A phenomenological reflection on approaching attitudes towards race in research

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Abstract

Through a phenomenological lens, this reflection explores the interplay between research ethics, researcher positionality, power and researcher identity during a semi-structured interview on International Student diversity in Higher Education. The phenomenological process of bracketing, i.e. the act of suspending biases or attachments, provides scope to evaluate researcher ethics during data collection and subsequently, during data analysis when met with racist language from the perspective of a researcher, specifically a researcher belonging to an ethnic minority group. This reflection advocates critical reflection on researcher identity throughout the research process to enable the researcher to better anticipate and prepare for challenging or confrontational interview responses. Furthermore, this reflection emphasises the significance of open questioning during data collection as a tool for increasing understanding of interviewee perspectives and avoiding confrontation whilst increasing the validity of findings.

Key words: Ethnicity; Linguistic Ethnography; International student diversity; Phenomenology; Power; Reflective practice; Reflexivity; Researcher positionality

Introduction

Ethics explore 'what is right and wrong in the research process, contingent on the context' and are often the focus of methodological discourses involving social subjects (Copland and Creese, 2015, p.177). Despite satisfying institutional ethical requirements to conduct an interpretive qualitative doctoral study exploring discourses on International Student diversity in Higher Education (HE) (De, 2019), I faced unanticipated challenges whilst collecting data. Specifically, as a British Asian doctoral student, whilst conducting semi-structured interviews, I felt ill-equipped as an interviewer and in my subsequent approach to data analysis when faced with the unexpected, i.e., in this case, what could be interpreted as a racist attitude. This led me to question my ethical responsibilities as a researcher, more specifically, as a researcher belonging to an ethnic minority group. In this reflection, I provide insights to my experience and learning by applying a phenomenological lens to evaluate my thought processes and actions during data collection and subsequent analyses which may prove valuable for novice researchers.

A phenomenological lens

By focusing on my researcher experience as a phenomenon, this reflection is distinct from the study which the interview data discussed was originally collected for (De, 2019). Phenomenology requires researchers to 'set aside all previous habits of thought' (Husserl, 1931) and to 'call into question… our manner of seeing the world' (Wolff, 1984, cited in Crotty, 2012, p.80). By focusing on a critical incident during a semi-structured interview about ethnic and cultural diversity with an International Student, a phenomenological lens enables me to critically reflect upon the interplay between my ethnicity and my ethical responsibilities as a researcher, alongside the power dynamic between the researcher and the researched. Furthermore, often used in education, psychology and nursing, a phenomenological lens supports researchers to synthesise abstract, policy and practical learnings about the phenomenon (Howitt, 2019). This reflection points to my learning and advice for

reflexive researcher practice when the researcher's identity and values form part of the data and more specifically, are criticised by a research participant.

Phenomenology invites researchers to make sense of phenomena, however, as researchers, our cultural heritage, biases, world understanding and more influence how we attribute meaning to phenomena (Crotty, 2012). Bracketing is a process, or a stance, within phenomenological research whereby the researcher 'brackets' or 'suspends' influence, biases, or preconceptions to directly experience the phenomenon (Howitt, 2019, p.286). Bracketing thereby encourages researchers to 'abandon' their cultural and theoretical experiences, knowledge, and wider understanding of the world. Accordingly, researchers can detach from their presuppositions and fully perceive the phenomenon rather attach meaning underpinned by our cultural and/or theoretical knowledge systems, prejudices inclusive (Howitt, 2019, p. 472). Reflecting upon my experience as an interviewer discussed below, I recognise that I unconsciously applied the process of bracketing to conduct myself ethically and refrain from challenging and/or voicing my opinion during data collection.

Reflective and reflexive practice

As a teacher and coach, I primarily consider myself an educational practitioner. Reflective and reflexive practice continue to play an integral role in the ongoing development of my professional practice. Reflection involves looking 'beyond the mirror' (Bolton, 2010, cited in Linds and Vettraino, 2015), whilst reflexivity refers to the transformative impact of thought on action in practice (Mezirow, 1990, cited in Linds and Vettraino, 2015). As an educational practitioner, reflective practice enabled me to determine that what I previously viewed as failure in my teaching was in fact rooted in my fear of the unknown associated with reflexive teaching practice (De, 2024a; 2024b). Subsequent reflections enabled me to identify developments in my practice, which I attribute to my growth mindset and the concept of negative capability, i.e. the ability to tolerate uncertainty without rushing to fix or solve (French et al, 2009). The former being evident through my ongoing

efforts to enrich my practice through a combination of effort, strategies and resources (Dweck, 2017); the latter encompasses my evolving ability to cope with uncertainty (French et al, 2009).

Similarly, by reflecting on my actions as a researcher, I hope to better understand my research ethics, to identify cultural influences, biases inclusive to enhance my ability to design and conduct ethical research. The 'bracketing' of influence and bias within the phenomenological stance (Crotty, 2012) specifically allow me to critically reflect upon my research conduct during data collection and my approach to analysis. Accordingly, I note the relationship between bracketing and reflexivity in research, both personal and epistemological reflexivity. A phenomenological lens attempts to remove or reduce the influence of the researcher's life experiences, knowledge, politics and more on the research and the influence that research has on us as researchers associated with personal reflexivity (Willig, 2008, cited in Howitt, 2019). Furthermore, by suspending biases and attachments to phenomena during analysis, the process of bracketing in phenomenological research reduces the risk of attaching subjective interpretations to phenomena within analysis associated with epistemological reflexivity (Willig, 2008, cited in Howitt, 2019).

This reflection is presented across three sections which are loosely based on Borton's 'What? So what? Now what?' model (cited in the University of Edinburgh, 2024). As this reflection focuses on an unexpected incident and outcome of my study, the 'What' section explains context of the research context, including methodological details and the interview transcript taken from the original study. In the 'So what?' section, I present my analysis through a phenomenological lens by critically evaluating my thought process and actions as an interviewer and their impact on the research participant and wider study. This part of the reflection explores power dynamics between the researcher and the researched and recognises areas of improvement in my research practice. Finally, I conclude with the 'Now what?' by pointing to the lessons learned from this experience and present cautionary words of advice for others embarking on their journey in qualitative research involving human participants.

What happened? - Context

The linguistic ethnographic study which this reflection is based upon aimed to explore discourses on International Student diversity circulating HE from the perspective of International Students, HE professionals and HE institutions (De, 2019). As a methodology, linguistic ethnographies comprise of elements of ethnography and linguistics. The main ethnographic feature guiding my linguistic ethnography was my desire to understand the meanings of diversity from social actors within the research context (Rampton, 2007) with a view to improving the teaching practices and learner experiences in HE. The ethnographic dimension was informed by my insider status and experience as a Teaching Fellow in Learning and Development in HE; the linguistic component evident through the critical role of discourse, which shaped the research design and analysis.

The study satisfied the ethical requirements of the institutions involved. Whilst designing the study, I was aware that researcher positionality could affect the quality of data and findings resulting from analysis and discussion. Tusting and Maybin (2007) explain that methods of data collection may be selected to minimise the effects of researcher positionality on social practices being studied. I therefore triangulated research methods and included methods to generate data independent of my direct involvement as a researcher as an attempt to reduce bias and to corroborate findings. Research methods consisted of documentary analysis, focus groups and semi-structured interviews. However, the study was not intended to be controversial and as the researcher, I did not anticipate any cause for concern during data collection.

This reflection focuses on my semi-structured interview with an International Student, henceforth, Student A. A means of generating qualitative descriptions of the interviewee's understanding and interpretation of the world around them (Kvale, 1996), the semi-structured interview was a flexible method of data collection which provided the scope to critically explore the viewpoints and experiences of research participants (Arkesey and Knight, 1999). Despite the flexibility permitted by the semi-structured interview method and my careful planning, in research practice, I

was un-prepared for the issues which arose when interviewing Student A, whose viewpoint and attitude towards ethnic diversity differ significantly from my own. This incident and my subsequent reflections have contributed to my development as a researcher in educational development.

Data collection

The extract below is taken from a semi-structured interview with Student A, who was in the process of carrying out his postgraduate studies at the same Birmingham based UK institution he studied his undergraduate degree. This interview extract shows an open question on cultural diversity which I asked each student interviewee in order to gauge their conceptualisation of culture and diversity before discussing their experiences and viewpoints on diversity within an internationalised HE environment. Open-ended questions as such are characteristic of qualitative research and in accordance with a phenomenological stance, allow research participants to construct their views without influence of the researcher (Howitt, 2019).

Researcher: How do you interpret the term 'culturally diverse?' What does it mean to you?

If a place is culturally diverse, what does it mean to you?

Student A: I would say in Birmingham… in fact, I would say that Birmingham is a bit weird, I would say, you know, there are too many Asians in Birmingham.

During my time here, when I was doing my BSc at this University, I found that there are a lot of Asians. There are not so many Africans. They are British.

I have not seen many people from places like Spain, Russia, the Ukraine, I haven't really seen them.

Researcher: Do you mean Birmingham in general, or do you mean this University?

Student A: Birmingham and this University.

Researcher: Ok, but, do you think that it is a diverse city or university?

Student A: No.

Figure 1. Interview extract

So what? - Power dynamics between the researcher and the researched

Generally, power is a consideration in interviews and, interviewers hold a powerful position due to their role in structuring the format and direction of questioning in interviews (Talmy, 2010 and 2011). Despite my efforts to conduct interviews in a neutral environment and by adopting the semi-structured interview style,

interviewees may have felt as though as the interviewer, I was in a powerful position as through questioning, I guided the focus of interview discussions. However, upon hearing Student A's criticisms of the number of Asians within Birmingham and the University, and, as someone who visibly belongs to the ethnic group which Student A was criticising, I felt a distinct shift in power and a loss of control during the interview.

Reading about conducting interviews and research ethics had not prepared me for this exchange. Prior to this interview, I had not considered myself an 'Asian' or 'British Asian researcher', rather, a 'researcher.' However, by stipulating an ethnic group, i.e. 'Asians' and conveying his perception of their being 'too many Asians' and 'a lot of Asians', Student A's use of racialized language made me acutely aware of my ethnicity. Student A's racialized language and criticism of the number of Asians within the University and city offended me and reduced me to the status of a 'British Asian doctoral researcher.'

I was unsure how to continue with the interview. I wanted to question, unpick and challenge Student A's viewpoint, as technically, the remit of the semi-structured interview permitted (Kvale, 1996). However, in the moment, I was unsure how I could explore Student A's views ethically, and refrain from conveying my values and biases. Furthermore, I was conscious that I had a series of topics to discuss in a limited period of time and I was keen to avoid conflict. Despite my personal values and beliefs, ethically, I understood that the focus and priority of an interview is the interviewee's thoughts rather than those of the interviewer (Arkesey and Knight, 1999).

I felt as though Student A's view was over-simplistic, prejudice and dismissive of the complexity of diversity, or superdiversity in Birmingham (Birmingham City Council, 2022; Phillimore, 2014). Whilst my perspective differed from Student A's, as the interviewer, I understood that my role was to scaffold a dialogue to permit the interviewee to freely express their viewpoint (Kvale, 1996). Moreover, I was aware that Student A is entitled to an opinion and as he had not expressed viewpoints that

posed a direct threat to anybody, I proceeded by providing Student A an opportunity to clarify his understanding of my initial question and to elaborate on his viewpoint.

On reflection, my final question in this extract is a closed question, which arguably could have been an open question to allow Student A to elaborate on their thoughts. However, their definite response of 'No' to their thoughts on Birmingham and the University being culturally diverse leaves no doubt of Student A's thoughts on the lack of diversity, which serves to reinforce their previous explanation of there being 'too many Asians.'

Subsequently, I struggled to write about this incident in my discussion and analyses. Given my focus on 'international student diversity', as advocated by Martin-Jones, Andrews and Martin (2016) it was important for me to consider the influence of my ethnic background on my actions as the researcher. With hindsight, I was naïve in failing to consider my ethnic background as a factor which had the potential to influence my actions as a researcher, thereby interfere with the processes of data collection and analyses. The lack of power I felt during the interview continued into the analysis stage, as primarily, my world view differs significantly from that of Student A and secondly, I belong to the ethnic group which Student A discussed.

From an ethical and phenomenological stance, I think I acted appropriately as the interviewer. Whilst I was acutely aware of my own ethnicity and cultural heritage in the moment, I inadvertently tried to 'bracket' my values and views to adhere to my research ethics. However, after countless reflections on this interview transcript, despite providing Student A with the opportunity to elaborate on his opinion, I failed to ask him to justify his viewpoint or question his understanding. This basic error resulted from my shock towards Student A's viewpoint and, my desire to avoid conflict, which made the analysis and discussion process problematic.

I did not want to produce a weak discussion which simply re-presented Student A's words or asserted my opinion. Instead, the sociological concepts of superdiversity (Vertovec, 2007) and conviviality (Gilroy, 2004) provided me with frameworks to begin to understand the complexities, particularly the tensions associated with living in superdiverse contexts expressed by Student A. The concept of superdiversity

extends beyond overly focusing on ethnic and national diversities (Vertovec, 2007) and permit the study of 'new' and 'old' international migrants alongside established groups in complex social spaces (Grzymala-Kazlowska and Phillimore, 2017). The concept of conviviality refers to the normalisation and challenges of multi-culture in complex urban areas (Gilroy, 2004 and 2006).

Additionally, whilst discussing 'international student diversity' within a global marketized HR sector, it was important to consider Student A in the role of a consumer. Olssen and Peters (2005) explain that due to the neo-liberal principles of 'choice' and 'freedom', diversity within student populations is often reduced to a commodity within a competitive HE arena. Exposed to HE market practices which often promote images of diversity (Ahmed, 2012), Student A may have formed a set of expectations of 'diversity' in the UK which differed from his everyday reality in a superdiverse city and institution. Discourses on the commodification of diversity enabled me to appreciate the potential range of factors influencing Student A's viewpoint and demonstrate how marketized discourses of diversity tend to conceal the associated conflict and inequality (Ahmed, 2012).

Thus, discussing Student A's views in relation to sociological and neo-liberal discourses of diversity prevented me from attributing my own meanings to his viewpoint. Instead, these discourses enabled me to form a deeper awareness and understanding of the potential factors influencing Student A's perspective. However, whilst I am confident that I refrained from conveying my views and biases in my conduct, write-up inclusive, I think the quality of interview data would have been richer had I the confidence to pause, reflect and confidently ask Student A to elaborate.

Now what? - Lessons learned and moving forward

My experience as a doctoral researcher revealed the difficulties of detaching one's values and identity from the research process. A phenomenological lens has helped me to critically reflect upon my actions during the interview, focus on the complexity

of the situation and the range of factors influencing my course of action in the moment. Despite the shift in power between Student A and myself during the interview, I acted ethically and avoided conflict with the interviewee by refraining from conveying my views or challenging Student A. Instead, I acted in the interest of my research objectives by encouraging Student A to elaborate on his viewpoint.

As a researcher, this experience has taught me the importance of reflecting on my identity, values and to refrain from allowing these factors to influence my research practice. Deeper reflection during the research design stage may have helped me anticipate and better prepare for challenges which arose during data collection when discussing ethnicity and subsequent analyses.

As the researcher, I was ethically bound to allow the interviewee to present and justify their viewpoint, however controversial their viewpoint may be. However, I feel my discussion and analysis of this interview remains incomplete as I failed to ask Student A to justify his thoughts due to my preoccupation with avoiding confrontation and my commitment to acting ethically. This experience has highlighted my responsibility as the interviewer to determine both interviewee viewpoints and the rationale underpinning their viewpoints to ensure a critical and comprehensive discussion of data.

On reflection, I recognise that I over-complicated the interview discussion due to the overlap between points being made about ethnicity which resonated with my ethnicity and my perceived loss of power in the moment. However, irrespective of viewpoints, as the researcher, it was my duty encourage a discussion to better understand Student A, or in the least, I should have encouraged Student A to justify their viewpoint. I would like to remind qualitative researchers of the simplicity and complexity of the question 'why?' as a tool to avoid confrontation and enhance researcher understanding and strengthen the validity of research findings.

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