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Bracketing in Phenomenology: Only Undertaken in the Data Collection and Analysis Process

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Abstract

Our aim with this article is to demonstrate how the researchers use bracketing as a method of demonstrating the validity after initiating a phenomenological study. Although bracketing is a method of demonstrating the validity of the data collection and analysis process in most phenomenological studies, how the researchers use them in practice is rarely demonstrated explicitly. We collected data through our experiences in preparing a phenomenological research study. We suggest that the concept of bracketing should be adopted upon initiating the research proposal and not merely in the data collection and analysis process. We propose four strategies for doing bracketing that are guided by the thinking activity of reflexivity: mentality assessment and preparation before deciding the research paradigm, deciding the scope of the literature review according to the prevailing gate-keeping policy, planning for data collection using semi-structured interviews guided by open-ended questions, and planning for data analysis using Colaizzi's method. Our proposition highlights that thorough preparation for doing bracketing is essential before entering the data collection and analysis process in phenomenology, because they are sequentially related.

Keywords

Phenomenology, Data Collection, Analysis Process

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Bracketing in Phenomenology: Only Undertaken in the Data Collection and Analysis Process?

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Our aim with this article is to demonstrate how the researchers use bracketing as a method of demonstrating the validity after initiating a phenomenological study. Although bracketing is a method of demonstrating the validity of the data collection and analysis process in most phenomenological studies, how the researchers use them in practice is rarely demonstrated explicitly. We collected data through our experiences in preparing a phenomenological research study. We suggest that the concept of bracketing should be adopted upon initiating the research proposal and not merely in the data collection and analysis process. We propose four strategies for doing bracketing that are guided by the thinking activity of reflexivity: mentality assessment and preparation before deciding the research paradigm, deciding the scope of the literature review according to the prevailing gate-keeping policy, planning for data collection using semi-structured interviews guided by open-ended questions, and planning for data analysis using Colaizzi's method. Our proposition highlights that thorough preparation for doing bracketing is essential before entering the data collection and analysis process in phenomenology, because they are sequentially related.

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Phenomenology is an approach to qualitative research that the specific focus is to identify the inherent and unchanging in the meaning of the issue under study (Langdridge, 2007). There are different approaches to phenomenology. Embree (1997) identified seven approaches namely, descriptive (transcendental constitutive) phenomenology, naturalistic constitutive phenomenology, existential phenomenology, generative historicist phenomenology, genetic phenomenology, hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenology, and realistic phenomenology. Amongst them, descriptive and hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenology are the two classical approaches that guide the majority of psychological research (Langdridge, 2007). Understanding the participants' lived experiences marks phenomenology as based on Husserl's philosophical work. Freeman (2011) asserted that understanding cannot be conceived as a fixing of meaning but how the meaning is generated and transformed. In order to discover meanings in the data, one needs an attitude open enough to let unexpected meanings emerge (Giorgi, 2011; Lopez & Willis, 2004). Through the fundamental methodology of "bracketing" the researcher's own experiences, the researcher does not influence the participant's understanding of the phenomenon. Although the concept of bracketing is well-suited in research that aims to explore human experience, the application and operation of bracketing remain vague and, often perplexing (Gearing, 2004). It results with disconnection of the practice of bracketing in phenomenology.

Bracketing is a methodological device of phenomenological inquiry that requires deliberate putting aside one's own belief about the phenomenon under investigation or what one already knows about the subject prior to and throughout the phenomenological investigation (Carpenter, 2007). Bracketing is holding in abeyance those elements that define the limits of an experience when the nurse is uncovering a phenomenon about which s/he

knows a great deal (Ray, 1985). The adoption of this attitude is unique to the phenomenological approach.

Bracketing is a means of demonstrating the validity of the data collection and analysis process (Ahern, 1999). Therefore, efforts should be made by researchers to put aside their repertoires of knowledge, beliefs, values and experiences in order to accurately describe participants' life experiences. However, in the hermeneutic phenomenological approach, it is acknowledged that pre-understanding cannot be eliminated or "bracketed" (Koch, 1995); the technique of bracketing is found inconsistent and problematic within this approach (LeVasseur, 2003). There is also no single set of methods for undertaking bracketing (Gearing, 2004; Wall, Glenn, Mitchinson, & Poole, 2004). Giorgi (2011) further argued that the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) provides no step in executing bracketing.

The recently published phenomenological studies involving nurses as participants have mentioned the term bracketing in their methodology (Kleiman, 2004; Sale, 2007), or have explicitly acknowledged that bracketing cannot be eliminated (Humble & Cross, 2010). However, these studies offer few sources of information or strategies for actually carrying out bracketing, or for addressing the problem of demonstrating validity. This lack of discussion about strategies may leave readers wondering as to how bracketing is actually carried out or how validity can be addressed in phenomenological studies. In order to handle these challenging issues properly, there is a need for a more concrete description to elicit how bracketing can be achieved in doing phenomenology.

Background

This article is prompted by a concern about the issue of bracketing that we had to face while initiating a study aiming to explore the lived experiences of Psychiatric Advanced Practice Nurses (APN) in their newly adopted role perceptions and performance in Hong Kong (HK). The purpose of the study was to establish a new framework of role adoption and performance through understanding their subjective perceptions and job-related experiences in work settings while fitting the new title into the new nursing structure. By seeking first-hand perceptions and descriptions of the participants' experiences, in-depth information regarding the meanings of the APN's job-related role performances can be obtained and explored via face-to-face interviews. In this research, after reflecting on the aim of the study, it was decided that phenomenology was the most appropriate research methodology to elicit the relevant information. Using this research as an example, we will discuss the problems in bracketing after initiating a phenomenological study and the proposed strategies that we have used during the research planning.

Conventionally, a research proposal should be prepared and approval granted before the researchers are allowed to enter the field of study. It is a must for a research student whose research proposal has to be passed by the university committee or the gatekeeper, and there is no exception for established faculty. Each step within the research proposal should be presented with justification. We will then make efforts to ensure that our approaches are judiciously informed by the philosophy that is held to guide the study. This means that meticulous work on the literature review is required to justify the need to carry out the research. This could help us to explain how the literature review informs and supports the research proposal.

To achieve bracketing, Hamill and Sinclair (2010) suggest that the literature review be delayed until after data collection and analysis, so that the researchers do not phrase questions or analyze data for themes that they know exist in the literature. In theory, the delayed literature review helps to address the impact of the researchers' pre-understanding of the research question. The researchers, then, can demonstrate that they have attempted not to

influence the data analysis and collection process. In practice, however, in the absence of linkage between the background knowledge and the research under study, the gatekeeper might question the justification for the research need and the overall plan of the study. This means that we have to acknowledge the theory-practice gap and the dilemma regarding the issue of literature review and bracketing. This is where we start to see that there are a number of challenges we have to overcome before getting into the data collection or analysis process. In addressing the challenges, we have to be aware of the factors contributing to the dilemma and tackle the issues of how properly and practically to plan and conduct the study using the phenomenological approach.

Attributes Affecting Bracketing

The inherent human factors and the ability to be aware of the researcher's preconceptions are the key attributes that can affect bracketing. The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis in qualitative research. The findings are mediated through this human instrument. Crotty (1996) pointed out that it is not humanly possible for qualitative researchers to be totally objective. If the researchers are unaware of their own preconceptions and beliefs, it is impossible for them to put these issues aside. Therefore, the ability to be aware of one's own values, interests, perceptions and thoughts becomes a prerequisite before we can set aside the things that influence the research process.

Our knowledge hinders our ability to research the topic thoroughly when we unconsciously bring assumptions about the topic into the research process (Parahoo, 2006). It becomes an inherent issue when the first author, as a Psychiatric APN, attempts to conduct a phenomenological study to explore the lived experiences of other Psychiatric APNs in their work settings. Our foreknowledge and suppositions limit our understanding of the participants' perspectives because we already know a great deal about the phenomenon. This could inevitably introduce bias into the research. In order to address the key issues in achieving bracketing, there is a strong need to develop strategies to acknowledge and tackle the influence of the researchers throughout the research process.

Strategies to Achieve Bracketing

We suggest the concept of bracketing should be in the researcher's mind throughout the research process, and these strategies are not merely restricted to the data collection and analysis phases. Instead, we propose they should be started before doing any literature review because the research processes of literature review, data collection and analysis are sequentially related. Reflexivity is the key thinking activity that helps us to identify the potential influence throughout the research process. Reflexivity involves the realization of an honest examination of the values and interests of the researcher that may impinge upon research work (Primeau, 2003). We note it helps qualitative researchers to identify areas of potential bias and minimize their influence by bracketing them (Ahern, 1999). Wall, Glenn, Mitchinson, and Poole (2004) suggest that using a reflexive diary is helpful to develop bracketing skills and facilitate decision making during the progress of a phenomenological investigation. To bring reflexivity into consciousness, a reflexive diary is used to write down our thoughts, feelings and perceptions. It allows us as researchers to re-examine our positions when issues are raised that might affect the research process. After initiating the phenomenological study, we proposed the following four strategies for achieving bracketing.

Strategy for Mental Preparation

Each researcher has his/her own standpoint and practice orientation. The first strategy aims to assess whether we are suitable for conducting a phenomenological study, and also prepares us for achieving bracketing. Before deciding the research paradigm, we have to confirm whether we can put aside all our own knowledge and adopt this attitude throughout the research. We start the thinking activities of reflexivity by examining our consciousness and thoughts, asking ourselves, for example: “Are we humble enough to learn about the experiences of other APNs, including our juniors?” “Can we equip ourselves to adopt an attitude of conscious ignorance about the issue under investigation?” After ensuring that we can answer the above questions in the affirmative, we can decide to use phenomenology as the research method. After starting the research journey, we have to ask ourselves what sorts of new information might be generated after the research. If we can answer this question readily, this means we are not open-minded. We should at least maintain our curiosity about the research question before proceeding to the literature review.

Strategy for Deciding the Scope of the Literature Review

The second strategy helps us to decide the scope of the literature review, which can manage the problem of pre-conception while meeting the gatekeeper’s criteria. A research method is a way of investigating certain kinds of questions, while the questions and the way one understands the questions are important starting points (van Manen, 1990). Apart from our personal experiences and knowledge of APN, we need to do some ground work through the literature review in order to gain a better understanding of the questions under the proposed study. However, the knowledge gained through the process of literature review may inevitably affect our preconceptions on the topic under study. The issue of where to stop the literature review remains undetermined. We have to decide when to stop the review process by asking ourselves: “Do we understand the topic enough that we can justify the research proposal while maintaining our curiosity in this area?” Once we can answer “yes” to this question, we can suspend the literature review. By being less uncertain about whether the literature review should be performed before data analysis and as long as we have the confidence to meet the gatekeeper’s criteria, we think it is enough.

Strategy for Planning Data Collection

The third strategy helps us to prepare for data collection using face-to-face interviews. When using the phenomenological approach during the interviews, the main aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of everyday experiences (Munhall, 2007). The directive of the questions and the manner in which the researchers ask them during the interview affects the way the participants tell their stories. This will, in some ways, limit the potential new data given by the participants and affect the richness of the information collected.

In phenomenological research, the research questions are not pre-determined; instead, the researcher follows the cues of the participants (Ray, 1994). By bringing the presupposition that we might post leading questions into consciousness, semi-structured interviews can be arranged to steer and guide the interview. A semi-structured interview is a technique for generating qualitative data and is characterized by open-ended questions that are developed in advance and by prepared probes (Morse & Richards, 2002). In the semi-structured interview, the interviewer has a set of questions on an interview schedule, but the interview will be guided by the schedule rather than dictated by it; the interviewer is free to probe interesting areas that arise from participants’ interests or concerns (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Smith & Osborn, 2003). To ensure that a broad coverage of issues is achieved during the semi-

structured interview, the researcher must ask focusing but not leading questions about their situation and listen carefully to the participants.

When the researchers maintain their curiosity regarding what they might not know, the participants are allowed to express themselves freely. We prepared an interview guide which consists of a list of questions that allows us to consider the range of issues that need to be covered during the interviews. The broad open-ended questions are developed around the research aims. The interview can be started by asking an open-ended question: "Can you describe your experiences in working out your new roles?" Subsequently, we will only ask questions for clarification or elaboration of what the participants are saying or when the participant might forget or not think of some important information that they might miss. One of the probing questions, for example, would be: "What are the challenges in working out your present duties?" The interview guide provides a good basis on which we can prepare the interview by designing the kinds of questions that should be asked or covered during the interview. Therefore, we can pursue an area of interest that is guided by these questions, while still allowing the participants to introduce issues of which we as researchers had not previously thought.

Strategy for Planning Data Analysis

Qualitative data are derived from narrative materials with verbatim transcripts from the in-depth interviews. The last strategy concerns the approach and procedures for data analysis that can enhance the trustworthiness. Choosing between the transcendental (descriptive) and hermeneutic (interpretive) approaches to guide the data analysis requires further reflection on the aim of the study. The IPA is an approach to psychological qualitative research that focuses on how a given person makes sense of the phenomenon in a given context (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). It is not at the level of description but at the level of interpretation that the natural attitude of the participants is understood (Overgaard, 2004). The aim of using IPA is to try to understand the content and complexity of meaning in respondents' experience (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). IPA can be used to analyze data from one-on-one interviews in order to develop rich descriptions of human experience (Fade, 2004) and emphasizes the importance of individual account (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, & Hendry, 2011). This study aims to seek in-depth information regarding how Psychiatric APNs understand their world and how this understanding shapes their practice. Therefore, in this study, IPA is more appropriate than the descriptive approach. It can help us to explore how APNs make sense of their job-related role performances in the work setting.

Data analysis is performed by the researchers, who may distort and filter information. This constraint affects the validity of phenomenological studies using IPA. Researchers need to suspend their predisposition during data analysis (Sale, 2007). After acknowledging that our own interpretations might influence the data analysis, we need to introduce measures to enhance the trustworthiness of the data analysis. Polit and Beck (2010) point out that Colaizzi's data analysis method is the only phenomenological analysis that calls for the validation of results by returning to study participants. To ensure that participants' experience is correctly interpreted, Colaizzi's method is matched with IPA in the present study. This procedure helps the participants to ascertain if their answers to any questions need to be rectified, and ensures that the researcher has not misinterpreted the data.

In summary, the proposed strategies addressed the key issues of bracketing that we had encountered after starting to work on the research question. The concrete descriptions of these strategies demonstrated how we worked through the challenges in doing phenomenology. These strategies helped us to prepare before entering the study field.

Discussion

Bracketing provides a useful methodological device to demonstrate validity in phenomenology. Hence practical strategies should be worked out to facilitate bracketing in the research process. Thorough planning for doing bracketing in the phenomenology study is essential before the data collection and analysis process, because they are sequentially related. The proposed strategies that are guided by the thinking activity of reflexivity could help us to address the issues of bracketing while the research plan was in progress. However, reflexive thinking on the posted questions during the research planning process can be a daunting experience, as it involves sincere efforts in terms of self-reflection and self-awareness. A flash of insight indicates the area of bias that might be experienced during the reflective thinking process (Ahern, 1999). Paradoxically, this is the kind of signal that tells us that we need to bracket our knowledge in that area. They are also the checkpoints that show that some issues concerning bracketing have to be managed before proceeding to the data collection and analysis process. This explains the reason for mental preparation before adopting phenomenology as the research method.

Our proposed strategies elicited concrete descriptions of how bracketing can be actualized. However, it should be noted that achieving bracketing is not a simple task. There are at least two issues that remain unsolved when applying bracketing in other phenomenological studies. First, there is no golden rule stating how many journals or books the researchers should read before conducting the phenomenological research, or that the literature review should be delayed until after data collection and analysis. It would be up to the researcher and should comply with the prevailing gate-keeping policy.

Second, there is an issue regarding who should be bracketed. Giorgi (1997) stated that only the researchers (and not the participants) should engage in the bracketing, because it is the participants' lived experience that the researcher is trying to understand. By contrast, Caelli (2001) suggested that both researchers and participants should attempt to put aside their assumptions about the phenomenon and its interpretations, because these can facilitate the description of the primordial experience. This would particularly be the case when the participants probably know that the researchers also have similar knowledge to the participants concerning the phenomenon under investigation. In this case, we recommend the researcher should emphasize that there must be different and unique lived experiences and perceptions in different people that the researchers cannot know entirely prior to the interview. It is suggested that this issue be addressed at the outset and before starting the interview, because it affects the data collected in the interview.

Conclusion

The ultimate goal in carrying out phenomenological research is to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experienced of the participants. The researcher as a human being inevitably influences the research process. Bracketing the researcher's own knowledge and experience will help to minimize the influence of the researcher throughout the research process. That is, it should be well planned before entering the data collection and analysis process.

In this article, four strategies for doing bracketing are proposed, guided by the thinking activities of reflexivity. In summary, the proposed strategies for achieving bracketing involve "BRACKETING": **B**egin with a mentality assessment of the researchers' personality; **R**eflexivity helps the researchers to identify areas of potential bias; **A**nalyze data in IPA using Colaizzi's method; **C**omply with the prevailing gate-keeping policy when deciding the scope of the literature review; **K**ee a reflexive diary, helping to awaken the researchers' own pre-

conceptions; Engage participants in bracketing during the data collection process when indicated; Thorough research planning before data collection; Interview the participants using open-ended questions; adopt a Not-knowing stand to maintain the curiosity in the participants; Generate knowledge from participants via semi-structured interviews.

Finally, it is true that no one in the world has better knowledge than participants themselves regarding their lived experiences and perceptions. All the measures adopted by the researchers, including bracketing, aim to ensure that the findings are as close to what the participants mean as possible and in a more realistic and practical sense. It is up to the researcher to commit to the issue of bracketing and to decide how much influence there can be by the researcher throughout the research process. This indicates that there is a need to call for innovative means of carrying out qualitative research that can address the problems of validity in doing phenomenology.

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