

Now I see it, now I don't: researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research

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Abstract

This article addresses potential effects on reflexivity of researcher's social position (e.g. gender, age, race, immigration status, sexual orientation), personal experiences, and political and professional beliefs. Because reflexivity is a major strategy for quality control in qualitative research, understanding how it may be impacted by the characteristics and experiences of the researcher is of paramount importance. Benefits and challenges to reflexivity under three types of researcher's position are discussed and illustrated by means of case examples: (1) reflexivity when researcher shares the experience of study participants, (2) reflexivity when researcher moves from the position of an outsider to the position of an insider in the course of the study, and (3) reflexivity when researcher has no personal familiarity or experience with what is being studied. Strategies are offered for harvesting the benefits of researcher's familiarity with the subject and for curbing its potentially negative effects. Directions for future research are suggested.

Keywords

insider-outsider, reflexivity, researcher position, rigor, trustworthiness

The main purpose of this article is to argue and illustrate that reflexivity in qualitative research is affected by whether the researcher is part of the researched and shares the participants' experience. Reflexivity has been increasingly recognized as a crucial strategy in the process of generating knowledge by means of qualitative research (Ahmed Dunya et al., 2011; Blaxter et al., 2006; D'Cruz et al., 2007; Gerstl-Pepin and Patrizion, 2009; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2002; Horsburgh, 2003; Koch and Harrington, 1998). For example, the journal *Forum: Qualitative Research* dedicated a full issue (May 2003) to subjectivity and reflexivity in qualitative research, and there

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is hardly any issue of a qualitative methods journal that does not include at least one article addressing issues pertaining to reflexivity.

Questions about reflexivity are part of a broader debate about ontological, epistemological and axiological components of the self, intersubjectivity and the colonization of knowledge. This debate has gained central stage as employment of communication research methods continues to evolve and the use of the self expands in a diverse plethora of research strategies across disciplines including autobiography, autoethnography, narrative co-construction, and reflexive ethnography (Pensoneau-Conway and Toyosaki, 2011; Wint, 2011). Consequently, researchers need to increasingly focus on self-knowledge and sensitivity; better understand the role of the self in the creation of knowledge; carefully self monitor the impact of their biases, beliefs, and personal experiences on their research; and maintain the balance between the personal and the universal.

While some have used the concept of *reflexivity* interchangeably with related concepts, such as *reflectivity* and *critical reflection*, while others made efforts to differentiate meanings of these concepts (D'Cruz et al., 2007), the literature appears to reflect consensus relative to its meaning. Reflexivity is commonly viewed as the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher's positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome (Bradbury-Jones, 2007; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Pillow, 2003; Stronach et al., 2007). Parallel to the expectation that clinical practitioners pay attention to the impact of their own history and issues on their understanding of and reactions to the client (conceptualized in psychodynamic language as counter transference), reflexivity is the self-appraisal in research. It means turning of the researcher lens back onto oneself to recognize and take responsibility for one's own situatedness within the research and the effect that it may have on the setting and people being studied, questions being asked, data being collected and its interpretation. As such, the idea of reflexivity challenges the view of knowledge production as independent of the researcher producing it and of knowledge as objective.

Relevant researcher's positioning include personal characteristics, such as gender, race, affiliation, age, sexual orientation, immigration status, personal experiences, linguistic tradition, beliefs, biases, preferences, theoretical, political and ideological stances, and emotional responses to participant (Bradbury-Jones, 2007; Finlay, 2000; Hamzeh and Oliver, 2010; Horsburgh, 2003; Kosygina, 2005; Padgett, 2008; Primeau, 2003).

These positions of the researcher may impact the research in three major ways. First, they can affect access to the 'field' because respondents may be more willing to share their experiences with a researcher whom they perceive as sympathetic to their situation (De Tona, 2006), and the researcher may be more knowledgeable about potentially helpful and informative resources. Second, they may shape the nature of researcher-researched relationship, which, in turn, affects the information that participants are willing to share; thus, a woman may feel more comfortable discussing sexual experiences with another woman than with a man. Finally, the worldview and background of the researcher affects the way in which he or she constructs the world, uses language, poses questions, and chooses the lens for filtering the information gathered from participants and making meaning of it, and thus may shape the findings and conclusions of the study (Kacen and Chaitin, 2006). For example, an interviewer who lost her father may

use the lens of this experience in making meaning of narratives of bereaved individuals (e.g. Valentine, 2007).

While such effects exist in all types of research, qualitative researchers, particularly practitioner researchers, tend to recognize and address them as an inherent part of the research (Drake, 2010) and to use reflexivity as a means to monitor the tension between involvement and detachment of the researcher and the researched as a means to enhance the rigor of the study and its ethics (Bradbury-Jones, 2007; Gemignani, 2011; Pillow, 2003).

Relative to rigor, Horsburgh (2003) posited that

Given that the researcher is intimately involved in both the process and product of the research enterprise, it is necessary for the reader to evaluate the extent to which an author identifies and explicates their involvement and its potential or actual effect upon the findings. (p. 309)

One goal of reflexivity in qualitative research is to monitor such effects and thus enhance the accuracy of the research and ‘the credibility of the findings by accounting for researcher values, beliefs, knowledge, and biases’ (Cutcliffe, 2003: 137), that is, to gain plausibility by securing research’s trustworthiness (Buckner, 2005; Macbeth, 2001). As reflexivity is a researcher’s conscious and deliberate effort to be attuned to one’s own reactions to respondents and to the way in which the research account is constructed, it helps identify and explicate potential or actual effect of personal, contextual, and circumstantial aspects on the process and findings of the study and maintain their awareness of themselves as part of the world they study (Mason, 1996; Porter, 1993). Thus, it enhances the quality of the research by allowing researchers to ponder the ways in which who they are may both assist and hinder the process of co-constructing meanings (Lietz et al., 2006), frees them to handle and present the data better, and consider its complex meanings and contribution to the understanding of social phenomena and of the process involved in knowledge production. The absence of reflexivity may lead to acceptance of ‘the apparent linearity, thereby obscuring all sorts of unexpected possibilities’ (Russel and Kelly, 2002: paragraph 37).

Relative to the contribution of reflexivity to keeping the process of research ethical, Pillow (2003) stated that ‘reflexivity is situating the researcher as non-exploitative and compassionate toward the research subjects’, thus helping to address concerns regarding negative effects of power in researcher–researched relationships. Reflexivity helps maintain the ethics of the relationship between researcher and research by ‘decolonizing’ the discourse of the ‘other’ and securing that while interpretation of findings is always done through the eyes and cultural standards of the researcher, the effects of the latter on the research process is monitored (Frisina, 2006; Josselson, 2007; Smith, 1999).

Reflexivity is crucial throughout all phases of the research process, including the formulation of a research question, collection and analysis of data, and drawing conclusions (Bradbury-Jones, 2007; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). For example, during interviewing, being self-reflective helps the researcher to identify questions and content that he or she tends to emphasize or shy away from and to become aware of own reactions to interviews, thoughts, emotions, and their triggers. During content analysis and reporting, it helps in alerting oneself to ‘unconscious editing’ because of own sensitivities and thus

enable fuller engagement with the data and more in-depth comprehensive analysis of it (Valentine, 2007).

Reflexivity is demonstrated by use of first-person language and provision of a detailed and transparent report of decisions and their rationale. While traditionally viewed as a process of personal self-supervision, reflexivity has been expanded to include teams where members attend to their own biases as well as check on one another's reactions (Horsburgh, 2003; Russel and Kelly, 2002). Strategies for maintaining reflexivity include repeated interviews with the same participants, prolonged engagement, members checking, triangulation, peer review, forming of a peer support network and back talk groups, keeping a diary or research journal for 'self-supervision', and creating an 'audit trail' of researcher's reasoning, judgment, and emotional reactions (Ahern, 1999; Bradbury-Jones, 2007; Fonow and Cook, 2005; Frisina, 2006; Padgett, 2008; Russel and Kelly, 2002; Smith, 1999; Valentine, 2007).

While the importance of reflexivity, its roles, purposes, and strategies to enhance it have been discussed and demonstrated (Gergen and Gergen, 1991; Hawes, 1991; Padgett, 2008; Pillow, 2003), the relationship between reflexivity and the position of the researcher vis-à-vis the phenomenon under study has been only sparsely addressed and 'the implications of theoretical and philosophical discussions about reflexivity, epistemology, and the construction of knowledge for empirical research remain undeveloped' (Kacen and Chaitin, 2006: 215).

This article discusses issues relative to reflexivity under varying types of researcher's personal experience with the world being studied and illustrates them using my own work. I studied the experience of immigrant women 10 years after I relocated from Israel to New York; I had the opportunity to conduct a study of stepfamilies before and while I was becoming a part of one by remarrying a divorced father who stepped into the role of my son's stepfather; and, I got involved in a study of the experience of abused divorcees with law guardians of their children, a situation which I have not shared. How did my different perspectives hold possibilities for seeing some meanings imbedded in the data and for obscuring such meanings? Examples from these studies are used to illustrate effects of my diverse positions in relation to the world and people I was studying on formulating research question, collecting data, and making sense of it.

Have been there, have done that: reflexivity when studying the familiar

I relocated from Israel to the United States in 1990 and started my study of the experience of immigrant women a decade later, when I was well established professionally and personally in my new country and legally a US citizen. At that time, I had had my share of encounters with unfriendly personnel of immigration services, coping with the hardships of reestablishing my credentials as well as my financial and social status; learning to live in a language, which was not my own; and coming to terms with my dual identity. Being part of the group under study means 'simultaneously being an onlooker in the stalls and a member of the cast' (Shaw, 1996: 10).

Having shared the immigration experience with study participants positioned me in the role of the 'insider' and as such offered three advantages discussed by Padgett (2008)

and Kacen and Chaitin (2006) in studying the familiar: easier entrée, a head start in knowing about the topic and understanding nuanced reactions of participants. That researcher's own experiences within various cultural locations can provide insight into culture has been illustrated in Richie's (1995) explanation of how her frequent experiences with racism and sexism because of being an African-American helped her gain trust and achieve rapport with the incarcerated low-income African-American women whom she studied and helped her attain insight into their lives. Similar experience echoed in Ahmed Dunya et al.'s (2011) report of her study of visually impaired young people in Bahrain.

My being an immigrant greatly facilitated recruiting participants. Women to whom I reached out to share with me their experiences were very receptive and cooperative. They expressed confidence that being an immigrant myself, I will be able to understand and represent their experiences and struggles better than a nonimmigrant researcher would as well as their desire to help an immigrant 'sister' (i.e. me) to achieve her goal. It also increased their and my level of comfort and assisted in developing a rapport – the moment they heard my accent, one could hear the sigh of relief and feel the atmosphere relax.

My immigration status affected the process of data collection and data analysis in studying life stories of immigrant women (Berger, 2004) because it allowed me to approach the study with some knowledge (i.e. having 'cultural intuition' and insight) about the subject and to address certain topics more easily or even be aware that I should address them. Sharing the experience diminished distance and enhanced my willingness and ability to go places that I otherwise would not. It also affected interviewees' expression. They often left sentences unfinished, acting under the assumption that 'you know how ...' (e.g. these Immigration and Naturalization officers treat you). When my interviewees recounted that when they criticize any aspect of their host country, they were often told 'if you do not like it here, go back to where you came from' and how it made them feel, I knew too well what they are talking about. Furthermore, I was guided by my own experience to explore reactions from officials before the citizenship eligibility interview and after it, as the tone tends to change, I knew to ask how it felt to stand for the first time in the queue for US passport and Green Card holders in the airport and hear 'welcome home' rather than a suspicious 'Why do you want to come to America?' They also gave me in numerous, often unspoken, gestures permission to address issues, which they would not allow nonimmigrants. Because of my insider position, I had to be constantly alert and rigorously reflect on how my presence and how I am shaped the conversation as well as explain that while we may have shared an experience, it was different for each, and I want to learn theirs.

Finally, coming from the 'shard experience' position, I was better equipped with insights and the ability to understand implied content, and was more sensitized to certain dimensions of the data. I was familiar with the 'immigration language' and aware of potential sensitivities, thus I knew what to ask and how to ask it as well as understood the responses in a nuanced and multileveled way. I was able to hear the unsaid, probe more efficiently, and ferret out hints that others might miss. For example, in the United States, the concept for legal residents who are no-citizens is 'aliens' (and officially the famous Green Card is an Alien Card). Being aware of the negative connotations of being defined

as ‘from another planet’ and thus not really belonging, which often triggers discomfort among immigrants, I knew to probe when a cynical tone was used by interviewees to allude to their formal status, whereas American-born colleagues who listened to the interview easily missed the clue. An interesting opportunity to gain understanding of possible effects of similarity versus difference between researcher and interviewee was offered by Gibson and Abrams (2003). Being a biracial research team studying African-American women, they compared the influence of their individual positioning on their experiences during the engagement, recruitment, and interviewing phases of the study. It may be very informative to conduct a similar experiment with a mixed team of immigrants and nonimmigrants content analyzing the same material.

In addition to the aforementioned benefits, insider’s position and familiarity carry the risks of blurring boundaries; imposing own values, beliefs, and perceptions by a researcher; and projection of biases (Drake, 2010). It has been recognized, especially in the context of studying minority groups, that a ‘dual identity’ of a researcher and a member of the community being studied shape the research process (Brayboy, 2000; Chaudhry, 2000; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Motzafi-Haller, 1997; Villenas, 1996, 2000). For example, when researcher and participants share experiences, the assumption of researcher’s familiarity with participants’ realities carries the dangers of participants withholding information they assume to be obvious to researcher and researcher’s taking for granted similarities and overlooking certain aspects of participants’ experience (Daly, 1992).

Participants who I recruited for interviewing were at different points on the route of immigration and were struggling with diverse adjustment issues depending on their particular position on this continuum. While listening to their stories and later analyzing them, visiting, in my mind, my own struggle with similar issues at the parallel points of the track was inevitable. It required a constant deliberate effort to maintain the separation between mine and theirs, curb the drive to compare experiences with immigration services, examine myself, and document my reactions. It was imperative to secure that I let interviewees tell their stories rather than ‘push’ them to certain directions, that I hear what is said rather than ignore potentially painful content, and that I check how I filter what I hear through the lens of my experience and refrain from insinuation (Padgett, 2008).

Bringing the researcher into the researched carries the danger of researcher’s self-involvement to the degree that it blocks hearing other voices (Cloke et al., 2000). Like Finlay (2000) stated ‘I had to guard against assuming that my participants and I shared the same language … if I failed to do so, I might have missed the point’ (p. 537). The question then becomes how to use one’s own experience, which offers intimate familiarity and hence potentially deeper understanding of the phenomenon, and at the same time, not impose researcher’s experience on participants (Pillow, 2003).

Shared experience may also color the power relationship between researcher and participant. These colors may vary. For example, it may create for the participant a feeling of comparison and competition. Thus, some immigrant interviewees were intimidated by my accomplishments as an immigrant; however, several respondents commented that it instilled hope by demonstrating that success is possible. Such reactions inevitably affect participants’ responses. A similar issue has been reported by Ahmed Dunya et al. (2011)

relative to the impact of her being a Sunni on her study in Bahrain: ‘Sunnis had more comments to make about Shi’as than Shi’as had to make about the Sunnis’ (p. 472), which she interpreted as related to Shi’a Muslims refraining from making comments in front of her because they perceived her as Sunni.

Unique issues of reflexivity in relation to immigration research have been discussed both by De Tona (2006) who explored ‘... when the researcher is an exponent of a minority group, an ‘outsider’, an *other*, who researches other minority groups, other outsiders, other *others*’ (paragraph 5) and Perez (2006) who addressed strategies that he used as a non-migrant to address challenges of conducting a study with immigrants. Interestingly, while Perez demonstrated understanding of the impact that power and status creates a divide between him, a member of the dominant social class, and his immigrant respondents, he failed to reflect about the way in which some of his statements illustrated his nonimmigration perspective. For example, he posited that ‘Immigrants are a particularly difficult population group to interview, something that is largely explained by their problematisation: their socio-economic position, their cultural difference, their racial visibility, and their legal position as denizens’ (Perez, 2006, paragraph 16). Unlike Perez, I found recruiting and studying immigrants quite easy and never encountered a suspicious or reluctant response. Conceivably, my own immigration status evident by my foreign accent bridged over the immigrant–nonimmigrant cleavage and contributed to this difference of our experiences in studying immigrants.

However, reflecting on the study of participants, with whom I shared the migration experience, revealed other issues. For example, my hesitation to disclose personal information relative to my own immigration experience became clear in the reflective process. My reaction may have two sources: first, my training as a therapist taught me to minimize ‘bringing my agenda’ and maximize the space for interviewees to tell their story, and second, my wish to distance myself from the challenges of the immigration experience and maintain my self-image as a ‘successful migrant’. I realized that part of avoiding of sharing my experiences served my own need for self-protection rather than the needs or wishes of the interviewees who often wanted to know more about me to feel confident that I understood their journey, feelings, thoughts, and reactions. Consequently, I found myself constantly struggling with the questions of how much to disclose, in which manner, when, and to whom. I gradually became more sensitive and responsive to requests for sharing aspects of my immigration experience and increasingly used it, still careful not to become imposing or intrusive, to prompt interviewees to address certain aspects of theirs. This often yielded disclosure of more personal and ‘deep’ stories than the more ‘professional’ distanced approach did.

A similar experience was echoed by Valentine (2007) who studied how bereaved individuals of different ages who had lost a significant other made sense of their experience. In her discussion, she articulated the struggle to maintain an ‘empathic distance’ as a vehicle to establish rapport, yet, as much as possible, not disclose personal material to avoid getting involved to a degree that may compromise her researcher perspective. Because of the collaborative nature of the research process and an ethical consideration of ‘owing it to the person who just shared with me his painful personal experience’ (Valentine, 2007, p. 171), she felt compelled to give honest and open answers to respondent’s questions regarding her motivation for conducting her study.

Here and there, now and then: reflexivity in studying while becoming

I have completed collecting data and was in the process of analyzing my interviews with couples who remarried to create stepfamilies, that is, families that included at least one child from a previous marriage (Berger, 1998) when I moved into my own stepfamily. While it occurred after the phases of recruiting participants, interviewing, and transcribing, the process of becoming a remarried wife and stepmother, that is, moving from the position of 'outsider' to the position of an 'insider' forced me to reexamine some biases and commonly accepted generalization that colored my study in light of my new experiences. For example, one disagreement I found between the literature and the reports of participants related to stepparent–stepchild relationship. While discussion of tension and competition in this relationship is abundant in the literature, a significant number of participants in my study described conflict-free, amicable relationships. When I was on the 'outside', this discrepancy puzzled me and I was struggling with possible explanations: Are respondents denying this aspect of their new family to support their decision to remarry? Are they misinforming me to maintain a 'picture perfect'? Is a 'Pollyanna' approach typical of nonclinical stepfamilies, and if so, what function does it serve in their life? As I was becoming a stepmother and was treated very amicably and cordially by my stepson, whom I soon learned to like and appreciate, I started to question the applicability of generalizations based mostly on clinical populations and problem-focused content, which characterize much of the available stepfamilies' knowledge to all stepfamilies and recognize the need for a more differential and nuanced approach to step-parenting issues in diverse types of stepfamilies.

As I was going simultaneously through the processes of analyzing the data and settling into the role of a stepfamily member, my insights and reflections of what I understood from the interviews was gradually changing. Horsburgh (2003) indicates that findings of research represent the interpretation by the researcher of constructs developed and conveyed by participants. As I was moving from being a divorced single mother to becoming a remarried stepmother, my way of understanding marriage and parenting changed to expand my perspectives and include new dimensions of these roles and relationships, such as the stepparent being potentially the person to whom a stepchild turns for help at times of tension because their relationship is free of past burdens, whereas the literature emphasized negative aspects of this relationship.

These changes affected my construction and theoretical conceptualization of the narratives told to me by the study participants. Consequently, I found myself revisiting interviews that I analyzed in my pre-stepfamily era, looking at them through my newly acquired 'stepfamily lens' and finding nuances to which I was blind before. While it is common in qualitative research to revisit previously analyzed interviews to seek for themes that emerged in the analysis of later interviews (Padgett, 2008), my new insights were clearly tied to my changing position vis-à-vis step-relationship. I was looking at what interviewees said with new eyes. Moving into a 'step' position forced me to become familiar with my biases and air negative stereotypes and myths reflected in folklore (e.g. Cinderella, Snow-White and the Brady Bunch) as well as in professional and public discourse (e.g. using concepts such as 'broken homes'). That

researcher's changed position may change the way of looking at the content became increasingly clear. Questions regarding the implications of the timing of these changes remain to be examined.

Strangers in a strange land: reflexivity in studying the unfamiliar

Reflexivity was a critical part of establishing rigor in the study of the experience of previously abused divorcees with law guardians of their children (Berger and Rosenberg, 2008). A law guardian (called in some states *guardians ad litem*) is a legal representative, who may or may not be an attorney, appointed by the court in custody cases to advocate for the wishes of children and protect their interests when their parents divorce. Studying this population, previously unfamiliar to us, made us realize how acknowledging our own identity and experience could both help and hinder interpretation of the narrative data (Reich, 2003).

Studying the unfamiliar offers several advantages. Because the researcher is 'ignorant' and the respondent is in the expert position, it is an empowering experience (Berger and Malkinson, 2000). This is of particular importance in the study of marginalized or otherwise disadvantaged population group. For example, in the aforementioned study of abused mothers, because of having a history of being in abusive relationships, participants in the aforementioned study by Berger and Rosenberg (2008) were hypervigilant to hierarchical authority-based systems (such as researcher-respondent) and reported feeling respected, empowered, and validated by being asked about their perception of the professional on whom they depend to protect their children's interests. Furthermore, a researcher unfamiliar with the specific experience under study may approach it from a fresh and different viewpoint posing new questions that may lead to innovative directions.

However, studying areas in which the researcher lacks immediate points of identification or direct experience also present challenges (Fawcett and Hearn, 2004). Some (e.g. Fontes, 1998) argued that a researcher cannot fully comprehend what it is like to be in certain situations, which she or he had not personally experienced. For example, 'researchers in family violence are more powerful than the participants by virtue of living their own lives in safety (assuming the researchers are not themselves in a violent relationship)' (Fontes, 1998: 55).

One trap in studying the unfamiliar is the challenge of conceptualizing a research question that is relevant to participants' experience. A related trap may be the absence of language sensitivity; for example, a nonadoption-aware researcher who studies the experience of adoptive parents may not be aware of the importance of asking at an early stage whether interviewees prefer the concept 'biological mother', 'birthmother', 'woman who gave birth to my child', or other concepts. Similarly, because of lack of awareness of negative associations with the concept 'stepfamilies', a researcher who studies them may fail to ask participants offer the concept they prefer for 'families like yours'.

Rosenberg's and my interest in the experience of abused divorcees with law guardians of their children was ignited by the reported experience of a client. None of us had previous acquaintance with the guardianship system. While conducting a study as outsiders

prevented role confusion and partiality of view (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000; Padgett, 2008), it also deprived us of the benefits that come with familiarity. Developing good questions was challenging and required special efforts to educate ourselves regarding pertinent issues and nomenclature. Recruitment of participants was laborious and involved intensive negotiations to gain the trust and cooperation of formal gatekeepers, such as women advocates who in their noble efforts to protect the women, were reluctant to enable us access to potential participants among the women they served.

Studying the unfamiliar may also be a barrier to identifying disguised and subtle expressions of themes. Each subculture develops its own language and associations. A stranger to the culture may miss clues that are clear to an 'insider'. For example, when we used the strategy of rater triangulation to enhance the credibility of coding, a rater who had been previously abused and who had a direct personal experience with the law guardian system was able to point to themes that were implied or 'masked' and which we failed to identify, and offered insights informed by her experience. Thus, she was able to identify in the interaction of women with the law guardians patterns of behavior that replicated their relations with the abusive husbands or intimate partner.

Furthermore, studying human phenomenon with which the researcher does not have personal or secondary experience may shape the horizon, that is, 'cultural, historic, and temporal understandings of the world' (Smith, 1999: 359). For example, not having experienced the feeling of being trapped, which is typical to victims of abuse, we may have viewed participants' stories through judging lenses, such as asking ourselves why they endured and did not leave, which may influence the conceptualization of the research question and eventually the interpretation of participants' experiences (Smith, 1999).

The importance of reflexivity in studying 'others' is paramount (Fawcett and Hearn, 2004). As Mauther and Doucet (2003) stated, 'Situating ourselves socially and emotionally in relation to respondents is an important element of reflexivity' (p. 419). Furthermore, concerns have been expressed whether a researcher who have not shared participants' experience can truly understand and convey it even when reflexivity is used as a vehicle for making the research process visible (Pillow, 2003). Thus, in trying to understand the women's experience in coping with personal and institutional abuse, our feminist theoretical framework, that is, the belief in the importance of women's perspective, and the importance we place on emotionality because of our professional background as therapists, needed to be constantly reviewed by conversation with each other and with colleagues to ascertain that we hear and convey what the women told us rather than what we think and believe.

I brought to our research an additional conflict that required on-going reflection. While cognitively I am well aware of the effects of being 'frozen to immobility' associated with the experience of abuse, there is that voice in me which refuses to accept, and is critical of abused women's 'submissive' position. In addition to the aforementioned potentially judgmental stance, I realized that I tend to overempathize to compensate for the judgment on the other. Thus, I had to make myself deliberately aware of the possibility that these conflicting reactions may tint the way in which I hear, ignore, and overemphasize certain aspects and disregard other aspects of women's narratives. Failing to consider this conflict may hinder my ability to be true to the voice of the interviewees.

This struggle relative to reflexivity is helpful in enhancing one's ability to analyze data in a rigorous way in the absence of familiarity with the phenomenon under study and was discussed by a Christian researcher who served on a team that analyzed narratives about the experience of being Jewish (Lietz et al., 2006). Asking questions about how her sociocultural, specifically her spiritual, position may interfere with her ability to understand someone with a different religious identity, that is, her ability as a Christian to understand Jews, sensitized the researcher to threats to trustworthiness, heightened her awareness of potential biases in data analysis, and compelled her to be more diligent in the data analysis process. Similarly, in analyzing the interviews with the formerly abused mothers, I compelled myself to diligent content analysis and made a deliberate effort to put myself in the role of a learner from my teachers, the participants, following the principle of feminist research to develop reciprocity with participants for the goal of equalizing the research relationship and conducting research 'with' rather than 'on' (Pillow, 2003).

Furthermore, we used triangulation by comparing analysis of same content by two researchers. To secure that the data analysis was a trustworthy representation of the themes in the narratives rather than reflection of my biases, the co-researcher was constantly consulted to consider the accuracy of the analysis.

Conclusions

This article focused on one aspect of understanding reflexivity in a context, that is, how researcher's position in relation to the population group and issues under study may impact the research process and its analytic stance. It discussed and illustrated how the benefits, challenges, and strategies to address them vary according to whether the researcher is a part of and shares the experience of the participants. Thus, this article adds a unique specific contribution to the growing recognition in the field of qualitative research of the potential effects that the researcher's philosophy, beliefs, feelings, and personal experience have on the research process and outcomes (Chesney, 2000).

Because 'no research is free of the biases, assumptions, and personality of the researcher and we cannot separate self from those activities in which we are intimately involved' (Sword, 1999: 277), strategies for attending to the effects of the researcher's characteristics have been developed. Reflexivity, the 'active acknowledgement by the researcher that her/his own actions and decisions will inevitably impact upon the meaning and context of the experience under investigation' (Horsburgh, 2003: 309), is a prime measure used in qualitative research to secure credibility, trustworthiness, and nonexploitative research by self-scrutinization of the lens through which the researcher views the phenomenon studied (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000; Scott, 1997).

In spite of extensive discussions in the literature relative to the importance of reflexivity, its multidimensional nature, measures to achieve it and its effects on research outcomes, the researcher's position vis-à-vis the researched as it relates to reflexivity have sparsely been addressed. The degree of researcher's personal familiarity with the experience of participants potentially impacts all phases of the research process, including recruitment of participants, collecting data via interviews and/or observations, analyzing and making meaning of the data, and drawing conclusions.

Reflexivity when sharing participants' experience, as in the aforementioned immigrant women study, helps address the double sword inherent in the situation. On one hand, such familiarity may enable better in-depth understanding of participants' perception and interpretation of their lived experience in a way that is impossible in the absence of having been through it. However, at the same time, the researcher must remain constantly alert to avoid projecting own experience and using it as the lens to view and understand participants' experience. Knowledge of potential sensitive issues also enables enhancing the collaborative nature of knowledge produced by 'leveling the ground' between the researcher and the participants. To benefit from the advantages while addressing the challenges, it has been suggested that 'asking questions, engaging in reflection on both differences and commonalities [between researcher and researched], will sensitize the researcher to ways in which varying perspectives can both support and potentially hinder this process' (Lietz et al., 2006: 448).

Three practical measures for maintaining the necessary balance between researcher's own experience and that of the participants include the use of a log, repeated review, and seeking peer consultation. Especially useful is a three-part log of the encounters, where researcher documents what was said by participant, what it may mean (i.e. interpretation of the verbatim), and what he or she felt and thought about it (i.e. which bottom it pushed for self, how it relates to own experience). It is also helpful to get back to review the same interview a couple of weeks after the original analysis. Such time lapse offers an opportunity to view the same material through 'new lens' and identify where one's own experience interfered with accurately understanding interviewee's report. In peer consultation, colleagues are helpful in offering feedback to the reported interview and its analysis by pointing to possible projections and ignoring of content by the researcher.

Reflexivity under the conditions of changed positions from 'outsider' to 'insider' as has happened in the reported stepfamilies research offers an opportunity to gain more understanding of the effects of position on the process and product of the study because the way in which one conducts 'two studies in one' and a comparison between data and analysis in the 'outsider's' phase with those reached during the 'insider's' phase may illuminate some of the effects of one's position vis-à-vis the phenomenon under study. Furthermore, such a systematic comparison helps sensitize the researcher to questions, topics, and language, which require sensitivity on the part of the researcher. An Israeli saying is that 'things that you see from here, you can't see from there'. Reflecting on those differences between what is seen from 'there' versus what is seen from 'here' may help us identify elements in research that are changed by the changing researcher position. A practical strategy for conducting this comparison is creating a matrix in which the pre- and postanalysis are compared for each section of the transcript to identify discrepancies, changes, and omissions on which it is useful to reflect because they may point to where researcher's evolving experience has 'colored' the research.

Given that representation, that is, the ability to capture the essence of the *other* and accurately convey their experience, has become a criterion for evaluating the quality and validity of qualitative research (Pillow, 2003), reflexivity in the absence of researcher's personal experience must focus on the researcher avoiding a patronizing stance and maximizing the opportunity for participants to impact the process and outcome of research. This may potentially help identify and control the effects of stereotyping and

stigmatizing perceptions such as the critical stand of ‘why do they stay with the abuser’ attitude in the mothers’ experiences with their children’s law guardians study. A main strategy for monitoring such an impact of researcher’s ignorance is embracing humbly the standpoint of the uninformed and actively seeking guidance and feedback from participants and from peers who are familiar with the study topic and population (‘tell me what I may be missing’).

It is important to remember that the researcher’s position may be fluid rather than static, and it inevitably affects the *emic–etic* balance in the research project (Eppley, 2006), that is, capturing the viewpoint of the person who actually lived the experience (*emic*) and understanding from the perspective of an ‘objective’ outsider (*etic*; Padgett, 2008). Therefore, researchers must continually ask themselves where they are at any given moment in relation to what they study and what are the potential ramifications of this position on their research. Measures that can be helpful in gaining and maintaining such continuous awareness are the strategies described in the introduction for securing reflexivity in general, with the added refinement of constantly updating one’s own position relative to the study and repeatedly asking self and discussing with others (co-researchers, peers, colleagues) about the *current* position and how it may affect the research.

While this article opened the conversation about researcher’s position and reflexivity, a lot remains to be examined in future research. The next step should be exploring the interactive effects of researcher position and sociocultural context on reflexivity. The importance of contextualizing qualitative research to evaluate its trustworthiness and plausibility has earned growing recognition in the last decade (e.g. Horsburgh, 2003). Reflexivity is no exception. It is conceivable that the same researcher position may have different meanings and effects on the research process and outcomes in different contexts. Exploring how researchers in different position within diverse contexts collect and interpret data has the potential of further illuminating the various aspects and effects of reflexivity and helping deepen our understanding of the multidimensionality of reflexivity. An additional question is whether different aspects of researcher’s positionality have differential effects on reflexivity and how the impact of such aspects depends on the topic under study. For example, does researcher’s gender affect reflexivity more when one studies gender-related issues? These and similar questions require further delving into for understanding the complex and nuanced facets of reflexivity in qualitative research.

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