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Bias in Qualitative Research: Voices from an Online Classroom

by
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Abstract

The issue of bias in qualitative research is an important one, and demands special attention and discussion in any qualitative research methods class. This reflective paper, written in the tradition of teacher-research, presents an analysis of how my students and I, working in an online classroom environment, learn together about the role researcher self and subjectivity play in designing and conducting qualitative research. While researcher bias and subjectivity are commonly understood as inevitable and important by most qualitative researchers, the beginners in qualitative research classes are generally not very comfortable with the idea of research that is not value-neutral. A systematic and reflective analysis of some of the teaching and learning activities, and of the online exchanges in these classes suggests that issues that require more critical thinking and reflection are dealt better using the power of written word. When students write down how their understanding of an issue is developing, the knowledge gained from the experience of putting the idea in comprehensible sentences is many times the knowledge gained when they make a verbal and often casual comment on the issue being discussed in the classroom. Since online instruction allows students to work at their own pace, factors such as differences in students' ability to communicate - through verbal or written expression, and their level of understanding of the content can be better addressed in an online classroom. The students' and instructor's voices in this paper, and the unique framework in which they are organized convey their increased understanding of qualitative research as a process of self-discovery.

Introduction

Over the last two years, I have taught online qualitative research courses to several groups of students. During this time I also designed and taught qualitative and practitioner research methods courses in traditional face-to-face classrooms. While teaching is always a challenge, it is more so when the instructor and students only communicate electronically, and besides the occasional online chats, the discussion is generally asynchronous. Though there are several aspects of qualitative research - philosophical and methodological - that span our discussions in these online classes, one issue that often attracts great deal of discussion is that of researcher bias.

This reflective paper, written in the tradition of teacher-research presents a peek into some of the online exchanges my students and I had in these online classes surrounding the issue of bias in qualitative research. The recent interest in teacher research movement marks a paradigmatic shift

by presenting "a different view of the teacher - as knower and thinker" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, [1999](#), p. 15). My objective in writing this paper is to think and reflect on my action as an online teacher of qualitative research, and in that process explore ways to improve my teaching practice. I see my role not just as a teacher, but also as a teacher-researcher interested in learning by systematically reflecting on my practice and producing a narrative of such reflection. Berthoff ([1987](#)) described teacher "RE-searcher" as one who did not need findings from researchers sitting in their university offices, but works to improve curriculum and instruction through dialogue with other teachers to generate theories grounded in practice. While I do have a university office, I strongly believe that as university teachers, we must constantly reflect on our teaching and engage in constructive dialogue with other university teachers. The present article, though grounded in my practice, invites readers to reflect on their own practice as teachers of qualitative research.

While researcher bias and subjectivity are commonly understood as inevitable and important by most qualitative researchers, the beginners in qualitative research classes are generally not very comfortable with the notion that meaningful knowledge can be constructed in a way that provides room for personal and subjective ways of looking at the world. This may be because many of them are more familiar with the positivist traditions of knowledge construction where objectivity and value-neutrality are considered important criteria for evaluating research.

Experienced researchers and experts in the field of qualitative research see self-discovery as essential to learning about qualitative research (Brown, [1996](#)). Simmons (1988, as cited in Brown [1996](#), p. 20) regards awareness of one's "biases, blind spots, and cognitive limitations ... as high a priority as theoretical knowledge". My experience in designing and teaching qualitative and practitioner research methods classes - both face-to-face and online - has taught me that it is important for students and instructors to engage in an honest and open discussion about the issue of researcher bias and subjectivity. While in a face-to-face instructional format, students have more opportunity to interact with the instructor, which allows for a more open exchange of ideas; the online instruction limits the frequency and intensity of student-instructor exchange. So when the issue under discussion is a complex one, like the issue of bias in qualitative research, it becomes essential that instructor and students rely on the power of written word to carry their message across the information superhighway.

The data for this paper came from the electronic postings of my students and me in three online qualitative research classes. At the time of taking my class, these students were pursuing their Masters degree through a distance education program in Conflict Resolution. Many of these students were in the process of deciding on a research topic for their thesis or capstone project they were required to do for completing their program.

The brochure for the MA in Conflict Resolution at this university states the program goal in these words - "students emerge from the program with a solid theoretical grounding in the literature of the discipline and a strong skill base of the very best practices in the field." To achieve this goal, the program integrates alternative modes of learning such as short residential sessions, on-line learning, practicum and at-home study. The two residential sessions are conducted in seminar format with emphasis on building theoretical foundations in the field and strengthening practitioner skills. Students attend one of these core sessions in the first quarter of

their program, and the other one in the sixth quarter. The core residential sessions are accompanied by additional online coursework and at-home study by the students guided by the program faculty.

All students in the program are required to take a minimum of 3-credit, program-approved research methods course that would prepare them for their capstone learning, to be demonstrated by either a thesis or a project that integrates theory, research and application in an area of individualized interest. This research methods course may be taken between the third and eighth quarters in students' program. During the last two years of my employment at this university, several of these students have taken my qualitative research methods course to meet their research requirement. Some of the students who felt they needed additional guidance also enrolled in the Proposal Writing course with me. Almost all of the recently graduated and current students in the program have not taken any other research methods course, though a small number of them have had prior experience - either in undergraduate programs or in their professional capacities - with basic quantitative research traditions such as survey methodologies. Thus, the students' voices presented in this paper must be interpreted in the light of this program structure.

The Class Experience

The 3-credit one quarter long online course is divided into four instructional units and each unit includes: (a) a brief lecture that outlines and discusses the major concepts for that unit; (b) set of student responses; and (c) instructor's comments on students' responses and questions. At the end of each lecture there is a written assignment which students are expected to finish before the next unit. Detailed guidelines for the assignments are also provided if and when needed. Students are assigned several appropriate readings for each unit.

The first unit provides an overview of quantitative and qualitative research, discusses key characteristics of qualitative research design, and introduces the concept of practitioner research (since many students in the program are practitioners in the field of conflict resolution or mediation, and want to conduct their research at the site they currently work). Unit two discusses issues like obtaining access at a research site, gaining approval from the gatekeepers, and planning fieldwork. Unit three focuses on issues pertaining to data collection methods such as observations and interviews, identifying key informants, building trust, prolonged engagement, and asking the right questions. The fourth and final unit discusses matters pertaining to qualitative data analysis, searching for issue(s) in data, and writing qualitative research.

As part of this class, I require students to design and conduct a "mini-project." This assignment, which follows some initial discussion about qualitative research as a paradigm and methodology, is designed to provide students with an opportunity to "get their hands dirty" in the world of qualitative research. Students pick a research topic of their own choice, and I encourage them to select a topic they may want to pursue for research in their thesis or capstone project in their program. While the focus of mini-project is very small so as to fit into the quarter-long class, I recommend that students incorporate at least two different sources of data, and use at least two different methods of data collection. This helps them see the value in obtaining multiple perspectives and triangulation in research. In each instructional unit, we devote sufficient time to

raise and discuss specific research design issues for students' mini-projects. It is in the backdrop of students' experiences with designing, conducting, and reporting their "mini-projects" that we discuss various aspects of qualitative research and design.

Beginnings

I begin my research methods classes by presenting my students with a list of questions designed to make them think and reflect on their worldview and their beliefs about truth and construction of knowledge. [Exhibit 1](#) below presents this list of questions. This list, I find, provides a good opening to the discussion on the difference between the epistemological assumptions of qualitative and quantitative research paradigms. I do not require that students answer all the questions on this list, but recommend that they address some of these questions in their responses to class reading assignments. I also suggest that students continue to revisit this list of questions and reflect on their changing or evolving thoughts about these issues as they go through the class and learn more about qualitative research.

Exhibit 1: Questions to Ponder

- What is Research? (A tip: Try to find some definition(s) that match your interpretation of the word, compare that with other definitions you may find in research methodology books).
- What are the different ways of conducting research?
- What are the different possible outcomes of research?
- What kind of research will I be doing?
- What kind of knowledge will my research generate?
- How will my research inform my practice, others' practice, theory in the field? Will I have any generalizable/transferable findings from my research?
- How will I connect my different "selves" - individual, practitioner and researcher?
- How will one benefit from the other?
- What will I as an individual learn from my research - as a process and as a product?
- How can I best express myself? What will be my writing style?
- How will my research effect my clients, peers, and supervisors?
- How will my research effect my beliefs, my worldview, and my life?
- Is it Research?

Since the class is offered online and the students and instructor do not have the opportunity of face-to-face interaction, having such a list of questions that does not require specific answers for evaluation purposes helps students exercise their "reflection and discussion muscles" in a non-threatening and relaxed environment. Also, some of the questions encourage students to start thinking about the kind of studies they would want to design for the class and/or for their theses.

In the first instructional unit of the class, we also spend time discussing the epistemological, axiomatic, and methodological differences between quantitative and qualitative research. The discussion postings in this unit, though primarily based on students' understanding of the readings they do for the class, often lead the way to more personal and reflective exchange of

ideas. For instance, one student compared her understanding of qualitative research to her knowledge of mediation and conflict resolution. In her words -

"In some ways, I feel like qualitative research is actually quite related to principles of mediation: believing *[that]* the parties in a dispute (the people in the "field" being studied) know best, that the role of the mediator is to be unbiased and to avoid inserting their judgments or directions; the utter importance of listening skills."

One important learning goal for these students in their Master's program in conflict resolution is to develop their skills as mediators and negotiators. In my course on qualitative research, many students are able to draw upon their knowledge of practitioner skills in mediation and develop a perspective that helps them see interactions between the posture of subjectivity in qualitative research and that of neutrality in conflict resolution. One student took this interaction a step further and added - "a mediation orientation is most compatible with a qualitative approach to research." She explained -

"As a researcher's approach derives from his or her personal orientation, my own research approach will derive, at least in part, from my training and perspective as a mediator.... One principle of mediation is that the parties know best. Regardless of what you as a mediator see from your viewpoint, you are the outsider and cannot ever "know" the parties' viewpoint and experience. They are the experts on the conflict. The mediator follows the parties and the progress of the mediation develops out of their interaction. The mediator doesn't come to the mediation with any pre-determined goals or judgments. Mediators attempt to be objective but are keenly aware of their innate personal biases. And finally, the most important skills a mediator has are listening skills. All of these principles are similar to principles of a qualitative research approach."

Such beginnings of the discussion on the role of self in understanding and producing research cracks open the door to a continuing exchange between the students and myself. One student admitted being "struck by the emphasis" my online lecture and the assigned class readings placed on the need to reflect and understand how our "self" shapes our ideas about a particular research topic and design. She offered her perspective on the issue as follows -

"I am drawn to detailed analysis, and feel comfortable in a quantitative paradigm. This intellectual tendency contrasts for me with strong beliefs in the idea that we co-construct our reality interpersonally, so, to understand conflict, we have to understand its meaning, in context, for participants. The latter leads to a belief in qualitative methods as an approach most appropriate to my work. Knowing these things about myself influences my thinking about research design and methods."

Deciding What to do Research on - Beginnings of Bias

"Interpretive research begins and ends with the biography and self of the researcher" (Denzin, [1989](#), p. 12). This notion of how one's self influences one's research interests is generally the beginning of our discussion on the issue of bias in research. Some of my students have a pretty good idea of a topic they would like to study when they take this class. Others are often

struggling in this regard, and they need some guidance on selecting a research topic. In one posting last year, I wrote this -

"A researcher's personal beliefs and values are reflected not only in the choice of methodology and interpretation of findings, but also in the choice of a research topic. In other words, what we believe in determines what we want to study. Traditional positivist research paradigm has taught us to believe that what we are studying often has no personal significance. Or, that the only reason driving our research is intellectual curiosity (which is a valid reason on its own). But more often than not, we have our personal beliefs and views about a topic - either in support of one side of the argument, or on the social, cultural, political sub-texts that seem to guide the development of the argument."

Scheurich (1994) remarks that one's historical position, one's class (which may or may not include changes over the course of a lifetime), one's race, one's gender, one's religion, and so on - all of these interact and influence, limit and constrain production of knowledge. In other words, who I am determines, to a large extent, what I want to study. I further believe that in addition to social and historical position, a researcher's evolving self in terms of his or her deliberate educational and professional choices that he or she makes throughout his or her academic career also influence selection of a research topic (Mehra, 2001). I tell my students that more often than not, researchers decide to study a topic because they see a "personal connection" to it at some level - either as a practitioner in the field, or as an individual. I advise that students achieve continuity with who they were, who they are, who they want to become, what they did in the past, what they do now, and what they want to do in future. I further suggest that students be driven by what they want to know, not by what they already know about a topic or the field. I believe that we start thinking like a researcher when we begin to question what we know and what we believe.

The above suggestions often allow for some exchange of ideas about students' passions and interests in their fields, which in turn opens the door to more discussion on bias in research. However, there might be some students who look for some more concrete advice on how to select a research topic. [Exhibit 2](#) below, which is based on Creswell's (1994) advice on this matter, presents a list of questions that I pose to my students as they struggle to find a research topic of interest. As they try to address some of the questions listed below, they start to narrow down their focus.

Exhibit 2: Criteria for Focusing a Study

- Is the topic researchable, given the time, resources and availability of data?
- Is there a personal interest in the topic in order to sustain attention?
- Will the results be of interest to others? Who will be the audiences?
- Is the topic relevant for present purpose - class project, thesis, publication etc?
- Does the study fill a gap, replicate, extend or develop new ideas in the literature in the field?
- Will the project contribute to my career goals?

In regard to selection of a research topic, I recall emailing this to my students last year -

"As you begin to think about a topic you may want to do your research on, take some time and recall what you know about different areas or topics in your field. Your readings from previous classes could be a good starting point to determine what areas interest you, what areas you think you will want to learn more about, and what kind of research is already available in that area."

This suggestion, while offering a more "objective" route of selecting a research topic, still allows room for students to reflect on their personal interests in the field. By presenting the argument in a more "impersonal" style, and by emphasizing the role of students' prior learning in their selection of a research topic lends an air of "objectivity" to the whole process that in reality is very subjective. This interplay of objective and subjective forces in a researcher's selection of a topic further leads the way to our discussion on bias.

A specific question I pose to my students to encourage them to think about the role of their "self" in selecting their research topics is this - "How do my worldview, my educational and professional background, and my learning style influence the selection of my research topic and methodology?" A student while allowing his classmates and instructor a peek into his past and present professional background, and his personal beliefs about the issues of social justice and organizational conflict summarized his response as follows - "Clearly the question of the connection between who I am and what I want to research is a multi-faceted one, influenced by life circumstances, existing career, and opportunity, as well as intellectual and philosophical orientation." Another student referred to some particular aspects of her personal relationships and the impact they have had in shaping her beliefs about the topic of apology in conflict resolution.

A student who worked as an intern and volunteer mediator at a community mediation center found herself curious to learn about the reasons that make people volunteer their service at a community mediation center, and what they hope to get from that experience. In her research report she discussed how her insider role in the research helped build trusting relationships with the research participants, and actually allowed her to gain a better sense of their reasons for volunteering. She, however, also presented the other side of the insider-outsider debate in her report -

"Because the participants saw me as a peer and knew that I was knowledgeable about ... and mediation, they felt confident that I understood what they meant when they talked about mediation and their experiences. As a result, they did not have to explain their opinions and experiences as thoroughly as they would have to an outsider. Similarly, I think that I did not probe the interviewees and did not ask them to explain as much as I could have, because I *did* feel like I understood."

A student enrolled in the class last fall agreed that her growing academic knowledge of the conflict resolution field was helping her redefine the answers to my question about the relationship between researcher's self and choice of a research topic. She shared with the group her previous experience of working in survey-feedback processes, where she conducted what she thought was qualitative research. She said -

"There was something basically dissatisfying about much of the surveying I did. In my effort to look 'scientific' in my approach, I sacrificed much richness of the feedback I heard from interview subjects. My processes were over-structured to the detriment of my clients."

She went on to describe that much of her learning in conflict management and in her master's program has built on the foundation that useful information can be gathered using more "intuitive" methods such as conversations, observations, and reflections. And for her, this learning correlated well with qualitative research methodologies.

A Biased Researcher, An Honest Researcher

One of the issues my students grapple with as they read and learn about qualitative research relates to the subjective-objective debate in research. I get questions like - Is it okay to be biased while doing research? How can a qualitative researcher keep his or her bias out of the research? How can I claim that my interpretations are unbiased and therefore, reliable?

My first response to such questions generally goes along these lines -

"Think about your topic, and ask yourself what do *you* believe in, not as a researcher but as a human being? Do you think it is possible to be totally unbiased about a topic, to have no opinions one way or the other?"

I challenge my students to think further about their research topics, especially why they chose those topics in the first place.

As students present various reasons for being drawn to a particular topic or area in their field, they start recognizing that they do hold certain opinions, sometimes strong ones, about the topic, and that it will be a challenge for them to stay "neutral" or "unbiased" in their research. I further challenge them with questions like - "Why do we researchers try so hard to prove that our findings and interpretation are unbiased, and that what we have produced is the objective truth as we discovered." To further bring my point home, I once borrowed Krieger's ([1991](#)) argument that the outer world, or our "external reality" is inseparable from what we already know based on our lives and experiences - our inner reality. Krieger further argues that the knowledge of the external world is only a small part of what our total knowledge can be; what we ever really know is, in essence, self. Thus, the reality we all see is based on our understanding of the world, which in turn is based on our knowledge of the self. And so continues our discussion on the issue of bias and subjectivity in qualitative research.

Specific Questions About Bias

As we move along with the class, our exchanges surrounding students' mini-projects and specific research interests bring forth discussion on more specific issues about qualitative research design. Some of those discussions deal with students' experiences in identifying their own biases and values as they design their own studies; others deal with more general questions such as the ones discussed below.

- How do we keep ourselves out when we are researching a topic that is of personal significance to us?

My short answer to the above question is - We don't. My long answer is this -

"Qualitative research paradigm believes that researcher is an important part of the process. The researcher can't separate himself or herself from the topic/people he or she is studying, it is in the interaction between the researcher and researched that the knowledge is created. So the researcher bias enters into the picture even if the researcher tries to stay out of it."

About a year and half ago, a student who took this online class with me summarized her understanding of the qualitative research in these words -

"It [*qualitative paradigm*] assumes [*that*] the self of the researcher has an effect upon the subject and context of study. It starts from accepting the assumption that there is no objective point of view, in contrast to quantitative methods that attempt to control for the influence of the researcher. This said, the criteria for trustworthiness applicable to qualitative researchers become essential for ensuring that the research actually reveals more about the subject than about the researcher."

Another student followed up on this discussion by raising a question about qualitative research design - "How could we possibly expect to maintain no influence?" She further compared learning about qualitative research to her continually expanding knowledge base in principles of mediation. In her words -

"The point that has to be made is one quite familiar to mediators. It involves behaving in as neutral a fashion as possible. It involves being aware of the power of the researcher in the dynamics of the relationship... It involves getting the participants to tell their perspectives without requiring an approval or confirmation from the researcher. It involves asking open-ended questions that don't steer the participants in a way which might appear to endorse a particular response. It involves modeling interviews after conversations between two trusting parties."

This notion of "trusting parties" led me to join the discussion by suggesting that the important thing is that we are up front and honest about our bias when we discuss the research design and particular methods used in our study. One student responded to the discussion by this suggestion -

"In order to prevent our research from being a narrative of our own opinions, we can record detailed field notes, and admit our subjectivity."

As I noticed student interest in learning more about specific ways to deal with their subjectivity in research design, I elaborated upon my earlier comment with more specific comments. I explained that qualitative researchers must inform their readers that the methodological framework of their studies allows for an interpretation that comes out of the interaction or intersection between the reality of researcher and that of researched. They should also acknowledge that throughout the process they have been aware of their bias entering into data

collection and analysis, and that they took some possible measures to monitor their bias and subjectivity.

These measures can range from being as simple as recording in a little notebook our personal reactions to what we are hearing and seeing in our fieldwork to being as elaborate as doing a critical analysis of those reactions. While I do not recommend that students include this subjectivity journal in their theses, I do advise that a regular review of this journal will put them more in touch with their reality - their beliefs and biases, and in turn may force them to be more "objective" in their approach by focusing on the insider or emic voice in research. In another posting on this issue of monitoring researcher subjectivity, I wrote this -

"Another purpose a subjectivity journal can serve is to make researchers see the multiple perspectives/interpretations that are possible. It also helps them become more aware of their tendency to judge people and actions on the basis of what they themselves believe and feel."

One student in my class last fall studied the controversy surrounding the issue of same-sex civil unions for her class research project. She had this to share with the group regarding her struggles with neutrality in qualitative data gathering -

"The other thing that has been challenging is maintaining neutrality toward a very abhorrent message. I have strong personal beliefs about the civil rights of gay and lesbian people, but I thought my interest in peace and community building would enable me to listen as a third-party neutral to the anti-civil unions side. I admit to feeling I have been swimming in sewage after being immersed in some of the anti- rhetoric, and it has been hard to deal with my own strong feelings. So issues about neutrality and managing my biases sufficiently to really understand how the antis construct their reality have been challenging. I think I have managed this professionally, but it has been a bit exhausting."

Keeping a subjectivity journal may also help researchers, in situations such as the one described above, deal with feelings of "exhaustion" experienced while coming face to face with a worldview that is totally opposite to their own. Personal beliefs and emotions can't always be kept aside when engaging in qualitative research projects. The same can be said about mediation. This interesting parallel of "feeling challenged" by dealing with emotions (either of self - researcher/ mediator, or of the research participants/ parties in dispute) was discovered first-hand by a student who conducted her study to understand the challenges faced by mediators. She wrote this in her class paper as she reported her findings -

"All of these mediators felt challenged by highly emotional cases. Some said simply that they did not like the emotional cases and that they would not be interested in doing types of mediation - divorce, family, parent-teen - that they felt would generally deal primarily with emotional issues. Overall, they felt that knowing what to do or to say in the mediations where the parties were very angry, crying or otherwise very emotional was very difficult...I find this feeling about emotions in mediation interesting because one of the values of mediation that the participants cited as an attraction for them was its ability to deal with emotions, in fact its emphasis on getting at the emotions in a conflict."

Qualitative research, like mediation, also provides room for the researcher and research participant to deal with emotions. The challenge is figuring out how to do this.

One way I try to emphasize the idea of researchers monitoring their subjectivity is by encouraging them to see themselves as learners. I suggest that they approach their research participants as "having the knowledge" about a topic that they as researchers are interested to learn about. At another time in one of the online chats with a group of students, when this issue came up, I typed this -

"And if we start thinking about it, it makes perfect sense. If our aim as qualitative researchers is to portray the insiders' reality - the reality of people/culture we are studying - who would have the most knowledge about that - the insiders. So if they are the experts, and we are the learners in the process of research, we have to learn about all sides of the argument/story, in order for us to be able to tell their story. This approach can also force a researcher to move beyond his or her bias and talk about the knowledge gained from the participants - who may be on the other side of the argument."

One student in the group extended my argument by adding that she views research as being a learning process for herself and those involved [as participants]. She offered some useful advice to others as she pinpointed some areas of her research design that would need careful scrutiny -

"With being so closely involved with the study, I will need to ensure that I maintain appropriate protocol and integrity of the process. I will need to have built into my procedures checks and balances to ensure the integrity of the study."

Through logical progression the group generally moves from discussing bias in research design to spend some time on understanding the role of researcher bias in interpreting and presenting the study's findings.

- How can I as a practitioner-researcher keep my bias separate from my study's findings?

In one of my online postings for the class last fall, I posed another question in response to the question above -

"If there is more than one truth out there, if we believe in multiple realities, subjective and constructed realities as opposed to single, objective, given reality, then how much weight should we attach to our findings which may reflect only one or partial version of the truth or reality?"

This raises an issue of how qualitative researchers interpret and present their findings and conclusions. In other words, their style of writing should reflect the fact that what they are presenting is a partial truth, and that their conclusions and findings are situated in or dependent upon the context in which they did their studies, the particulars of the research participants in their studies and so on. By linking the notion of bias in qualitative design and findings to writing qualitative research, I try to give students some ideas on how they may want to/or not want to write when it is time to write their qualitative research. One such advice is that students begin to explore and understand the purpose of their studies, whose reality do they want to portray

through their research and writing - theirs or their research participants'? This understanding could help them better plan their data collection, interpretation, and presentation aspects of their study. I elaborated upon this idea in these words -

"The idea is to keep the two voices separate - emic (insiders'/ participants' voice) and etic (outsider/ researcher's voice) - as much as possible in your data, and decide which voice will be the predominant voice in your text. The etic voice is of course, always there, hidden may be, but is always present in the text by way of how the text is organized, how the data is presented, what quotes are used and what data is ignored etc., etc. If you are interested in the emic voice being the predominant voice to tell the story, then it is important that you keep your personal judgments/interpretations out as much as possible."

One student working on a practitioner research project at a site where she held an "insider" status as an employee shared this with the group -

"My understanding of objectivity, especially as it pertains to the researcher as insider, is first that it is important for the researcher to be straightforward about the potential bias she may hold. Second, that objectivity is most important when it comes to the data [*collection*] itself (i.e. guarding against seeing only data that conforms with your ideas or manipulating data to fit your expectations, etc.) and less so, at least in the case of action research, in [*presenting*] the conclusions ... at conclusion of the project. So, an action researcher may have an agenda in the form of wanting to help the studied group with a problem, or wanting to right an injustice. This is legitimate as long as the data collected and used for that purpose was unbiased, unmanipulated and true."

The above comment raises an important issue with regard to what we see and hear in a research setting, especially when what we see and hear becomes the basis of the reality we construct from our research. I responded to this posting in the following way -

"Yes, it is difficult to maintain total objectivity when you are an insider to the research setting, and you are right that what really matters is that we try to see everything that happens in a setting, and not just look for what suits our bias or our purpose in research. We need to try and understand the setting or context as a whole in order to make "correct" interpretations of what we see and hear."

I reminded this student and others in the group that the interpretations they make from the data will be theirs, which means that they will be subjective interpretations - based on their reality and their worldview. So even though they believe they have objective data, they do make interpretations and analysis based on their subjective reality. I emphasize that students make sure that their interpretations and analyses sound credible or "ring true" in light of the data they present as evidence for their conclusions. And, that the interpretations are presented in a way that allows readers to see why the researcher reached a certain conclusion based on the available data.

This idea of researcher bias in collecting and interpreting data generally inspires some valuable discussion where students share their experiences from the fieldwork they have been doing for the class mini-project. One student made following comment in this regard -

"For me, I have discovered that my insider-outsider status has invited me to 'interpret' my raw data as I wrote it during the session versus simply observing what was going on. Yikes! Shame on me. Does that real-time interpretation allow me to miss some trends/themes? I haven't figured out yet how I will 'deal with' that."

Such an honest reflection on part of this student encouraged another student in the group to share her experience from the field -

"I totally share your challenges with being an insider and interpreting your participants' action. I've observed a couple of mediations with my focus on the mediators. I find that a lot of my notes are judgments about what they didn't do or could have done, etc. I'm trying to make my language about their actions neutral (i.e. the mediator asked P1 "Don't you think you should offer a concession to P2?" - instead of [writing] "the mediator pressured P1 to make concessions.") But it's hard! And I must admit that I feel like my judgments/interpretations are sometimes relevant (i.e. the mediator was putting pressure on P1). Do you think interpretations should always be avoided?"

Next day when I logged on to class from my home computer, I saw the following response by the first student to the question raised above -

"I also struggled with language that simply depicted the action in the observation. Do I think they [*interpretations*] should be avoided? I think they can't be, BUT I can try to limit them. I think if I'm having alarm bells go off in my head about how MUCH I'm interpreting, then I've got a problem and need to search for a way to be more neutral, as you say. I can't put too much of my own spin if I want to be inductive about my data."

While the above exchange of ideas happened over a couple of days, the asynchronous nature of the discussion did not effect the strength of the arguments these students were making. It was the students' willingness to share their insights and reflections, combined with the power of the written word that led to such a powerful discussion. The point here is that beginning qualitative researchers must be encouraged to openly talk about their subjectivity and bias as they begin their research careers.

The honest nature of the discussion that these two students started, and the insightful questions they raised had to inspire me to respond. My response was long, and my advice was based on personal experience -

"As we are sitting in a room taking in what is going on there, we are compelled to make on-site, immediate interpretations of what we observe. This is not all bad, as often our hunch may be correct, and we can later use that hunch to get further clarification from our participants during interviews. I agree that it is not easy to keep our personal judgment out of our interpretation. But the trick is to keep your notes on the action and its interpretation separate - may be on separate sides of a sheet, or as I have done in past - use a small spiral notebook for field notes (smaller than a standard 8.5 x 11 notebook) and use it from both sides. Open it from one side - the right way - and you write down what you are observing (go ahead and include any non-judgmental comments, memos to self about research progress in there as well). Open the notebook from the

other side - the flip side - and start writing any personal judgments or subjective reactions to your observations. By literally keeping the two separate you are trying not to get very biased by your subjectivity and this will help you interpret your data from a more objective perspective."

With regard to the issue of multiple and subjective interpretations that are possible from the same set of data, I encourage students to discuss the emerging trends in their data with others in the class so that they are able to see the reality through another set of eyes. This enriches their interpretation, or at least takes them away from their sometimes "biased" interpretations. Because the class is offered online, it takes a little extra effort on my part to encourage students to participate in peer debriefing. To allow this peer exchange, I pose some specific questions to the group, and answering these questions is built into the class schedule as a required activity. These questions require students to share some of their fieldwork experiences, to raise issues for discussion from these experiences, and to submit a list of emerging themes from their data.

- Is it possible to conduct a totally objective, value-neutral research?

A similar question was faced by one of my students doing research on identifying the challenges faced by mediators. She reported these findings -

"Another challenge mentioned by more than one participant, was remaining neutral. This came up in two different contexts. First, two mediators had experienced situations in which an issue about which they had professional expertise surfaced in a mediation and they had to resist the inclination to give advice or make recommendations based on that expertise. Doing so would compromise their role as a neutral third party. Both of these mediators said they had a very difficult time maintaining this neutrality. Another challenge related to neutrality was brought up by other mediators and had to do with the necessity to suspend judgment while mediating. These mediators stated that they are judgmental personally and that they make a conscious effort to put those judgments aside when they are at the mediation table. This is an essential skill for mediators and these mediators feel they are still working on developing it."

Both these issues of struggling with neutrality and avoiding judgments are of critical importance in qualitative research as well. When my students ask this question if it is possible to conduct a value-neutral research, I share my personal belief honestly with my students that no research (for that matter, no creative process) is value-free. There are, however, some things a researcher can do to ensure that his or her values are utilized productively in the research process. In one posting, I said this -

"In order to be sure of what my values are, what my bias is, I like to read lots of stuff that I think I may agree with and also some that I may disagree with. This prepares me better in "sticking to" my beliefs and also helps me see the other sides of the argument." By reinforcing my beliefs this way, I feel more confident about the selection of my research topic and my study's design."

As the students start exploring some literature on their particular research topics, I tell them that they must critically analyze whatever they read in connection with their research or other classes they may be taking at the time. I suggest that they try to figure out what particular piece of information they agree with, and what they disagree with - "that way, you'll know where your

biases lie." My advise to students is generally that while they should definitely "double check" their assumptions with that of the writer whose work they are reading, they should also make sure that they keep their thesis committee abreast of how their thinking is evolving and how their assumptions and beliefs are changing (or not). This way, I further ensure that their biases and values about a particular research topic and design will not get them into any problem with the biases and values of their program and the particular faculty with whom they are working.

When one student interested in pursuing her quest of learning about "value-based research," we had some brief discussion about qualitative research approaches using critical theory, feminism, praxis or action-oriented, advocacy, ethnocentric, and emancipatory ideological perspectives. These researchers work in frameworks that not only value researcher's values, but also consider them to be essential ingredients of research. These ideological perspectives advocate research that moves beyond description and understanding to emancipatory action in collaboration with those who have been subjected to domination of others. Feminist research approaches, like action-oriented and critical theory based, encourage transformative research, require collaborative and non-exploitative relationships between the researcher and researched, and place researcher within the study so as to avoid objectification.

While discussing the thin line between good value-based research and propaganda, I suggested that she should first check with her advisor and thesis committee about doing a value-based research project. In the spirit of qualitative research, I however added -"I personally believe that each research when done in its right theoretical framework and interpreted in that framework has something to contribute. Remember, you will be the sole author of your thesis, it should reflect your values." I could not have said it any better than the student who posted the following -

"I prefer to have my research contribute to some larger social or cultural goal. Who I am socially, politically, and culturally will influence what I choose to research, and also what I conclude from that research. ... We as researchers share our political and social ideas by what we decide to research, the questions we ask, and the conclusions we reach."

What Did I Learn?

Clifford Geertz ([1973](#)) suggested -

If you want to understand what a science is you should look in the first instance not at its theories or findings and certainly not at what its apologists say about it; you should look at what the practitioners of it do. (p. 5)

This perspective reflects a common phenomenological value and research strategy that Eger ([1993](#)) describes as one "which tries to stay close to the phenomena by avoiding as much as possible all abstraction and imposition of constructs, and by relating always the object of study to the experiences of the subject who does the studying." When teacher-researchers describe and understand their students, classes, curriculum through personal reflection and narratives, they are "staying close to the phenomena" (Jungck, [1996](#)). In this paper, I tried to stay close to the phenomenon of researcher bias and subjectivity as it shows up in my online qualitative research classes. I have presented a snapshot of some class discussions surrounding this important issue in

qualitative research, and by doing that I have allowed readers a peek into my practice as a teacher.

A reflective analysis of the above sampling of words and phrases used by myself as the instructor, and my students in online qualitative research classes brings home some key areas of learning for me, and possibly for other instructors of qualitative research. I do realize that my experience in designing and teaching qualitative research classes has been limited, and also the evidence presented in this paper came from students in a particular field of study. But my aim here is not to make any broad-scale, universally applicable teaching implications for designers and instructors of qualitative research courses, but to bring forth for further exploration and reflection some critical issues that emerged in my experience as an online instructor of qualitative research.

First, the issue of bias in qualitative research is an important one, and demands special attention and discussion in any qualitative research methods class. Denzin ([1989](#)) comments that all research is really about the researcher; but in order for the research to be of value it must move beyond the researcher and researcher's situation. This notion is what drives me to spend time on the idea of researcher subjectivity throughout the class as I pose some specific questions to encourage students to reflect on this issue. The opening discussion in qualitative research classes on the epistemological roots of the methodology definitely brings up the issue of researcher subjectivity, but it requires a constant reflection and discussion by the instructor and students to understand how their subjectivity and their biases effect all aspects of their research design from selection of a topic to interpreting and presenting the results. It is important that beginning researchers, who more often are somewhat familiar with the traditional scientific method of doing research which emphasizes the value-free nature of science and knowledge construction, are encouraged to scrutinize the issue of value-laden research in qualitative methodology. This allows them to become comfortable with the notion of researcher bias and makes them see how their self constantly influences and is influenced by what they study, how they study, and why they study. Constant reflection and analysis of the ways in which researcher's self, including personal bias, opinions, beliefs, and values shine through the process of research design makes the understanding of the differences between quantitative and qualitative methodologies more concrete and tangible.

Second, the value of discussion about an issue such as researcher bias becomes manifold when students and instructor only interact online. Because most of the time the instructor and students in online classes do not get to exchange their ideas synchronously, there generally is a time lag in getting a response to a question posed by one party. However, this time lag allows everyone in the class to reflect more on the issue being discussed, which in turn can lead to more insightful and perceptive responses. The steps involved in the process of initiating and /or participating in an electronic discussion - thinking, typing, emailing, waiting for response, reading, analyzing, and responding - help clarify the intricacies of an issue as complex as researcher bias.

Third, the way my online classes are structured, all the lecture notes and discussion postings are available for re-reading, and re-analysis, which allows students more time to chew on the issue. Also, the comments made by everyone in the group can be later categorized and organized according to an issue of interest, which further helps students grasp a complex issue like

subjective-objective debate in its totality. For example, another emerging issue in our online exchanges in these classes, and also evident in the data presented in this paper, is the relation between qualitative research and the field of mediation. An educator or researcher in mediation would find such recorded, thoughtful exchanges very informative and reflective.

While some of the aforementioned teaching and learning activities can be incorporated by the instructor and students in a face-to-face classroom, my experience suggests that issues that require more critical thinking and reflection are dealt even better using the power of written word. When students write down how their understanding of an issue is developing, the knowledge gained from the experience of putting the idea in comprehensible sentences is many times the knowledge gained when they make a verbal and often casual comment on the issue being discussed in the classroom. Of course, we must take into consideration factors such as differences in students' ability to communicate - through verbal or written expression, and also students' level of understanding of the content. But because online instruction allows students to work at their own pace, some of those factors can be better addressed in an online classroom.

Finally, though I did not compare my online teaching experiences to my face-to-face teaching experiences, based on what I have learned from my overall experience using these two instructional delivery formats, I have come to believe that students in a traditional face-to-face course in qualitative research would also benefit from some form of online exchange opportunity (e.g., online café, chat room, etc.). This can provide the instructor and students more flexibility and freedom in sharing their ideas and raise questions on specific issues in qualitative research design that demand more in-depth analysis and reflection. Students in a face-to-face class will also benefit from the extended, in-depth analysis and reflection that asynchronous online exchange allows. As an instructor whose first language is not English, I have found that online instruction has helped me convey my ideas better in some ways. Students who do not feel comfortable expressing their opinion in a face-to-face classroom may also find the online environment less threatening and relaxed. This may also benefit students who are not avid note-takers in a face-to-face class but prefer some form of written material to refer back to at some later time.

Conclusion

This paper presented an analysis of how my students and I learn together about the role researcher self and subjectivity play in designing and conducting qualitative research. This learning is especially significant as the students in these classes are going through a graduate program in Conflict Resolution - a field that, like qualitative research, walks the thin line between maintaining value-neutrality and making sense of subjective worldviews. As I come to the close of this paper, it is only appropriate for me to reflect on how I walked that fine line in the production of this paper.

Berg and Smith ([1988](#)) raise an important question - where do we (social scientists) position ourselves in connection with our research? They emphasize the responsibility that qualitative researchers have to science - and to the participants of their studies - to examine minutely their relationship with their research. As a qualitative researcher and a teacher of qualitative research, I was acutely aware of imposing my interpretations on the comments posted by my students in

our online discussions. I found that on some occasions I was taking students' comments out of their original context in order to make my point about bias in qualitative research. On other occasions I found myself reading too much into a casual remark made by a student - so long as it helped me illustrate his or her struggle in dealing with researcher subjectivity. In order to be true (or at least as true as possible) to my students' original intent behind their comments, I ended up including long quotes - longer than the ones in my original draft -- instead of including only the relevant parts of the quotes that would have shortened the length of this paper, but would have removed the context in which they were generated.

This paper explored how beginning qualitative researchers understand and articulate the intellectual and emotional struggles they experience as "they formulate ideas, collect and interpret data, and build theory" (Berg & Smith, [1988](#), p. 11). The voices included in this paper are of students who begin their research careers in social sciences with an understanding that qualitative research involves a process of self-discovery. Intermixed with these students' voices is my voice of the instructor who is interpreting the emerging ideas and thoughts of novice qualitative researchers by organizing and re-organizing them so that a bigger picture may emerge. Together, these voices and the unique framework in which they are organized convey the message that the students and the instructor are on the road to discovering this important aspect of qualitative research -

People and their interactions are more than a collection of objective, measurable facts; they are seen and interpreted through the researcher's frame- that is, how she or he organizes the details of an interaction, attributes meaning to them, and decides (consciously or unconsciously) what is important and what is of secondary importance or irrelevant (Brown, [1996](#), p. 16).

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