which had been our relationship prior to the study), as she told me about her experiences as a teacher with her students. I certainly still want to be attentive and affirming, but I want to try to limit the number of times that I compliment the participants, so that when I offer such comments, they will be sincere, and not automatic.*

The class assignment provided an opportunity for Stephanie to actively consider what her theoretical frameworks were and how they informed not only the overall study but also the individual interactions during research interviews, such as this one with Miranda. Stephanie realized that although theoretically she valued personal connections and the concept of shifting identities in research, the interview was heavily informed by previous interviews that resulted in re-instantiation of the previously established and power-laden teacher–student relationship. In addition, through reflection, Stephanie was better able to acknowledge and build relationships with the participants, while examining the ways in which rapport unfolded in interview interaction. Stephanie realized through reflective writing that although understanding theoretical assumptions are important, applying these in practice is equally challenging, and continues throughout the process of conducting interviews and analyzing data. To return to Barad's (2007) diffractive methodology, Stephanie's reflection on the ways in which she "emerge[d] through and as part of [her] entangled intra-relating" in the research process—her "entanglement"—permitted her to more fully appreciate how her methods both aligned and conflicted with her theoretical positionings (p. ix). Barad's discussions of the importance of critiquing sameness and examining difference in reflexivity and her diffractive strategies may be a plausible method for encouraging novice qualitative researchers to examine the multidimensionality of theories' relationships to methods.

Examining the Role of the Researcher

Second, in foundationalist epistemologies, researchers are called upon to be "neutral," "objective," and "impartial." Researchers working from new-paradigm approaches are called upon to be explicit about their subject positions and points of view, and actively manage these through reflexive practices (Chenail, 2011; Finlay, 2002, 2012; Hsiung, 2008; Peshkin, 1988; Preissle, 2008). One, but not the only approach, is that of "strong objectivity." Fine (2006) advises that

> *strong objectivity* is crucial to explore with those graduate students who worry they are "too close to the topic" and with those graduate students who believe themselves to be detached and free of bias. Both groups need to interrogate *why* they are studying what they study; *what* in their own biography, curiosity or sense of responsibility spurs the questions asked; whose perspective will be privileged, negotiated, and/or silenced in their work. Just as researchers were encouraged to undertake psychoanalysis in the past, here we are pressing students to examine the biographical wisdom and blinders they import, wittingly and not, to their studies. In writing activities and focus groups, graduate students should be asked to explore their fears, anxiety, who-am-I-to-do-this-work, guilt, responsibility, privilege, terror and projects as they develop theoretical frameworks and empirical designs. (p. 90, italics in original)

As Fine (2006) mentions here, writing activities are recommended for doing this work and can include writing subjectivity statements that indicate the researcher's subject positions and include information concerning how these relate to the topic and participants of a study, as well as providing written accounts of actions and rationales for decision making throughout a study. The purpose of writing these sorts of statements is to encourage the researcher to reflect deeply on his or her assumptions, actions, and interactions, and what the implications are for those involved in a study. The primary goal is to stimulate awareness (Etherington, 2004). Bracketing interviews in which researchers explain the impetus for their research interests may assist in unpacking assumptions about topics and a priori commitments (Roulston, 2010b).

Throughout the development of research proposals and assessment of the quality of research studies, conversations about a researcher's "bias" or "error" might be counterposed with questions about a researcher's role:

- Have researchers been forthcoming about their interests in the study, contexts of research, and the implications for the interpretations of data? (Luttrell, 2010a)
- Have researchers demonstrated reflexive practices in keeping with theoretical commitments? (Finlay, 2012; Finlay & Gough, 2003; Pillow, 2003)
- How do researchers' adherence to reflexive practices sustain "sameness" and elide examinations of "difference?" (Barad, 2007)
- Have researchers discussed how their relationships with the topic and study participants evolved throughout the life of a study?
- What information is provided concerning analytic decision making and representation of data?
- What rhetorical moves are made by researchers to support arguments? (Hyland, 2011)

Here, we again turn to Stephanie's work to illustrate what this might look like in practice. In examining transcripts from interviews she had conducted, Stephanie realized how her personal positions constantly influenced her research, before, during, and after data collection, and how, from a feminist queer perspective, those realizations might be considered as research strengths. Reflexivity is important from Stephanie's theoretical perspective because reflection allows her to consider both her and her participants' various personal and social positionings, such as their identities as researcher or teacher, with school affiliations, and so on. By using reflexivity as a resource, to position the researcher within the context of the interview process, we argue that this contextualizes researchers' and participants' motivations and contributions, avoiding representations of findings that "appear to have no social causes" and no "location within human history" (Harding, 1993, p. 73).

In one reflection paper, Stephanie wrote, "One of the greatest areas of growth has been my increasing acknowledgement of my undeniable and constant role in every aspect of my research" (Finlay, 2012). As an example, she considered that although she had used the same interview protocol with each participant, an array of factors constantly influenced the ways that she, as the researcher, remained central to the research process. She had, for example, crafted interview questions that worked from the assumption that the participants would share similar experiences, simply because they all shared common interests that had led them to volunteer as research participants. One interview question, "Talk about an experience that you have had this semester involving LGBTQ bullying" assumed that because the teachers who were participating had responded to recruitment scripts and had signed consent forms detailing the study's focus on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) bullying in classrooms, the teacher participants would all have experiences to describe. It had seemed a reasonable assumption until she had several participants respond along the lines of, "Oh, I haven't seen anything like that in my classroom." Initially frustrated, reflecting on her role as researcher helped Stephanie realize that her subject positions and beliefs had been major factors from the beginning of the project deserving of continued interrogation throughout the life of the project. This process of continued reflection on her subject positions in relation to both theory and method resulted in insights about sampling, recruitment, and data generation.

Participants had been sampled as representative of typical novice secondary teachers, and nearly all had self-identified as heterosexual. Stephanie realized that she had assumed, based on her own experiences and findings in related scholarship (e.g., Haertling Thein, 2013; Meyer, 2009), that those teachers who would be interested in participating in her research would do so because of firsthand encounters with LGBTQ bullying. Instead, all of the participants cited personal and political commitments to LGBTQ rights, within and beyond their classrooms. Without a reflective examination of the data, Stephanie might have dismissed the participants and their interviews as not fitting within the anticipated data corpus. By considering the ways that she might think about her and her participants' subject positions, Stephanie could examine the ways that her assumptions were embedded in the research from the outset, and how these informed data generation and analysis.

Analyzing the Researcher's Work

Much literature on reflexivity has discussed the researcher's role in the design and formulation of research topics, and involved reflections on the events that occur during a particular project. Researchers might also analyze their "work" in the generation of data. For example, researchers can examine their own contributions to a project through a variety of theoretical approaches to gain methodological insight into the implications of their actions for data generation. As one example, recent work has focused on unpacking what goes on in the generation of interview data (Danby, Ewing, & Thorpe, 2011; Mallozzi, 2009; Rapley, 2012; Roulston, 2011a, 2014; Roulston, Baker, & Liljestrom, 2001). With respect to qualitative interviewing, the value for researchers analyzing their personal interactional styles is that they can relate the context-specific details of particular studies to their espoused theoretical perspectives. In this way, context-sensitive portraits of an array of research practices become available to others for review.

Therefore, in teaching qualitative research methods, instructors might initiate conversations about how data are generated and represented by asking the following questions:

- How do researchers contribute to the generation of data? (e.g., Rapley, 2004, 2012)
- How do researchers manage interactional difficulties and problems in the generation of data? (Roulston, 2011b, 2014)
- How are interactional contexts for the generation of data represented in findings? (Potter & Hepburn, 2012)

As an example, Stephanie closely re-examined the co-construction of data in an interview that had gone well. Although she had formerly thought that the interview was "over," she came to realize that more could be learned by re-examining the data, including how both she and her participant worked to "locally manage their identities" (Rapley, 2012, p. 545), and how her own receipt and acknowledgment of her participant's talk contributed to the production of data. She also became more aware of the effort on the part of her interviewee to discuss the research topic:

> *What was most illuminating about the CA [Conversation analysis] transcription was my realization of how difficult the interview process might have been for [my participant] Lillian. I had a very clear sense of this interview being a success, and because I was so delighted with it, I think that I assumed that it was a good interview because it seemed to happen so naturally and easily. However, having carefully analyzed Lillian's speech for speed, pauses, inflections, and emphases helped me to see that there were a number of times when she seemed to stumble or to hesitate before continuing, suggesting that perhaps the interview was, while not unpleasant, a more challenging experience for her than I had previously understood it to be.*

Here, we have examined the researcher's work using the interview method—these questions might also be asked of other methods of data generation (e.g., field notes, visual data etc.). Without the expectation that novice researchers will revisit their data, with a view to methodological analysis, it is possible that many will move directly to analysis that focuses on topics, rather than consider how data are co-constructed by researchers and their participants. Without a course requirement that she consider and write about what interactional contexts had emerged in her interview, in this case, through CA transcription, Stephanie would never have revisited her data-making. Through being asked to consider the complexity of how a "good" interview unfolded, she was able to reflect on what that process entailed for both the interviewer and the interviewee.

Conclusion

It is tempting to think that issues of bias are passé. They are not. Researchers new to qualitative methods frequently bring understandings of bias that rely on foundationalist perspectives to research. Furthermore, in many disciplines, preference for foundationalist perspectives to scientific inquiry along with critiques of new-paradigm and post-foundationalist approaches is shown by the kind of research that is funded, as well as what gets published. Therefore, it is imperative to revisit what has been said about bias. Why? Teachers of qualitative inquiry must work to ensure that students are conversant with the historical debates in the field and learn how to both design and situate their research studies in ways that meet standards of quality within different communities of practice (Freeman, deMarrais, Preissle, Roulston, & St. Pierre, 2007; Roulston, 2010a). Students pursuing new-paradigm and post-foundationalist approaches to qualitative inquiry must be able to appropriately debate relevant issues and provide strong rationales for their theoretical and methodological choices. Some students may choose to embrace the ideas of "subjectivity" and "reflexivity" in research, others may not. Researchers need to be well informed, however, to develop high quality studies, studies that are "provocative, risky, stunning, astounding" (St. Pierre, 2011, p. 623).

Discussions of bias in teaching qualitative research are a potentially fruitful place to start, because unpacking the conceptualizations of "bias" that students bring to their work gets at the heart of how knowledge about the social world is produced and how assessments of quality are made in relation to the design and conduct of research. Discussions of subjectivity and bias provoke difficult questions about ontology, epistemology, theory, research ethics, research design and conduct, and the value of research for society. There will be little agreement on what "bias" and other concepts—including subjectivity, objectivity, and reflexivity—with which it is entangled are and what they mean for qualitative methods. Yet, by interrupting conventional understandings of "bias" in qualitative inquiry, teachers of qualitative inquiry can ensure that novice researchers are well prepared to take their place within their chosen communities of research practice.

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