Up close and personal: The role of the bracketing interview in interpretative phenomenological analysis and its impact on the researcher.

By Lois de Cruz
ABSTRACT

In this paper I want to explore some of the challenges facing a qualitative researcher on a personal and sensitive topic such as miscarriage. These can be methodological, ethical and emotional. The strength of phenomenological methodology is in the relationship between the researcher and the phenomenon, the demand for rigorous examination of our own prejudices and beliefs and transparent reflexive practices. Before we can begin to describe and interpret participants’ experience for research purposes it is important to bring into awareness our own assumptions and prejudices about the phenomenon being studied.

Therefore, I will examine the role of the “bracketing interview” in interpretative phenomenological analysis and discuss how it can impact on the researcher at both an intellectual and personal level. This process of self-discovery can be a painful and lonely journey at times but in my experience it is also one of liberation and transformation.
My research topic:

Women’s perception of their experience of miscarriage decades after the event.
Challenges facing a qualitative researcher beginning research on a sensitive and personal topic:

- Ethical
- Methodological
- Personal
Why Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis? (IPA)

• It attempts to explore personal experience
• It is concerned with an individual’s personal perception of an event
• The researcher is concerned with trying to understand how participants make sense of their own experiences but acknowledges that access is always dependent on the researcher’s own interpretation of another’s personal world.

(Smith et al, 2009)
Challenges for researcher using IPA

The researcher appears to take up contradictory stances:

• There is a need to bracket pre-understandings but at the same time use them as a source of insight
• She is distanced and detached but at the same time open and fully involved

(Finlay, 2008)
Why a bracketing interview?

1. To explore my own response to miscarriage 17 years after the event
2. To bring into awareness my subjectivity, assumptions and vested interests in undertaking this research and to consider how these may impact on my interviews with participants
3. To enable me to perform a thematic analysis on the transcript which might form a further data set in the research
4. To make transparent my reflexive practice in the hope I am lending rigour and credibility to the research
What did I discover?

- Tension between the personal and professional in this research – this is what makes it exciting and engaging!
- Personal impact (The story of my baby’s blanket)
- Clearer insight into my motivations for this research and why it is important
The story of my baby’s blanket

- During the interview I talked about buying a blanket for my baby which was the only memento I had after the miscarriage.
- After the bracketing interview I came home and unwrapped the blanket for the first time in 17 years.
- I discovered in the packet there were two blankets. I put one back in the cupboard and that symbolised for me my secret child and the personal aspects of my research.
- The second blanket I put over my computer chair. It has come to represent my shadow child who grows along side me and would be 17 years old now. It is also symbolic of the professional side of my research which is in the public domain.
- This demonstrates the very profound and personal impact that this bracketing interview has had on me both as a researcher and as a women who has experienced miscarriage.
Conclusions

• I cannot separate myself from the research. I can only hope to see with fresh eyes.

• I feel closer to the research and my participants

• The experience of undertaking a bracketing interview has been transformative
The next step

To go forward approaching my research with “empathic openness,” keeping in mind that in phenomenological research,

“Past knowledge is both restricted and used to interrogate the meanings that come to be, in order for the researcher to be more fully open to the research encounter.”

(Finlay, 2008)
References

Finlay, L. (2008). A dance between the reduction and reflexivity: Explicating the “phenomenological psychological attitude”

*Journal of phenomenological psychology* 39  1-32


My contact details:

l.m.de.cruz@ilcs.keele.ac.uk