A nurse researcher's guide to reflexive interviewing.

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A nurse researcher’s guide to reflexive interview method

Introduction

Reflexive interviews are data collection tools that increase understanding of the researcher's position and influence. Personal experiences and beliefs have the power to influence research studies by introducing bias throughout the research process - from choice of topic to the interpretation of analysis. In every academic undertaking, researchers ought to reduce bias, and a reflexive interview is one tool to do so. Because reflexivity is a vast term, and due to its elusive presence in the literature, nurse researchers may not be aware of this useful method.

The researcher suggests a reason there is no single source that describes how to conduct a reflexive interview is that reflexive interviews are best explained through example. Therefore, the following is a reflexive interview from which the researcher hopes others will find understanding on the method of reflexive interviews. Nurse researchers are invited to follow a similar method when conducting reflexive interviews.

In this paper, a review of the literature on reflexivity is followed by a detailing of the reflexive interview method in which the researcher is the respondent. Methodological fragments are gathered from numerous published resources that had varying definitions of reflexivity in order to achieve one holistic picture of a reflexive interview. Consistent with the reflexive interview, a reflexive form of analysis leads to the explication of the researcher’s biases. Following analysis, reflexive interviews are recommended to nurse researchers.

Reflexivity in the Literature

In nursing literature, a definition of reflexivity is difficult to find, and where it does appear, it is poorly defined (Carolan, 2003; Hugill 2012). Seminal works in the field of reflexivity are over a decade old, with recent authors attempting to increase methodological rigour in the form of platitudinous claims to reflexive methods without explanation or definition (Hawamdeh & Raigangar, 2014; Jefford & Sundin, 2013). The variations of reflexivity boast a myriad of benefits to research: reflexivity claims to demonstrate credibility; disclose the 'position of', or 'situate' the researcher; produce a decision trail of methodological choices; expose bias; 'bracket' or 'suspend' said bias; and add rigour. Nevertheless, there is a general consensus that reflexivity can be described both as 'methodological self-consciousness' (Seale, 1999), and 'explicit self-aware meta-analysis' (Finlay, 2002a). Reflexivity presents an opportunity for researchers to speak of their own experiences, thus improving transparency to the research process (McDermid et al., 2014). This paper presents a concrete example of a reflexive method, providing nurse researchers with adequate information to follow a similar method.

'Confessional' or 'reflexive' accounts began influencing qualitative research in the 1970's following a long established trend of researchers recording observations for scientific credibility (Bell & Newby, 1977). Autoethnography followed confessional reflexivity, described by Ecker (2016) as marrying autobiography and narrative inquiry via research diaries. Autoethnography allows a researcher to, in a sense, 'represent oneself to oneself' (Dowling,

2006). This type of reflexivity is present throughout the entire research process, and is inclusive of wider settings and cultures.

Reflexivity has become a defining practice of qualitative research (Banister, 2011) because it has become clear that researchers unintentionally influence the direction of their studies (Hall & Callery, 2001), with some claiming a researcher's experiences are inseparable from the way he or she conducts research (Hugill, 2012). A researcher's influence may include the subject of the study chosen, the particular focus taken on the subject, and how the analysis is interpreted (Colbourne & Sque, 2004). Particularly in qualitative studies, the researcher is not an inanimate object such as an online survey. Rather, the researcher is a living being, existing in a social context, positioned in a certain way that is worth disclosing to the reader

Reflexivity can be seen as a measure of how much a researcher admits influence over a study (Cassidy, 2013). By implementing reflexive practice, the academic community can better inspect the integrity of the decisions made (Hall & Callery, 2001) due to the transparent documentation of research decisions and ability to 'situate' the researcher (Finlay, 2002a; Finlay, 2002b; Louis & Barton, 2002). Reflexivity therefore presents an opportunity for transparency and authenticity, adding rigour.

Researchers cannot reduce biases about which they are unaware. Colbourne and Sque (2004) refer to a study in which their past work as clinical nurses made them overly critical as researchers. They reported being more

evaluative and condemning about their participant's healthcare experiences than the participants were themselves. The authors continue that once they adopted reflexivity into the same study, they realised the bias and, simply, 'became more aware'. This example highlights how researchers used reflexivity to 'suspend' or 'bracket' the bias (Creswell & Miller, 2000), at least in the context of the research study.

The previous paragraphs demonstrate that reflexivity is a broad term with many definitions. Finlay's (2002a) five variants of reflexivity are recognised as the definitive work in the field. According to Finlay, reflexivity as 'introspection' focuses on the researcher's experiences, encouraging those experiences to act as the beginning of a research process, as primary evidence (Creswell, 2012). In this paper, 'introspection' is used in the form of a reflexive interview, which allows biases to be exposed at the beginning of the study. Finlay's second variant, 'intersubjective reflection', allows the researcher to use past experiences to gather more information during interviews (Hollway & Jefferson 2000). The researcher may find a bridge of similarity with the respondent, increasing rapport and giving added opportunity to probe. Reflexivity as 'mutual collaboration' utilises respondents as co-researchers. Multiple voices, perhaps with differing views, are all given the opportunity for reflexive dialogue. Reflexivity as 'social critique' seeks to minimise the researcher's authority over the respondent. For example, a researcher may use self-deprecating humour during an interview in an attempt to lessen the power imbalance that exists with the respondent. Finally, reflexivity as 'discursive deconstruction' deals with textual meaning, or the ambiguity within

language that may produce multiple meanings rather than one. Even Finlay's five variants of reflexivity highlight the wide range of possibilities available to researchers.

While several other types of reflexivity exist in the literature (see Marcus, 1998; Willig, 2013) for additional reading on reflexivity), Dowling's (2006) four types of reflexivity are noteworthy in the literature, demonstrating that even Finlay's definitions are not an exhaustive list. The first type of reflexivity according to Dowling is aimed at sustaining objectivity through the use of 'bracketing', and is associated with the positivist paradigm. Dowling uses diaries as an example of data collection for this type of reflexivity. Another type is epistemological reflexivity, which explores for researcher's assumptions, and determines their implications on the research. Epistemological reflexivity asks the question, how does the chosen research question limit what can be known? And, could it have been explored differently? The third type is 'politics of location', wherein the researcher is implored to move beyond the navel-gazing act of writing in a research diary – and move toward a critical standpoint. Wider contexts are examined and discussed as potential threats to introduce bias. A strength of this type of reflexivity is that social constructions are identified for the purpose of reducing limitations. Finally, 'positioning', is a feminist theory associated with reflexivity in which interviews are the most common form of data collection. Typically interviews exist within a power dynamic in which the respondent feels, whether intentioned by the interviewer or not, similarly to being across from a therapist. Alternatively, feminist interviews seek non-hierarchical partnerships.

Unfortunately, objectivity can be perceived in this type of reflexivity as detachment or inauthenticity. Colbourne and Sque (2004) therefore suggest that if researchers cannot mask themselves, they should be utilised to benefit the research process. Therefore a weakness of the feminist positioning of reflexivity is that many researchers would feel uncomfortable being open with participants, just as participants may not feel comfortable being open during interviews.

Considering the array of types of reflexivity, researchers may view reflexivity as a continuum from which to select a type that will benefit their research. Researchers may position themselves, offer decision trails, disclose statements of assumptions and past experiences, but this is ultimately reduced to navel-gazing (Seale, 1999) unless the reflexive method provides no more information than is necessary for the purpose of adding rigour and reducing bias. To add clarity for the reader, researchers are implored to identify and discuss which type of reflexivity they use.

Reflexive Interviews

Reflexive interviews are the most commonly used reflexive tool (Cho & Trent, 2006; Creswell & Miller, 2000). Other techniques include reflexive field notes (Hollway, 2016), reflexive diaries (Clancy 2013), reflexive member checking (Cho & Trent, 2006), and reflexive video focus groups (Liu, Gerdtz, & Manias, 2016). Reflexive interviews are also called ‘bracketing interviews’ (Crotty, 1996), implying that they are conducted to allow the researcher to bracket assumptions realised during the interview. This language was not used in this

paper due to the wide variability of definitions of reflexivity, which could be understood by the term ‘bracketing interview’ to be a method only able to bracket. A reflexive interview is indeed able to bracket, but it is also adaptable for use in any of the multiple types of reflexivity. Thus the term ‘reflexive interview’ is used in this paper so not to limit the perceived abilities of the method.

To explain the nature of a reflexive interview, the researcher offers a brief comparison to something a bit more familiar. Reflexive interviews can be compared to the act of story telling. Various meanings may lie beneath what is being said and what is being heard in both reflexive interviews and storytelling. The listener/interviewer probes and reacts, waiting for a full account of the story. The words spoken in an interview are accompanied by unspoken undercurrents of biases and beliefs accumulated from life experiences. The listener/analyst also brings bias and may sway the original message intended in the interview or story. Both the words being spoken, and the meaning that lies beneath make up sources of qualitative reflexive data that add richness to a study while simultaneously exposing bias.

Reflexive interviews are described in the literature as tools of social transformation (Puigvert, 2014), describing culture and challenging people to be free of discrimination (Denzin, 2001). Reflexive interviews can explore ethical issues beyond what is required by a research institution (Robertson, 2012) and facilitate thought formation about past events (Downing, Polzer, & Levan, 2013). They are described as cinematic; reflexive interviews provide a

way of talking about the world where meaning is performed as if in a movie or play (Denzin, 2001). During analysis of such interviews, which in qualitative methods includes iterative readings of the transcripts, the interview comes to life, dramatized in each reading.

Finally, reflexive interviews are used to situate the researcher (Foley, 2002a). While conducting a study on bereavement and palliative care that was expected to induce strong emotion, Rolls and Relf (2006) undertook a series of reflexive interviews for the purpose of situating the principal researcher. The supervisory team acted as accountability when biases arose in the subsequent data collections and interpretations of the wider study (Blythe et al., 2013; Dowling, 2006). Rolls and Relf (2006) responded to a challenging subject matter by undertaking reflexive interviews early in the research process, increasing validity and exposing the emotional position of the researcher (Behar, 2014).

Justification

The reflexive interview was undertaken in a doctoral study with a two-fold justification: to reduce bias of the researcher's experiences and to pilot an interview instrument. The researcher's study abroad experiences included witnessing a peer's near death due to misdiagnosed malaria and avoiding assault by armed personnel who attacked a vehicle ahead of the one she was travelling in. Techniques for reducing bias were employed in the researcher's doctoral study (adhering to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) credibility,

transferability, dependability, and confirmability), however these techniques were thought to be insufficient due to her traumatic experiences studying abroad. Following the example of Rolls and Relf (2006), the researcher undertook a reflexive interview to uncover implicit feelings (Liamputtong, 2008) that needed to be exposed regarding nursing study abroad trips.

The questions posed in the reflexive interview were identical to the questions meant for the nursing student participants in the doctoral study. These questions had not been used previously, and thus the reflexive interview acted as a pilot to validate the questions.

Method

An experienced interviewer who was not associated with this project conducted the reflexive interview. Questions were adapted with permission from those used in a study by Citrin (2011). Citrin's study was chosen because it addressed a similar subject to nursing study abroad trips: an ethnography of Nepal and the short-term medical volunteer trips that travel there. Citrin's interview questions focused on the goals of medical trips (in pre-trip interviews) and what could be improved about the trip (in post-trip interviews).

The interview was conducted and analysed before data collection began with nursing student participants who were preparing to study abroad in the doctoral study. This was in an effort to reduce the possibility of the researcher's voice overpowering that of the participant's, and to understand her position and potential biases early in the research process (Valentine, 2007).

Post-interview discussion

In a post-interview discussion with the interviewer, the researcher (who will now be called the 'respondent') considered her feelings towards the interview experience. Throughout the interview, the respondent assessed her own interviewing skills as questions were being asked. Answering questions was an educational process made possible by observing the style of the interviewer. His use of voice inflections and pauses facilitated a positive interview environment. The interviewer also kept a facial expression that

seemed he did not quite understand, which was later discussed as a useful interviewing technique that draws more detail from the respondent. Perhaps the most important lesson learned was the speed at which the interviewer spoke. He spoke slowly and methodically, providing ample time for the respondent to gather her thoughts to answer in rich detail. The lessons learned in the reflexive interview affected subsequent interviews the respondent conducted, such as slowing her speech, making eye contact before writing notes, and keeping a guise of naivety.

The interviewer provided the researcher with comments on how to improve the instrument, including sequence and style of questions, and potential biases. The discussion provided the following preliminary analysis of the interview instrument.

Pilot

The reflexive interview was an opportunity to pilot the questions and make the necessary amendments. As part of the post-interview discussion with the interviewer, two prompts were added. The first was to introduce the subject of study abroad trips. To further probe into the respondent's level of preparedness, a second prompt was added concerning the daily expectations while studying abroad. Finally, a question beginning with 'why' was changed to 'how' as it felt as though the respondent was being challenged.

Identification of researcher's potential biases

Reflexivity allowed the researcher to see herself as an 'other' – that is, able to analyse the data as if it were obtained from another person. The researcher directed her gaze at her own words, which she had recorded and transcribed as if collected from no particular interview, making it possible to regard herself as an 'other' (Foley, 2002). This made the reflexive interview methodologically possible wherein the researcher acted as respondent, researcher, and analyst. Upon analysis, the researcher began to see how she was situated, and her feelings about the social construction towards the 'other' became more explicit.

Reflexivity requires researchers to express how their subjectivity has been called into question (Cho & Trent, 2006). Due to the researcher's perception that her study abroad trips had many shortcomings in terms of preparation, an underlying assumption arose during the reflexive interview that all study abroad trips carry numerous risks for which students are unprepared.

Analysis

The Listening Guide adapted by Mauthner and Doucet (1997) from Brown and Gilligan (1992) informed the reflexive interview analysis, along with Joplin's Experiential Education (1981), which facilitated understanding of the reflexive notes extracted through the listening guide.

The researcher sought a reflexive method of analysis to match the reflexive nature of the interview. Reflexive interviews are not typically analysed with traditional qualitative (i.e. thematic) analysis techniques; instead the aim of analysis is to find undercurrents of values or beliefs that may not be found through thematic analysis. The reflexive analysis focuses on self-awareness, where the researcher talks through how each decision is made based on values and techniques that are realised through a reflexive process (Finlay 2002b). The following is an overview of the adapted listening guide used in this study, made up of four readings:

1. The analysis begins with the first reading in which the researcher identifies the plot and associated main events.
    a. Within this first reading, the researcher also employs the element of 'reader-response' wherein she makes explicit her reactions to the text. This is done by the researcher comparing herself, or relating to the respondent (in this case, the researcher was the respondent, however the researcher ought to relate to *any* respondent during the reader-response step). The researcher should immediately document her response – emotional, intellectual, etc. - toward the transcripts while

reading. The purpose of the reader-response step is to situate the researcher socially in relation to the respondent, drawing out implicit biases.

2. This is followed by the second reading; the researcher listens for the use of “I” in the transcript. The purpose of this reading is to determine how the respondent feels and speaks about herself. This process amplifies the terms and language used by the respondent to describe herself, forcing the researcher to consider how the respondent defines herself. Tracing the “I” in the transcript leads the researcher to an accurate interpretation of the respondent.

3. In the third reading of the transcript the researcher notices what relationships are present in the transcript. Relationships are not limited to interpersonal ones, but can include workplace and wider contexts. Relationships may surface in which the respondent felt silenced or empowered. For example, the relationship of the sending Higher Education Institution (HEI) to the student being widely variable based on the expectations of the respondent, from ‘preparer, traveller’, to ‘enabler, world changer’.

4. The fourth and final reading consists of the respondent being placed within her wider social, political, cultural, and structural contexts. The researcher seeks to describe the situation in which the story in the

interview occurred. In the wider study an ‘ideological context’ is of interest, i.e. the expectations associated with study abroad trips.

As stated earlier, the researcher adapted Mauthner’s version of the listening guide with an additional step of selecting themes from within her reflexive notes taken during the four readings. It is important to state that the themes below were extracted from the listening guide’s reflexive responses taken during the four readings, not from the interview transcripts. Table 1 represents the qualitative analysis findings, with ticked boxes where appropriate indicating the represented themes across different readings. ‘Shock’ and ‘relationship to HEI’ are the only themes carried throughout all four readings.

Table 1. Voice-centred Relational Analysis

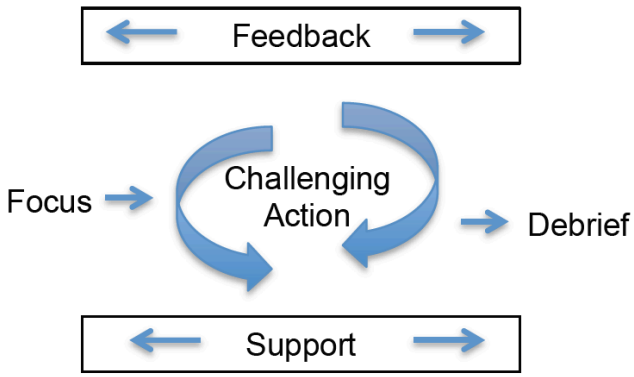
Theme	Reading 1st	2nd	3rd	4th
Altruism	x	x	x	
Expectations	x	x		x
Shock	x	x	x	x
Descriptions of the 'I'		x		
Relationship to sending HEI	x	x	x	x
Relationship to patients			x	
Relationships to fellow students			x	

Theoretical underpinnings

Joplin's Experiential Education (1981) informed the reflexive interview analysis. As the four readings of the listening guide analysis were followed, the researcher's reflexive notes were viewed through the lens of experiential education. This model was chosen based on the subject of the reflexive interview being nursing study abroad trips, which rely on education through experience. Nurse researchers can choose models and theories to interpret reflexive notes taken from the listening guide analysis in order to fit the directional needs of their studies. Doucet and Mauthner (2008) advocate a flexible approach, allowing the listening guide to be used across a wide variety of research methods, e.g. analysis of student personal reflection diaries (Petrovic et al., 2015), or to inform theoretical perspectives on feminist theory (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003).

The five-stage model of experiential education resembles a hurricane that illustrates the stages of an educational experience (see Table 2 below). The first stage of *focus* precedes the hurricane portion of the model and isolates the student's attention to concentrate on the upcoming trip. Inside the model's hurricane is *challenging action*, representing the stressors the student could experience in an unfamiliar setting. *Support* and *feedback* surround the entire model as stages that should be present throughout the educational journey. The fifth stage of *debrief* follows the hurricane and signifies the end of the student's experience. The *challenging action* stage requires a great deal of attention as the student struggles, evaluates, and embraces the new experiences around her. This is a time ripe for learning (Che, Spearman, & Manizade, 2010). While the challenging action stage requires autonomy, the *support* stage provides the confidence that help is available. This stage also encourages sharing with others about experiences and frustrations. The *feedback* stage enables forward movement in the learning process. Discussion allows students to speak with peers and supporting faculty during the *debrief* stage wherein learning is recognized, articulated, and evaluated (Joplin, 1981).

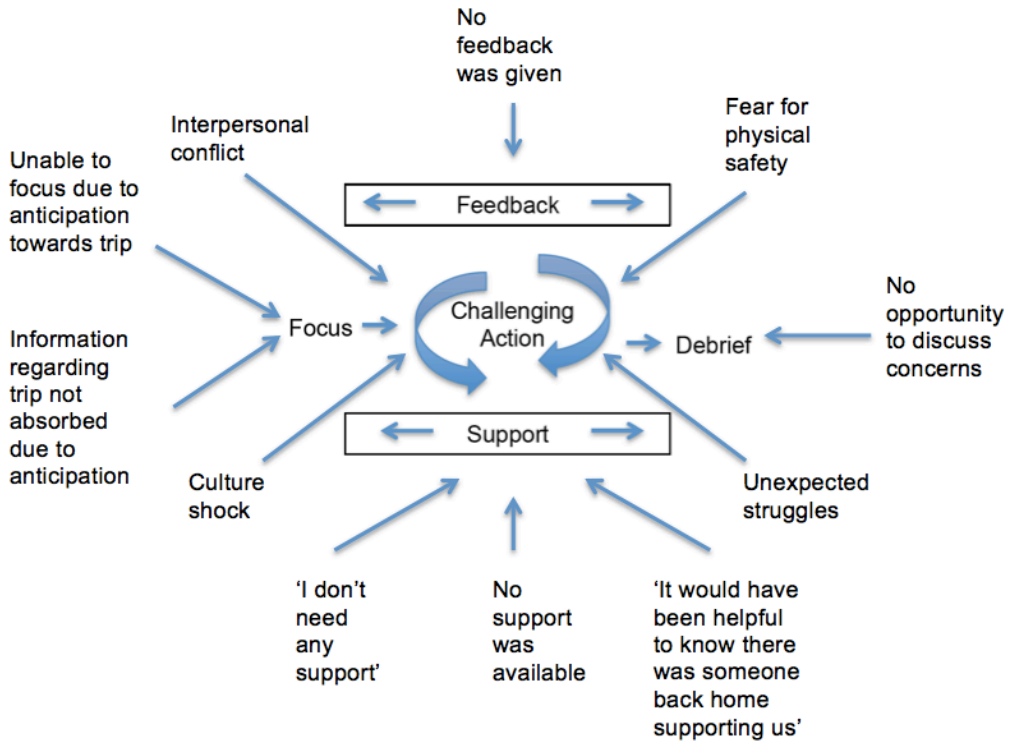
Table 2. Experiential Education



Joplin's (1981) experiential education also informed the interpretation of reflexive notes taken during the four readings of the listening guide. According to Joplin (1981), the five stages represented in the model are necessary for experiential education to be complete. However the five stages were not present within the reflexive interview (see Table 3 below). For example, *focus* was not present during the respondent's preparation phase prior to her study abroad trip. The respondent was excited for an adventure, and did not focus at this pivotal time in which she was given some, albeit scarce, information regarding her trip. *Challenging action* was especially severe for the respondent, as she stated she was in shock frequently. Joplin suggests the challenging action stage requires considerable support, however this was not the respondent's experience. The study abroad trip began with a long drive to a blistering hot clinic site – the first of many unexpected struggles encountered during the 'hurricane' stage. While the support stage encourages sharing and communication, this was not possible due to the respondent's feelings of anger towards one peer, and the remaining peers feeling excited

rather than disappointed about the impact of the trip. Only one peer had similarly critical feelings about the trip, which did not allow for a full group discussion regarding how to learn from the experiences on the trip. The respondent remembered feeling she would not need support before her trip, followed by a reversal of this view post-trip that ‘it would have been helpful to know there was someone back home supporting us’. The *feedback* stage was not discussed in the reflexive interview as the respondent did not receive any throughout the trip. A lack of feedback may have restricted her ability to learn and process her experiences studying abroad. However, the respondent’s lack of opportunity to receive feedback may have been the driving force behind the desire to tell her story, thus the decision to undertake a reflexive interview.

Table 3. Experiential Education with Findings



The reflexive interview was conducted to explore the researcher's biases toward study abroad trips, which is the subject of a wider doctoral study. The reflexive interview analysis shed light on further biases than the researcher realised: that students are unprepared to study abroad, and may feel they have positively cared for an underprivileged community even if they have not. A further bias exposed through the reflexive interview was that students might be focused on the consumerist expectations - the adventure of the trip – to the extent that they disregard the training they receive. The most prominent themes from the listening guide of 'shock' and 'relationship to sending HEI' were consistent with the post-interview discussion between the interviewer and respondent, which shed light on a bias that preparation is inadequate in nursing study abroad trips. Realising her biases that nursing students are

unprepared to study abroad, that study abroad trips may not benefit the host location, and that students merely study abroad to have an adventure enabled the researcher to take care in how she interviewed nursing students. It was only through realising these thoughts toward study abroad trips that the researcher was able to move past the subconscious drive to ask leading – and potentially cynical - questions in upcoming interviews with participants.

The reflexive interview enabled the researcher to identify previously undisclosed beliefs, which led to a conscientious decision to put them in abeyance, to disallow them from affecting the upcoming interviews with participants. The researcher bracket her assumptions, and subsequently the wider study resulted in data collected from a more neutral stance, made possible through the use of a reflexive interview. The researcher's journey through the data and ultimately to the findings becomes apparent through the use of a reflexive interview.

Conclusions and Recommendations

A reflexive interview was conducted following a nursing study abroad trip to reduce the risk of the experience biasing a doctoral study on the subject of nursing study abroad trips. The use of a reflexive interview was an appropriate methodological tool in the researcher's wider doctoral study. It exposed implicit biases and enabled the researcher to pilot an original interview instrument. This paper responds to a gap in the literature for further research on the topic of reflexive interviews, and is original in its use of

researcher-reflexivity in the field of nursing, which is currently absent from the literature.

The researcher would encourage nurse researchers to use reflexive interviews in qualitative and quantitative research. Reflexive interviews are a valuable tool to study nurse biases such as those regarding cultural competence or which biases/beliefs are present in locations associated with high nurse turnover rates. The researcher recommends the use of reflexive interviews to novice researchers who have the support and accountability of a supervisory team. Observing the interview style of a more experienced researcher may be one way of improving a novice researcher's interview skills. Use is also recommended early in the research process in studies that carry emotionally challenging subject matters, to expose bias prior to making research decisions. The recommendation for this reflexive method is justified in that it allows for introspection, reduces bias, adds rigour, and encourages social transformation.

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