EXCAVATING BLIND SPOTS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: REFLECTING ON A LECTURER'S EXPERIENTIAL PAST

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Abstract
Buoyed by reflexivity, this paper examines blind spots that lie ahead of a qualitative research journey with particular reference to the development and production of academic dissertations and theses. It is based on the author's many years of interactions with students and their works, mainly as a research supervisor and examiner in different universities in Southern Africa. The paper observes that the aspects which students and supervisors either unintendedly or strategically ignore, neglect or are unaware of, keep them from seeing the phenomenon clearly, leading to partialities and distortions in the final research product. Overall, the paper provides a potential template for use by both the novice and established researchers in overcoming the various forms of hidden obstacles to quality research.

Key words: autobiography, blind spot, lived experience, qualitative research, reflexivity

1. Introduction

The primary goal of this paper is to examine the blind spots that lie ahead of university students' qualitative research journeys as they engage in the development and production of dissertations and theses. I attempt to exhume my own 'experiential' past which has been punctuated by nearly two decades of role oscillation between mainly supervising and examining dissertations in five universities in three Southern African countries namely Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Like other scholars on this subject, I am strongly attracted to adopting the definitions of *blind and blank spots* by Wagner (1993) (see also Gough, 2002; Hitchings & Latham, 2017; Reid, 2019; Reid & Scott, 2013). *Blind spots* are the things or aspects which the method, definition or theoretical approach does not allow to be seen or said. Sometimes it can be a form of both unintended and strategic ignorance (Chambers, 2017). For example, a small number of case studies may allow one to build rich descriptions but may not allow generalisation. A blind spot is also defined as an area where a person's view is obstructed or in which a person lacks understanding or impartiality (Concise Oxford English Dictionary, 2011). *Blank spots* are the aspects or circumstances which the research does not cover. What we know enough to question but not answer are our blank spots, and what we do not know well enough to even ask about or care about are our blind spots (Wagner, 1993). Although both the blind and blank spots confront every research driver, due to their contiguities and overlaps, I have settled on *blind spots* as the weaving thread for the discussion.

The paper is buoyed by reflexivity, a methodological tool in social sciences which arose in the light of the increasing concern about power relationships in research (Davies,

2008; Day, 2012). Although reflexivity is not novel in qualitative research, its contribution to the body of knowledge has far reaching implications for the quality of teaching and learning research. Reflexivity demands a critical self-examination in order to understand the researcher-participant relationships that influence knowledge production (Finlay, 2002; King, 2004; Mann, 2016). Interaction with students provides the opportunity to investigate oneself as an active research tool (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Attia & Edge, 2017; Davies, 2008; Day, 2012; Edge, 2011). Through reflection on lived experiences researchers can improve their practice and become aware of the unfortunate practices they are part of. In this paper, students' research experiences are revealed through the eyes of the supervisor and examiner. Thus as Woolgar (1988, as cited in Davies, 2008) asserted, no process of knowing is fully reflexive until it is explicitly turned on the knower, who becomes self-conscious even on the reflexive process of knowing. Revealing the methodological hurdles through reflexive autobiography provides an opportunity to understand the limits of one's theoretical traditions and perspectives.

Although many scholarly works have been anchored on reflexive methodologies (Cloke, Cooke, Cursons, Milbourne & Widdowfield, 2000; Davies, 2008; D'Silva, et al., 2016; Edge, 2011; Hennum, 2014; Leitch & Day, 2000; Natukunda, Johnson & Dibben, 2016; Olive, 2014; Power, Jackson, Weaver, Wilkes & Carter, 2011; Russell-Mundine, 2012), little attention has been paid to academics' autobiographies as they interact with their own research students particularly in an African setting. I have purposively selected to reflect on the qualitative research approach ahead of others because while it is overwhelmingly popular among students and supervisors it is equally least understood. This is unhealthy for both scholarship and practice. Thus, there is a need for dissertation supervisors to regularly upgrade themselves so as to effectively prepare for the potential obstacles that lie ahead.

This paper is partly a response to the call for scholars to begin to research themselves and their products in order to enhance the quality of research. In this study, this was done primarily through reflecting on author's own direct observations and systematic review of both undergraduate and postgraduate dissertations and theses from 2006 to 2020. Researchers are also required to be self-reflexive in order to produce legitimate and authorized knowledge. This is particularly important in qualitative research which is regarded as "a journey that is its own destination" (Tremmel, 1993, p. 456., as cited in Leitch & Day, 2000, p. 180). The inductive nature of the process requires continuous reflection. Admittedly, reflecting on own 'ignorances' has been a real ordeal.

2. Autobiographical cast

My university service began in 2005 in Zimbabwe following a few years of industrial practice as a human resource specialist. Since then I have also worked mainly as a dissertation supervisor and external examiner in other universities in Botswana and South Africa. My involvement in doctoral thesis oral examinations (viva voce) has been particularly most revealing as it afforded me the opportunity to benchmark my approaches with international best practice. For purposes of analysis, I have purposively sampled dissertations

and theses which I have supervised and examined between 2015 and 2019 as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Dissertations supervised and examined (2015-2019).

Year	Degree Level						
	BA/BSc		Masters/M.Phil.		DPhil/PhD		
	Supervised	Examined	Supervised	Examined	Supervised	Examined	Total
2015	25	10	2	2	2	0	41
2016	30	15	4	2	3	1	55
2017	34	20	2	2	2	2	62
2018	24	10	6	4	1	0	45
2019	11	8	5	3	1	1	29
Total	**124**	**63**	**19**	**13**	**9**	**4**	**232**

Source: Author's own moderation

My research interests centre on issues in industrial sociology, human resource management and rural development. In addition to my masters and doctoral theses, I have dozens of trans-disciplinary peer-reviewed and referenced publications which have traditionally veered towards the constructivist strand. I have also chaired and facilitated at international conferences and served as a reviewer for some internationally acclaimed publishing houses.

3. Excavating the blind spots

3.1 Research topic and title

Selecting a suitable research topic and formulating an appropriate title remains critical but largely one of the most taken-for-granted components of the research process. The topic and title have also been occasionally confused with the *research area*. While a research area is a broad field of study in which the problem is located such as 'Employment,' a possible topic for such an area could be '*Reward management strategies in the mining sector'*. Research topic is the central idea to learn about or to explore (Creswell, 2014) and the decisive feature of a successful research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Unlike the topic, the scope of a *title* is more specific and often more interesting and informative. It is developed from the research problem, ethical considerations and occasionally study findings and conclusions. An appropriate title for the above topic could read: '*Employee benefit schemes and the retention of electricians in a selected diamond mining firm in the Central District of Botswana.'* I recall taking-off in one of my qualitative studies in 2014 with a *topic* reading: '*Indigenous knowledge systems and rural development in Zimbabwe*'. The subsequent *title* which was strongly influenced by the research question read: '*The marginalization of indigenous knowledge systems and rural (under)development in Zimbabwe'*. After being subjected to several backward and forth peer reviewing, it was refined into an engaging journal article and published in 2016 as: '*A moral compass that*

slipped: Indigenous knowledge systems and rural development in Zimbabwe' (http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2016.1266749).

It has increasingly become a norm among many students to start with research *titles.* This could partly be a result of their individual supervisors' preferences or persuasions. As Chambers (2017) argued, the biggest blind spot is our own mind set, biases and preferences. Such research supervisors may not be concerned about how the student would have come up with the research title. In some cases, topics and titles have been imposed onto the students. I have also interacted with faculty colleagues who have not considered such practice untoward given their role as gatekeepers to knowledge production. This results in *ethical blind spots* (Sezer, Gino & Bazerman, 2015) that normally occur when individuals behave unethically without their own awareness.

There are also university faculties or departments which have incessantly discouraged students from pursuing trans-disciplinary or 'intellectual cross border' researches (Tamboukou & Ball, 2003)—that is conducting research outside the traditional discipline or departmental boundaries. Similarly, researching the 'non-normatives' (Chambers, 2017; Hennum, 2014), such as lesbians, homosexuals, and workers living with disabilities has hardly been encouraged or promoted. As a result, most dissertations have become mere confirmations of the 'already established'.

As a way of overcoming the above blind spots, I have encouraged students to derive their titles from either the central research question or problem. The structure and content of a research *title* is the mirror image of the research problem. According to Glesne and Peshkin (1992, as cited in Creswell, 2014) a title is a major road sign in research—a tangible idea that the researcher can keep refocusing on and modifying as the project progresses. As the face of the dissertation, the *title* should clearly and precisely reflect the content, scope, research design and context of the study. All this done, one may not worry about restricting the length of a title to any prescribed word-count as the norm in some faculties or departments.

3.2 Introduction and background to the study

Across the five universities, the remit of an *introduction and (or) background* section has often varied according to individual departmental norms and standards. However, the two have also been continuously lumped depending on either the research supervisors' preferences or degrees of 'ignorance'.

Ideally, an *introduction* opens up the study's specific area of interest or the identified topic and problem of research inquiry with a general statement considering the targeted audience (Neuman, 2012). It is critical to introduce the reader to the topic and explain why it is worth doing, theoretically and practically (Adler & Adler, 2008; Creswell, 2014). The *Introduction* prepares the reader for the scientific argumentation, brief overview of the status of research in the area and the proposed study context.

As a guideline for developing a good *introduction* and/or *background*, one may seek to address the following questions:

a) Is the research problem situated in the light of the existing state of knowledge in the area of study?
b) What is the motivation for and justification of the study?
c) Is context of the research clear and relevant?

As a complement to the above, Wolery and Lane (as cited in Gast, 2010) proposed approaches for developing an *introduction to a research* that included the accumulating evidence, deficit or discrepant knowledge, and the historical perspective approaches focusing on trends and patterns of a phenomenon such as HIV/AIDS infections at global and local level. *Background* is supposed to be more than *introduction* because it puts the problem within a broader context, thus relating the specific problem to the larger problem or showing its relationship to similar problems elsewhere. It should succinctly inform the research problem and provide the direction of the research. Admittedly, some aspects of the *introduction* relate to the *background* and hence the maze experienced by both beginning and established researchers. Thus, due to the overlaps between the *introduction* and *background*, it is advisable to address them separately since examiners have tended to award them different scores. It is also beneficial for students to widely consult already published academic works in order to acquaint themselves with international best practice.

3.3 Statement of the problem

The *statement of the problem* can be regarded the 'first hurdle', the DNA and bedrock of any research but also arguably one of the most misunderstood. Many scholars concur that all studies originate with a research problem or the question (Brownhill, Ungarova & Bipazhanova, 2017; Creswell, 2014; Grant & Osanloo, 2014; Leedy, 1997). In the qualitative approach, a study should be guided by non-directive question(s) beginning with either *how, what, or why*, so as to allow research participants to express diverse perspectives on the phenomenon.

Research questions develop out of the research problem previously framed by deep knowledge of the literature and experience with the phenomenon (Swanson & Holton 111, 2009). Thus, beginning a research journey with a title is analogous to taking a shortcut or an undesignated route to the proposed destination. Research problem delineation should precede title formulation. Over the years, I have attempted with negligible success to orient the students to follow this approach. Research questions should act as the liaison between the existing knowledge and the problem to be resolved (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Thus, a researcher should find a question, an unresolved controversy, a gap in knowledge or unfulfilled need within the chosen subject (Walliman, 2006). Formulating a research question or hypothesis is part of creating a problem statement regardless of the research approach. Most students do not seem aware of the connection between the research problem and research question. Van de Ven (2002, as cited in Swanson & Holton 111, 2009, p. 12) advises

researchers especially in organisations to "ground the research problem and question in reality". This is because the research problem could be derived from one's practical experience and gap in knowledge as informed by the critical appraisal of related scientific literature and untested theory. However, as Chambers (2017) argued, experience can also generate biases leading to a tendency for researchers to strategically overlook some issues while privileging those that confirm preconceived ideas. Therefore, it is important to distinguish necessary perspectives from prejudices and other variants of partiality that distort research (Baur, Herring, Raschke, Laura & Cornelia, 2014).

Overall, a *research problem* should be *researchable* (i.e. it should be answered by collecting and analyzing data), *original* (it should not have been done previously and it creates or adds new knowledge), and *contributory* (it should make a difference in the discipline or profession or in society). It should be concise without a repeat of information already stated in the *Introduction* or *Background.* Students have increasingly struggled with this task because the research questions would not have been 'good' enough. A good research question is one directly addressing the research problem and is able to guide researchers in making decisions regarding study design, data collection and analysis (Brownhill et al., 2017). My participation in dissertation viva-voce sessions revealed an apparent disconnect between the research problem and question. This is partly due to candidates' lack of full knowledge of the key concepts necessary for the exact formulation of the research question at beginning of the research project (Lumineau & Oliveira, 2018).

In order to overcome the above obstacles, some scholars have recommended further gap-spotting literature (Gast, 2010; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011) and theoretical background review (Walliman, 2006). Unchartered terrains are considered fertile grounds for the generation of research problems and the justification of the study. However, over-reliance on gap-spotting literature may not lead to the generation of new and interesting ideas. These tend to be created through *problematization*—that is, identifying research problems by critically challenging established assumptions and worldviews (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011). Such level of scholarship has not been evident among many dissertation candidates. Consequently, many dissertations particularly at post-graduate level could have been passed for celebrating 'received wisdom' without carving out any new and 'logic-breaking' knowledge which demands high level of originality (Judge, Cable, Colbert & Rynes, 2007; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011).

3.4 Research purpose and objectives

The contribution of research questions to the purpose and direction of a study has already been intimated on. The interchange of related terms such as *research aim, purpose, overall objective and goal* has been evident across all the universities. Unawareness of their distinction reduces one's capacity to overcome other blind spots that lie ahead.

According to Grant and Osanloo (2014), the research purpose defines the outcomes of the study and what the researcher hopes the study will add to, critique or revise current

knowledge in the field. Generally, the aim or purpose reveals the implications or contributions arising from the proposed study. Aims and purposes of study are mirror images of the problem statement or research question. I support the argument by Creswell (2014) that the purpose statement is the most important aspect of the entire study as it sets forth the intent and major idea of the study building on the research problem and research questions. The purpose determines the kind of research, the instruments for data collection, sampling and scope (Cohen, et al., 2011; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). The purpose reflects the justification or rationale for the study (Creswell, 2014; Swanson, 2009). The verbs used in the purpose statement may inform the research approach types and methodologies. Thus, broad and long term verbs such as *discover, develop, examine, explore, investigate, and understand* are consistent with goals or purposes in qualitative researches such as action research, ethnography, grounded theory and phenomenology.

Formulation of specific objectives has also been largely taken for granted. It is not a matter of just plucking off verbs from a taxonomy. Research objectives should contain action verbs representing a networking of the statement of the problem. Unlike the purpose statement which is broader in scope, an objective specifically describes the action such as *compare, describe, assess, measure, determine, explain, identify, list,* and *state.* Often dissertations including those which have already been passed contain imprecisely and flatly stated objectives such as '*the study sought to find out the factors influencing ….*'

3.5 Literature review

Literature review is an essential and integral part of any research. Many scholars (Creswell, 2003, 2014; Grant & Osanloo, 2014; Neuman, 2014; Rocco & Plakhotnik, 2009) acknowledge the value of literature review in demonstrating the importance and justification of a study. Merriam and Simpson (2000, as cited in Rocco & Plakhotnik, 2009) add that literature review and conceptual and theoretical frameworks share key functions that include demonstrating how a study advances knowledge, assessing research design and instrumentation, and providing a reference point for interpreting findings. Literature review is expected to critique both the methodological and theoretical explanations of findings of previous studies. It may be guided by the need to fill-in the spotted gaps or deficiencies in previous researches or create new knowledge through the use of novel or alternative methods. Grant and Osanloo (2014) and Rocco (2005) observe that the theoretical framework can be used as a guide for logically developing and understanding the different, yet interconnected, parts of literature review. Thus, an effective review should critique and synthesize representative literature on a topic in an integrated way so as to generate new frameworks and perspectives on the topic.

Connecting previous studies to the problem statement, research questions and discussion of findings is "a precondition for doing substantive, thorough, sophisticated research" (Boote & Beile, 2005, as cited in Rocco & Plakhotnik, 2009, p.125; Wolery & Lane, 2014). Thus, a comprehensive review of literature is expected to contain subthemes directly relating to the research objectives and questions. Literature review seeks to determine

the research-ability of a topic and establish the importance of the current study in relationship to previous studies (Creswell, 2003, 2014). One common challenge pertains to students' unawareness of the connection between the studies they would have reviewed during the research proposal stage and their own findings. They also struggle with reconciling the insights from literature review with both the theoretical and conceptual frameworks and discussion of findings. This blind spot generates text reproductions which do not show how the research contributes and fits into the existing body of knowledge or discipline. Literature review should be systematic, original, and critical. Unfortunately, most students seem habituated to presenting third party sources as original and often oblivious of the ethical implications.

In an attempt to overcome the above challenges, some departments have done away with *literature review* as a standalone chapter in the final research report but retain it as an integrating thread for all the seams of the dissertation. Perhaps this is inconformity with international best practice on academic journal article writing. However, this has also inadvertently encouraged students to avoid critical review of related literature at the proposal stages of their dissertations.

3.6 Conceptual and theoretical frameworks

The *theoretical* and c*onceptual* frameworks are interconnected parts that function as 'bearings' for ensuring the research 'vehicle' remains on track. They support the research problem, purpose of study and discussion of results (Berman, 2013; Grant & Osanloo, 2014; Rocco & Plakhotnik, 2009). In particular, the theoretical framework is 'the structure, the scaffolding, the frame of study,' and conceptual framework relates to concepts, empirical research and relevant theories to advance and systematize knowledge about related concepts or issues (Bradbury-Jones, Taylor & Herber, 2014; Corley & Giola, 2011; Creswell, 2014; Kivunja, 2018; Merriam, 2001). Stewart and Klein (2016) and Maxwell (2013) add that theories aid analysis and interpretation of data. They also assist in developing research questions, discerning methodological issues, discussing findings and demonstrating the relevance of the research. A theoretical framework simultaneously conveys the deepest values of the researcher and provides a clearly articulated signpost or lens for how the study will process new knowledge (Collins & Stockton, 2018; Creswell, 2014; Grant & Osanloo, 2014). However, this can also generate over-reliance on a single research tradition or pronouncement of a theoretical commitment which has long been widely criticized especially in ethnography (Tamboukou & Ball, 2003).

There is consensus among many scholars (Berman, 2013; Bradbury-Jones, et al., 2014; Green, 2014; Parahoo, 2006; Stewart & Klein, 2016) that a conceptual framework can be developed from a combination of ideas and concepts drawn from various theories situating the study. This can be illustrated diagrammatically or by way of concept mapping or a process for representing and organizing ideas using pictures (Novak & Canas, 2006, as cited in Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Unlike theories, conceptual frameworks are most useful in qualitative research as they are flexible and can be modified along the research journey

placing emphasis on understanding instead of prediction or confirmation. Whereas a theoretical framework can be applied when testing a theory, a conceptual framework is made of theoretical and empirical works to support each research question (Rocco & Plakhotnik, 2009).

The evidence of widespread conflation or lumping of the two frameworks without any operationalization with respect to the research problem confirms what other scholars have already observed elsewhere (Anfara & Mertz, 2015; Collins & Stockton, 2018; Jabareen, 2009). Some candidates would declare use of a conceptual framework in the early stages of their dissertations while actually referring to a theory. Many do not seem to fully appreciate the role of either theory or conceptual framework. For instance, I recall interacting with students who had as many as four to five theories being applied in a single study! This has had severe consequences for the management of data in the later stages of the dissertation.

3.7 Research designs and methods

Any study based on a flawed design is effectively a failed endeavor. Notwithstanding the variation in the chapter nomenclature across universities, methodology has always been considered immediately after the review of literature. Its key constituents which are expected to logically build into one another include research approach, design, sampling, data collection methods and analysis techniques.

Extant literature (Creswell, 1998, 2003; Gast, 2010; Leedy, 1997; Stewart & Klein, 2016; Swanson & Holton 111, 2009) has long intimated on the research question's interactive relationship with the other methodological aspects such as research paradigm, design, methods and context. Once the research questions and objectives have been constructed the most suitable methodological designs are selected. My interaction with most students confirms other scholars' (Gough, 2002; Creswell, 2014) observations that novice researchers fail to make a distinction between methodology, and methods, approach, and design. Perhaps one may attribute this to supervisors either neglecting or taking them for granted. As Sileyew (2019) observed, the methodology should show how the research outcome will be obtained in line with the stated study objectives. Across universities, most students struggle to locate the philosophical worldviews and theoretical perspectives informing the different research approaches and designs. For example, a *case study* design has been inaccurately delineated and on many occasions presented as riding on statistical analysis in spite of its widely acknowledged designation as a qualitative methodology (Creswell, 2014; Hartley, 2004; Houghton, Casey, Shaw & Murphy, 2013; Neuman, 2012; Yin, 1994; 2009).

Research designs and methods have also been largely generalized. Statements like '*the study adopted a qualitative research design',* have been popularized without presenting specifics such as autobiography, case study, documentary survey, ethnography and genealogy. Further, traditional data collection techniques such as interviews and open-ended questionnaires have been overstretched while neglecting equally established ones such as participant observations, diaries, histories, repertory grids, and pictorial presentations. There

has also been very little detail regarding their reliability and validity including the matrix showing connections of techniques to the respective research questions and objectives. In addition, the emergence of digital technology which calls into question the efficacy and sustainability of the traditional techniques needs attention. In areas such as migration and employment, virtual anthropological fieldwork could successfully assist getting round the challenge through the use of digitalized technologies such as WhatsApp and Twitter (Maunganidze, 2019). Thus, combining data collected through online space with that from traditional methods may provide an opportunity to skirt around some of the methodological blind spots.

Another blind spot is the tendency to select research methods not with respect to their value for addressing the underlying research problem, but rather according to the researcher's preconceived ideas about which paradigm was dominant in the particular discipline (Berman, 2013; Chambers, 2017; Goulding, 2002; Marshall, 1996; McPhail & Lourie, 2017). Admittedly, I have also not yet easily escaped this one. Becoming prone to such *bias blind* spots have accustomed researchers into 'loving' or 'hating' certain theoretical traditions and methodological practices. Popular declarations by either students or supervisors such as, '*I just don't like quantitative (or qualitative) methods*' reinforce the argument by Greenbank (2002) that the ontological and epistemological positions adopted by researchers are influenced by their personal and competency values. In some departments students have often been discouraged from using documentary survey as a design in its own right in spite of its wide reverence (Bhatia, Flowerdew & Jones, 2008; Maphosa, 1997; Mogalakwe, 2009; Squire, Andrews & Tamboukou, 2013; Tamboukou, 2013). Thus, overtime one can easily become a committed paradigmatic purist (Donaldson, 2005; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007) without being conscious of it. This effectively keeps one from immediately recognizing the resultant partialities and distortions.

Although declaring one's positionality and standpoint is critical for research credibility, it has been largely neglected and sometimes strategically. According to Hennum (2014), *positionality* refers to the place one is assigned to in social structure depending on gender, race, class, or education, and *standpoint* deals with the choice made by the researchers in relation to the studied group. The influence of positionality and standpoint on selection of data collection techniques, negotiating access to research participants and eliciting rich data has been widely documented (Becker, Boonzaier, & Owen, 2005; Belur, 2014; Bourke, 2014; D'Silva et al., 2016; McAreavey & Das, 2013; Mikecz, 2012; Petkov & Kaoullas, 2016). Most dissertation candidates have conducted studies either within own organisations or communities but have not always been forthright in pronouncing or communicating their positionality and standpoints before, during and after the research. I recall a few cases in which some undergraduate students had claimed arranging face-to-face focus group discussions involving executive managers in their organisations but without declaring their positionality in spite of the already established difficulty associated with interviewing elites (Mikecz, 2012; Petkov & Kaoullas, 2016).

3.8 Sampling and ethical issues

Sampling is one of the staple but largely underrated diets of the qualitative research. It has increasingly become a recalcitrant problem due to the overlaps between the different non-probability sampling techniques such as convenient, judgmental, respondent driven, chain referral or snow-balling and theoretical sample (Browne, 2005; Heckathorn, 1997; Leedy, 1997; Marshall, 1996; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Polit & Beck, 2004). Researchers need to be clear and precise about the sampling techniques given the volumes of qualitative data (to be) collected in the form of texts, narratives, and thick descriptions.

Students have often declared using specific sampling techniques without providing a complete protocol from the initial subject or case identification to data saturation including confirming and disconfirming cases. Our students' dissertations are replete with statements such as '*I selected five participants through purposive sampling'* but with no detail regarding the selection of the initial key informant(s) or gatekeeper(s) and the inclusion and exclusion criteria that determined the final sample size. Readers may be interested to know why five and not six or seven participants were selected. However, it is critical to recognize that in qualitative research it may not be the number that provides the basis for the truth; rather it is being clear about objectives, being systematic and consistent in observation, analysis and interpretation. The quality of this section can be enhanced by articulating the strengths and limitations of each sampling technique in comparison with the other established and seemingly overlapping techniques such as homogenous, typical case, deviant case, expert and critical case sampling (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016).

Qualitative research also generates critical ethical dilemmas relating to gaining access, securing consent of the research participants, and managing key informants, intermediaries and gatekeepers given the ever evolving and complex transactions associated with the data collection protocols. As a thesis examiner, I have observed both students and supervisors increasingly falling victims to this blind spot. Ethical issues have also been generalized with numerous 'cutting and pasting' of standard versions extracted from either institutional guidelines or Wikipedia without situating them to the study problem. Across universities, dissertation examination and assessment regimes have also tended to downplay ethical considerations. It is culpable to bungle with ethical issues as this can easily discredit the whole thesis.

3.9 Managing study findings

Presenting and analyzing large volumes of narrations and texts associated with qualitative research are one of the biggest challenges facing dissertation candidates. The inductive nature of qualitative research approach and the mutual existence of data reduction, display and interpretation make it even more challenging. This also requires the rigorous conceptualization and coding processes: open or closed, axial and selective (Neuman, 2012; 2014). In this regard, use of the widely documented computer assisted data analysis software (CADAS) such as NUD*IST and NVivo (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Creswell, 1998; Houghton, et al., 2013; Leedy, 1997; Robson, 2002) can assist in overcoming the hurdle

given their rigor in tracking decision trails made during the data collection process. However, both students and supervisors have not fully appreciated their use. In spite of their usefulness, CADAS requires cautious treatment as any rigid application may lead to an objectivist and mechanistic coding that could result in misinterpretation of some data.

The processes of data coding, memo writing, and analysis frameworks have also been neglected, resulting in students producing their own 'stories' and compromising the credibility and dependability of the results. Students have increasingly neglected the 'emic perspective,' that is, attempts to capture the participants' meanings of reality through the eyes of those being studied (Olive, 2014; Yin, 2009). Occasionally, established researchers have been complicit in ignoring participants' voices and visions casting them as objects to be studied (Chambers, 2017; Russell-Mundine, 2012). They have increasingly tended to write *about* participants instead of writing *with* them.

Another blind spot is failing to provide participants the chance to respond to the researched texts and validate researchers' interpretations of evidence. This allows researchers to question their own statements and is important for testing rigor. The case for member-checking or respondent-validation is widely acknowledged (Creswell, 2014; Houghton, et al., 2013; Russell-Mundine, 2012; Sultana, 2007), but many students have not engaged in the practice because either no time was allocated or examiners have also not paid attention to it. Furthermore, the data have been either presented in too abstract or highly technical language to allow for effective respondent validation.

On many occasions, data analyses contain generalized statements such as *data was analysed using themes.* There is no detail regarding how the analysis proceeded and ended and the explicitness of thematic types such as the *ideal type, successive approximation, illustrative method, domain analysis, analytic comparison, narrative analysis and negative evidence* (Neuman, 2014). Other useful techniques including pattern-matching, conversational, content and discourse analysis are rarely mentioned. The choice of any of the analytical techniques should reflect the constructs, concepts, models and theories that structured the study in the first place (Collins & Stockton, 2018). Important views from interviewees have also lacked supporting evidence. For example, lengthy verbatim transcriptions have been noted without any declaration of the use of video and audio recorders elsewhere in the methods section. This lack of attention to rigor compromises the quality of qualitative research. While the demand for verbatim transcription in qualitative research is ever increasing some scholars have already warned against their use particularly in the absence of collaborative interviewing and reflexive dialoguing (Clocke, et. al., 2000; Loubere, 2017) and investigator triangulation (Archibald, 2016).

There are also blind spots with respect to interpretation of results. Lindseth and Norberg (2004) observe that researchers tend to interpret out their own pre-understanding which is influenced by one's culture, values, beliefs, class, or educational level. This form of 'conceptual lock-in' can be redressed by 'defocusing' or loosening the boundaries of one's

own self-awareness (Neuman, 2012). This requires intense self-reflection in order to put aside one's pre-understandings (Chan, Fung & Chien, 2013; Gearing, 2004). The political–temporal contingency of the research process may result in certain issues being interpreted or told in certain ways, and producing silences in others (Sultana, 2007). Research reports tend to be silent about voices and visions of the vulnerable or minorities. A few students may declare them as part of study limitations but only when they would have found a fitting remediation. There is a tendency to fix results that confirm one's pre-understanding.

Unlike in quantitative research in which the results of study sample can be generalized back to the population, qualitative approach is aimed at an improved understanding of complex human issues rather generalizability of results (Cassell & Symon, 2004; Creswell, 2014; Marshall, 1996; Neuman, 2012). In spite of the currency of this widely acknowledged idea, many students have tended to overgeneralize findings and their implications. Conclusions at the group level may be misleading as they may not apply to all participants (Zayas, Sridharan, Lee & Shoda, 2019). There is a tendency to equally characterize effect on each participant in the study to represent the whole group. This is what Lumineau and Oliveira (2018) coined the '*single-party blind spot'*, which involves extrapolating from observations of a single party to arguments concerning the whole.

Another part of the qualitative research journey that has been largely overlooked is the embedment of theoretical frameworks into the discussion of findings. The case for the role of a theory in the analysis and discussion of qualitative data has long been venerated (Bendassolli, 2014; Bradbury-Jones et al., 2014; Broger, 2011; Collins & Stockton, 2018; Corley & Giola, 2011; Creswell, 2014; Ruona, 2009). Aligning the theoretical framework to the research problem, purpose and significance is an important part of the dissertation process (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Many dissertation candidates overlook application of the theory even after having declared so in the early stages. They explicitly locate their study within a particular theory but then seem to abandon efforts to link, apply or interpret their findings in the context of the theory (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2014). A theory serves as a tool to scaffold, set the constructs of the study and help to make meaning of subsequent findings.

Although one of the widely established primary purposes of qualitative research is to generate theories and frameworks (Green, 2014; Stewart & Klein, 2016), such level of scholarship has been missing among many students. This can partly be attributed to the overreliance on the traditional 'gap-spotting' techniques of constructing research questions which rarely challenge established assumptions (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011). Disproving a theory is a powerful act of knowledge production because rigidly applying a theory produces a tendency towards confirmation biases which are popular with the hypothetic-deductive approaches in quantitative research. Anyway, closed theoretical systems in qualitative research have long been criticized for hindering research (Collins & Stockton, 2018; Foucault, 1980, as cited in Tamboukou & Ball, 2003). Most of the research outputs in university repositories have been largely confirmatory. Dissertation candidates need to be supported to stretch beyond just confirming theories (or models) and attend to unexpected

results by searching for data that goes against the established grain. Manuscripts should be analytical and critical so that ideas advanced become transferable (Reid & Scott, 2013). Most dissertations rarely explain unusual or unanticipated patterns emerging from results. They tend to be silent about the questions that participants could have refused to answer. Paying attention to discrepant or negative information that runs counter to the themes enhances accuracy of findings (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2013; Neuman, 2014).

3.10 End of road: Summary and conclusion

The concluding chapter is one of the hidden hindrances to quality scientific reports. There is consensus among institutions on the key issues to be covered in the concluding chapter, namely: summary of findings, developing the conclusion(s) in response to the central research question, and limitations of the study and recommendations for further research and practice. However, at higher degree levels, students may be expected to articulate the contribution of the study to either the discipline or body of knowledge.

Ideally, the summary of findings opens with a restatement of the study purpose or overall objective such as '*the main purpose of the study was to explore……'* and broadly submits summarized results guided by research questions. However, study conclusions tend to be more complex and challenging. Good conclusions should provide concise and affirmative responses to the specific research questions or objectives and where possible supported by limited literature unless there are very strong reasons for its inclusion.

Majority of students tend to emphasize *summaries of findings and recommendations* while marginalizing the *conclusion(s)*. This is partly due to the conflation of the *summary* and *conclusion(s).* One of the critical but largely neglected questions that the concluding chapter should address is: *whether conclusions and recommendations refer back to statement of problem and relate to the study objectives.* Students often fail to establish whether their study objectives had been accomplished or the research questions adequately answered. Conclusions should directly relate to the study findings. Finally, it is essential to critically appraise the significance and implications of the study for both the body of knowledge and field of practice.

4. Final reflection

This article sought to examine the different blank spots that lie ahead of a qualitative research journey focusing mainly on students' engagement in the development of dissertations. What emerged across all the five universities is that both students and research supervisors were prone to the blind spots in different ways reinforcing the idea that these actually kept them from seeing the phenomena as clearly as they might, leading to partialities and distortions in the final research product.

There is an overwhelming unawareness or ignorance of the inherent symbiotic linkages among the different blind spots leaving researchers incapacitated of overcoming them even in cases of future recurrence. Similarly, the interconnections among key research

aspects, notably problematization of the research question, literature review, and methodology and data management have increasingly remained off the review mirror of many research drivers. The paper also strengthens the idea that adopting a reflexive lens through interpretation and reflection enhances one's awareness of the hidden methodological obstacles.

Finally, I have possibly thrown up some questions in respect of the rigor of the dissertations and theses already buried in many university repositories. Since this article relies much on the author's first-hand accounts, further research focusing on the lived experiences and reflection of other lecturers and their own students especially basing on other research traditions is strongly recommended. However, the article is a timely intervention providing both the novice and established researcher a possible template for overcoming the blind spots likely to derail the production of quality research outputs.

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