

Hi everyone! Dr. Pope here. Thanks for joining me to watch this screencast on subjectivity. By the end of the screencast you should be able to:

- Define subjectivity
- Understand the relevance of subjectivity in qualitative research
- Identify practical methods to practice reflexivity and engage subjectivity
- Begin practicing reflexivity to become aware of your own subjectivity

First, let's do a little interpretive exercise. What do you see in the following images?

Do you see a man's face or the word "liar"?

Do you see a donkey or a seal?

Do you see a woman looking into a mirror or a giant skull?

Do you see a woman reading or the profile of a man's face?

Is this cat walking up or down the stairs?

These images, more commonly known as illusion images, distort the perception of the viewer. But, my questions to you are: Does what you see first matter? After being introduced to the different interpretations of these images, were you able to see the other viewpoint?

What we see and understand in the world is often influenced by our initial interpretations or experiences within different contexts. Depending on our perspective, we may see something differently from someone else and both what we see as true and our inherent biases will be informed by our interpretations. If you are flexible and open after receiving new information your viewpoint can shift and you can begin to see a different perspective. How we see an image, hear a story, or learn new information can change our opinion, thoughts, and feelings about the world around us.

But, what does all this have to do with research?

Researcher as Instrument

In qualitative research specifically the researcher is instrument. The researcher's worldview and interpretive lens impacts the design of their study, data collection, data analysis and writing a final report. The lens of the researcher is influenced by their inner, subjective world. This subjectivity influences how we understand the outer world while creating questions in response to our experiences. Those questions in turn impact how we make meaning from our experiences and how we think about ourselves, others, and history (Dirkx & Mezirow, 2006). John Dirkx (2006) wrote that in order to understand our perceptions, reflections on the "intellectual, emotional, moral, and spiritual dimensions of our being in the world" must be developed (p. 126). These perceptions are an individual's subjectivity.

While recognizing subjectivity is primarily done in qualitative research, a researcher's subjectivity impacts a researcher's choice of topic, choice of research approach, and choice of research design whether their study is qualitative or quantitative. In this screencast, we'll talk about how subjectivity is defined in research and why qualitative researchers place importance on acknowledging it in the research process.

Subjectivity

“Subjectivity refers to an individual's feelings, opinions, or preferences” that comprise a person's identity (Siegesmund, 2008, p. 2). Acknowledging subjectivity is becoming aware of biases, beliefs, emotions, and opinions that influence an individual's interactions with the world.

At times, the presence of subjectivity in research is seen as a problem for achieving objectivity in research. For some researchers, whether quantitative or qualitative, their goal is to remove subjectivity as it is seen to color the researcher's view and analysis of that which is being researched. However, I argue this cannot be fully achieved as our subjectivity influences how we interact with, and study, the world around us at all times.

Specifically in qualitative research the researcher should not attempt to ignore their subjectivity, but instead to reflect on and learn how their subjectivity “filter[s], skew[s], shape[s], block[s], transform[s], construe[s], and misconstrue[s] what transpires from the outset of a research project to its culmination in a written statement” (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17).

Peshkin (1988) explained that one's subjectivity is like a cloak that surrounds and consumes the researcher's awareness. This cloak cannot be removed, existing in both research and non-research realms of our lives (p. 17). It is an always present filter, shaping how we behave and what we do wherever we go, no less in research than in any other area of life (Peshkin, 1994, p. 47).

Peshkin (1988) was one of the first researchers to champion subjectivity in qualitative research as having a positive role. For him and many others to follow, when subjectivity is systematically examined and openly acknowledged throughout the research process quality and rigor are enhanced in the research study. Subjectivity is powerful and can influence and shape each aspect of the research process. As Roulston (2010) explained, “in contemporary qualitative research practice, investigation and acknowledgement of one's subjective positions in relation to one's research topic and research participants is routinely seen to be an important aspect of one's apprenticeship as a reflexive researcher, and the absence of subjectivity statements in research reports can be a cause for suspicion on the part of the readers” (p. 119).

What this means is that oftentimes a vital aspect of social science research is that researchers acknowledge and account for their subjectivity. Researchers must attempt to understand how they are influenced by their own beliefs and opinions about a subject. It is through this acknowledgement that blinders can be removed from the research process and one's subjectivity is less likely to drive the research process while the researcher is unaware of this happening.

Reflexivity

To do acknowledge and interrogate subjectivity, researchers engage in reflexivity. Reflexivity “can be broadly described as qualitative researcher’s engagement of continuous examination and explanation of how they have influenced a research project” (Dowling, 2008, p. 2).

Finlay and Gough described reflexivity as involving “thoughtful, self-aware analysis of the intersubjective dynamics between researcher and the researched. Reflexivity requires critical self-reflection of the ways in which researchers’ social background, assumptions, positioning and behavior impact the research process” (2003, p. ix).

The extent of reflexive practice in a study is often determined by the methodological and epistemological approaches a researcher takes in their research

But, Why? How?

So, quality and rigor of a study can be enhanced through acknowledgement of subjectivity because of the influence a researcher’s subjectivity has on their research interests, questions, design of the study, choice of collection methods, analysis and interpretation of data, and the way they represent this in a final report. By reflecting on subjectivity, researchers can at least represent their subjectivity to their readers or at best “be enabled to write unshackled from orientations that they did not realize were intervening in their research process” (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17).

Now, in looking at qualitative research specifically, if engaging with subjectivity is so important, what methods should researchers use to develop awareness of their own subjectivity? Roulston (2010) suggests several strategies to account for and address subjectivity in research. These include researcher journals, interviews with the researchers themselves, analyzing the interviewer’s interactions in research interviews, and writing a subjectivity statement. Let’s look at subjectivity statement, as this is a very common method for novice researchers to engage with their subjectivity.

A subjectivity statement is “a summary of who researchers are in relation to what and whom they are studying (Preissle, 2008, p. 2). Subjectivity statements change over time and depend on the research environment in which different subjective lenses may be raised (Preissle, 2008; Roulston, 2010). As such, they should be updated over time depending on the changing research circumstances a researcher finds themselves in. Researchers should consider them a living document. While similar to the concept of an autobiography, a subjectivity statement is not the same as an autobiography. Subjectivity statements emphasize the researcher in relationship to others, especially the research participants, specifically within the context in which the research occurs (Preissle, 2008). So, a subjectivity statement is who the researcher is as a researcher and how this impacts their approach to and process of research.

Subjectivity statements include discussions of “personal histories, cultural worldviews, and professional experiences” (Preissle, 2008, p. 845) in relationship to a research project. Preissle (2008) described the purpose of subjectivity statements as “(1) helping researchers identify how

their personal features, experiences, beliefs, feelings, cultural standpoints, and professional predispositions may affect their research and (2) conveying this material to other scholars for their consideration of the study's credibility, authenticity, and overall quality or validity. Researcher subjectivities may bias, unbalance, and limit endeavors, but they may also motivate and illuminate inquiry” (p. 845).

What Do You Think?

So, what do you think? Do you think you will work with and engage subjectivity in your research process? If you decide to write out a subjectivity statement for a research project, think about what life experiences, values, and beliefs inform your research interests and your approach to research. How do you think your subjectivity comes to light in your own research and how can you become aware of it so it does not unknowingly control your research process?

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