Debriefing interviews and coaching conversations: Strategies to promote student reflexivity and action

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Abstract

Without conscious will and engagement in critical reflexivity as a process of growth and learning in research, students remain unaware of their subjective biases and the effect of bias on the inquiry. A qualitative, exploratory, single descriptive case study was used to explore and describe the operationalisation of debriefing interviews and coaching conversations as strategies to promote student reflexivity and action in postgraduate supervision practice. Two female Master of Technology (Somatology) students were purposively selected. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured debriefing interviews, coaching conversations and semi-structured naïve sketches. Data analysis followed a thematic coding approach. It was found that the strategies of debriefing interviews and coaching conversations promote self-awareness and methodological awareness, transformation, learning and support, and increase students' capability to act and react more quickly to research challenges. However, bracketing of personal epistemological beliefs and ethical reasoning remain a challenge.

INTRODUCTION

By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is the noblest; second by imitation, which is the easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest (Confucius 551– 479 BCE).

Readers may wonder why we (supervisor and co-supervisor of the students) have chosen to begin this article with Confucian philosophy on learning. It is because something akin to this concept appears to us to be present in the learning taking place within postgraduate supervision. We have found that some students learn and only imitate, 'some dabble near the surface, dipping into reflexive moments ... before returning to the safety of the mundane. Others attempt to confront the fear of the monster lurking in the abyss ...' (MacMillan 1996, 15). For some students, the

failure to learn from experience dooms them to the frightening potential of eternal recurrences (Nietzsche 1974, 341).

Unlike quantitative research, when conducting a qualitative inquiry, the researcher is considered the main instrument for data collection, data analysis and data interpretation (Guba and Lincoln in Denzin and Lincoln 2005, 210). As part of laying claim to the integrity of qualitative research, it is important for researchers, especially novice researchers such as students, to find ways to analyse how subjective and intersubjective elements influence their research (Finlay 2002a, 531). Students may, however, differ in their ability to carry out the necessary mental manipulations associated with cognitive or reflexive ability (Calderhead 1989, 43; Mezirow 1990, 359). Disciplined and guided reflexive practices may hold the key to promoting 'self-aware meta-analysis' and 'methodological self-consciousness' (Finlay 2002b, 210), therefore serving as a self-correcting verification strategy during the conduct of the inquiry itself (Cohen and Crabtree 2008, 334; Rolfe 2006, 309).

Our contention is that without conscious will and engagement in critical reflexivity as a process of growth and learning in research, students remain unaware of their subjective biases and the effect of bias on the inquiry, a factor which ultimately affects the integrity of the inquiry. However, reflexivity alone does not automatically result in learning or change (Jarvis, Holford and Griffin 2003, 73; Mezirow 1990, 354). Action upon these insights is equally needed (Vince and Reynolds 2004, 64). According to Daley (2010, 69), being reflexively engaged in the research process involves 'reflection-in-action' (Schön 1983).We would suggest that through dialogue, in the form of debriefing interviews and coaching conversations, reflexivity and action could be promoted, and that the supervision context holds the potential for the guidance and promotion of reflexivity.

REFLEXIVITY AND BRACKETING

Reflexivity involves the realisation that qualitative researchers are part of the social world they study and as such, their values, assumptions, prior knowledge and experiences may impinge upon research work. In many forms of qualitative research it is expected that the researcher will make a sincere effort to understand, put aside, or temporarily suspend, his or her values and assumptions in order to describe participants' experiences more accurately. Ahern (1999, 406) argues that the ability to set aside personal feelings and preconceptions is more a function of how reflexive one is rather than how objective one is. It is not possible to set aside aspects of which one is not aware. The process by which researchers endeavour not to allow their assumptions to impinge on the research inquiry is known as bracketing. Bracketing refers to the process during which the researcher reflects and sets aside, as far as humanly possible, all preconceived ideas and experiences to best understand the central phenomenon of the study(Plano Clark and Creswell 2010, 287). Bracketing is a validation strategy that is an iterative, reflexive journey that entails preparation,

action, evaluation, and systematic feedback. Both reflexivity and bracketing require time to reflect, an environment of support, and reflective skill (Ahern 1999, 408).

DEBRIEFING INTERVIEWS

Debriefing or cognitive interviews are often utilised in quantitative studies, in the social, behavioural and health sciences as a type of 'retrospective' probing or debriefing (Willis 1999, 1). This type of debriefing focuses explicitly on studying cognitive processes that respondents use to answer survey questions, in other words, covert processes that are normally hidden, as well as overt, observable cognitive behaviours of respondents.

Onwuegbuzie, Leech and Collins (2008, 3) suggest a novel way to obtain reflexive data from the qualitative researcher, namely interviewing (debriefing) the interpretive researcher. The novice researcher (student) may not be optimally aware of information (e.g. thoughts, perceptions, feelings and experiences that emerge while conducting the research). Onwuegbuzie et al. (2008, 13) argue that being formally interviewed by another person can promote reflexivity by reflecting on the researcher's 'situatedness', the biases they bring to the study, and their personal investment in and commitment to the inquiry, thereby closing the hermeneutic circle (which represents the circle of understanding).

Debriefing has a logical appeal because it promotes a reflective approach and mirrors what occurs in helping professions such as psychology, nursing and social work. Debriefing is often used as an intervention by professional helpers to assist people who have experienced extremely stressful or traumatic events to share the material with peers or supervisors. The interviews could additionally serve as an audit trail documenting the evolution of the researcher's thoughts, perceptions, feelings, experiences and learning over the course of the research. Debriefing interviews may illuminate challenges as they emerged during the research process, and allow for adjustments to be made, thus serving as a self-corrective measure during the research process.

The concept of peer debriefing is often found in qualitative inquiries as a strategy to promote the credibility of research findings (Bitsch 2005, 83; Spall 1998, 280) as well as a way to support, encourage and reinforce confidence and task completion through organisation and planning (Spall 1998, 286). Interviewing the researcher is, however, different in that the researcher is debriefed by a trusted and knowledgeable 'outsider', not a peer. This form of debriefing has received little attention in qualitative research literature (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2008, 5). McAlpine, Weston and Beauchamp (2002) question the effectiveness of debriefing as opposed to a group colloquium. The outcome of their research favoured the group colloquium. It should, however, be noted that the participants of their research were a group of experienced professors who had highly developed reflective processes. The mentioned authors note that under different circumstances, for example, if the professors had experienced problems with the research design or interviews, their satisfaction with the debriefing

interviews might have produced different results. They conclude that debriefing interviews could be useful in providing opportunity for individual attention and private commentary.

COACHING CONVERSATIONS

Coaching is equally becoming a technique for developing reflexivity (Hall and Duval 2003, 16; Styhre 2008, 276–269). The concept of coaching is becoming one of the desired teaching strategies for postgraduate supervision practice (Pearson and Brew 2002, 140; Visagie and Maritz 2009, 9). The very idea of coaching is that the articulation of insights, perceived challenges and individual shortcomings may produce opportunities for new practices.

Coaching conversations can be described as a focused (sometimes fierce), stimulating learning conversation that leads to transformation or change in both people and processes (Hall and Duval 2003, 36). Coaching conversations are based on the creation and development of open, trusting and authentic relationships and they work best when there is mutuality and collaboration between the supervisor and student. Coaching conversations equally rely on critical, evocative and probing questions that are designed to elicit assumptions rather than mere information (Hall and Duval 2003, 15; Weiss, Donigian and Hughes 2010, 73). Cranton (1994, 87), however, warns that 'sitting at home in an armchair asking challenging questions [to oneself], may be doomed to failure even with the assistance of challenging questions'. One needs a 'provocateur' (coach), someone who stimulates challenges, promotes critical thinking and provides feedback (Cranton 1994, 119). Coaching conversations assist with the formulation of qualities or goals that the students want to reach as well as exploring ways to produce them. Such conversations provide a space for improvising (reflection-in-action) as well as illuminating the learning experience the students want to exemplify (Schön 1987, 372–373). Coaching conversations start with a reflective stage, but culminate in a structured plan for action which is measurable.

In this inquiry, the debriefing interviews and coaching conversations served as a stimulating event to set the reflective process in motion. Coaching conversations were combined with debriefing interviews specifically to enhance the interactive constructing process through dialogue, as well as the action-focus orientation. The aim of this inquiry was to explore and describe the operationalisation of debriefing interviews and coaching conversations as strategies to promote student reflexivity and action in postgraduate supervision practice. To operationalise a concept means to define the concept so that it can be expressed (Williamson 2008) or used on a daily basis in practice.

The central research question was: How might debriefing interviews and coaching conversations be operationalised to be used in postgraduate supervision practice to promote student reflexivity and action?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

A qualitative, exploratory, single descriptive case study (Plano Clark and Creswell 2010, 233) was used. Case studies focus on contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts (Yin 2009, 20). The phenomena in this case refer to debriefing interviews and coaching conversations as a reflexive practice in postgraduate supervision.

This research took place at a university in Johannesburg, in the Faculty of Health Sciences. Experienced supervisors within the somatology field were limited; therefore supervision assistance for master's students was sought within the field of nursing sciences. Somatologists work within the health care industry and provide relevant treatments for a variety of skin and body conditions.

Two female Master of Technology (Somatology) students were purposively selected to participate in this inquiry. A homogeneous sampling strategy was used (Plano Clark and Creswell 2010, 253). Both students were in their mid-twenties; one participant was black and one white. Both held Baccalaureate in Technology degrees in Somatology and were lecturers at the university. Their research experience was limited to a research project at Baccalaureate level. Neither student had experience in qualitative research.

Data were collected through semi-structured, interactive debriefing interviews of approximately 40 minutes each, coaching conversations and semi-structured naïve sketches (3–5 pages in length), utilising the guidelines provided by Onwuegbuzie et al. (2008, 7). Additionally, our field notes (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché and Delport 2005, 298) and reflective diaries (Wall, Glenn, Mitchinson and Poole 2004, 22) served as written accounts of the interview events, conversations, observations and our thoughts. The coaching questions/conversations were dispersed throughout the debriefing interviews and supervisory practice as the opportunity arose.

Onwuegbuzie et al. (2008, 6) prefer the debriefing interviewer to be an independent 'outsider', someone who holds no vested interest in the researcher's findings, interpretations or conclusions. Although we could argue that we (the supervisors) held no vested interest in the findings, interpretations or conclusions, we had a vested interest in the quality of the research product. Resources such as time, funds and finding an interviewer who met the criteria to conduct the interviews limited our choices of utilising an 'outsider' in practical terms. The co-supervisor (JM) accordingly acted as the 'insider' debriefer. She had a doctoral degree in Psychiatric Nursing Science with extensive experience in interviewing (both counselling and qualitative research) as well as being an advanced business coach and mentor.

We used the debriefing interviews as follow: before the students embarked on their data collection, they were briefed on how reflexive practice in the form of debriefing interviews and coaching conversations could play a role in their learning. The co-supervisor was present during the first two interviews conducted by the students during their fieldwork. This allowed her, during the debriefing interviews, to generate additional and follow-up questions specific to the data collected. One debriefing interview was held in a private location, the other in the main supervisor's office.

All voice-recorded data were transcribed verbatim by an independent transcriber. The debriefing interview of one student took place directly after her first participant interview whereas the other student's debriefing interview took place after her fifth participant interview. Although the initial purpose was to conduct both debriefing interviews directly after the first data collection, contextual challenges (related to the richness of data) of one of the students prevented the debriefing interview from taking place immediately.

The interview questions were open-ended and allowed the students to create their own options for responding (Plano Clark and Creswell 2010, 257). The first question focused on the students' experience of the data collection process of their study. Thereafter the questions were structured according to the suggestions of Onwuegbuzie et al. (2008, 7). Although Onwuegbuzie et al. (2008) provide examples of 31 questions, the range of questions is meant merely as ideas, and it is not expected, or practical, to ask all of the questions during a single debriefing interview. The debriefing interview explored the methodological topics relating directly to researcher bias including the researcher's perceptions of the participants, interpretations of interview findings, impact on the researcher, impact on the participants, ethical issues and unexpected dilemmas. Additional questions were explored in semi-structured naïve sketches which the students could complete in their own time after they had collected and analysed their data. Typical coaching questions related to content included: What, when, how would you like to improve? What knowledge have you gained? What will you do the same/differently? Questions related to process included: How did you come to know this? How did you decide? How were you affected? Questions related to premise included: Why is this relevant? Why does it matter? Why are you considering this perspective?

Data were analysed using the descriptive thematic analysis technique by Tesch (Creswell 2003, 192). Authenticity was ensured through the principles of fairness, awareness and action (Guba and Lincoln in Denzin and Lincoln 2005, 207). This meant that all the views, perspectives, claims, concerns and voices of the students were heard and accepted. A reflexive approach raised the level of awareness of both the students and the researchers. Based on the awareness gained, the inquiry prompted action through change in research practices.

The supervision relationship, by its very nature, could have placed the students in an asymmetric power relation. The following considerations were taken into account in order to avoid the reality and appearance of coercion: Informed consent was obtained from both participants by means of a letter communicating the necessary information pertaining to the research. Confidentiality was maintained and participants were informed of the rationale, recording and safekeeping of audiotaped interviews, transcriptions and sketches. Participation was voluntary.

FINDINGS

The aim of this inquiry was to explore and describe the operationalisation of debriefing interviews and coaching conversations as strategies to promote student reflexivity and action in postgraduate supervision practice. The findings describe the emotional discomfort experienced by the students on entering the field as novice researchers. A process of awakening took place as the students became aware of bias in their personal epistemological beliefs, and also of challenges in fieldwork. The challenges also relate to ethical ways of thinking and being. This awakening allowed for transformation to take place with regard to the students' thinking, and their intrapersonal and interpersonal processes, resulting in greater cognitive and affective flexibility. Students experienced the debriefing interview as 'helpful assistance' that promoted reflexivity and increased their ability to act and react more quickly to research challenges. Each of these themes will now be discussed. Verbatim quotes are provided to highlight the themes.

ENTERING THE FIELD OF RESEARCH

The students described their entering the field as novice researchers with 'limited knowledge and experience' as being emotionally distressing and uncomfortable. Emotional distress refers to feelings of discomfort, ambivalence, anxiety and worry when faced with excessive adaptive demands (*Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary*). Their initial contact with their participants was 'nerve-wracking' and 'difficult'. One student felt as if the 'world was ripped out from under me'. As novice researchers they did not 'know what to touch and what to leave'. These uncertainties led to 'nervousness' and 'fear' that valuable information might be missed. One participant felt 'panicky' because she did not know 'how to ask', referring to the use of facilitative communication techniques of probing. Our field notes confirmed these anxieties as we observed their nervousness on several occasions before and during their initial fieldwork activities (interviews). The students tended to ask multiple questions at the same time, answer on the participants' behalf or interrupt their participant. They would wring their hands or play with objects such as pens or microphones. The nervousness was in turn often countertransferred (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2008, 13) to their participants.

AWAKENING AS AWARENESS

Awakening in the field relates to the students 'waking up' to possibilities and potentials, which up to this point had been 'sleepy' within their consciousness (Hall and Duval 2003, 344). Awakening in the research field took place as the students became aware of their personal epistemological beliefs.

Personal epistemological beliefs refer to an individual's conviction about knowledge and knowing, his/her truth value and justification (Kuhn 1999, 21). During the debriefing interviews, the students became aware of their personal

epistemological beliefs as preconceived cognitive maps that they held in relation to their research topics, the complexity of topics and the struggle to bracket their beliefs.

The preconceived cognitive maps related to conceptual definitions and theoretical frameworks of the students:

> "what I had already decided that I knew about [the topic] ... the connection in my head of what I know I know, and what I know they will tell me". Also "... you read it in the books ... the books says it is an effect ... so you don't expect it or even think it could exist ... you already know what you know".

One student realised that these cognitive maps may not be within one's conscious realm:

> '... maybe not consciously ... but we tend to just assume ... and you hear what you think you assume ... you think they should feel this'. Having preconceived cognitive maps or ideas possibly encouraged selective listening on the part of the students '... in my head I thought I could hear this ... perhaps I will not hear this ...'.

The other student became aware of the 'complexity' of her topic and that her 'formulisation of what I thought [about the topic] was wrong ... or maybe just different'. She realised 'why I did not do a literature review in the beginning of my [qualitative] study'. The students found it essentially difficult to bracket their preconceived ideas. Difficulty also arose when role boundaries between being a researcher and being a (somatology) therapist became blurred, '... I found it difficult because I was a therapist myself, and I think, once a therapist, always a therapist ... I shared something with them.'

Being an 'insider' in the community of somatologists impacted on the bracketing experience of one of the students in that she drew from her own experience of 'how I practised it [the topic] in the industry' and this led to a 'belief about how therapists would answer the questions I asked them'. This belief influenced the value which the student placed on certain answers provided by her research participants:

> "... they don't know what they are talking about" and "I believe this has nothing to do with [the topic] ... I felt they were wasting my time when they said that."

When her participants' answers aligned with her own experiences, the student felt that she could relate because she knew 'what they are talking about ... that's what I wanted to hear'. On becoming aware of her own cognitive frame, the student shared with the interviewer (JM) that although she found the concept of bracketing difficult, she would in future 'leave my experience and focus on the person and the research questions'.

CHALLENGES IN FIELDWORK

The debriefing interview highlighted students' increased awareness regarding the practicalities of interviewing as a data collection method. Students revealed the importance of context and interviewing skills. One participant realised how 'interruptions' had an impact on the flow of the interview; also, that feeling psychologically safe and issues of 'trust' influenced how much information was shared: '... she [the participant] was scared to give information because she didn't know who would be listening'. A (student researcher) participant was perceived as 'definitely holding back [information]'. The students realised that setting the right 'atmosphere' prior to, as well as during, the interview was important for collecting information-rich data.

Through their reflections on the interviewing process, the students realised '... where and how' they were 'leading' and at times were not 'true to' their research paradigm. One became aware that, as the content of the topic became interesting, she was distracted by the content and it was 'easy to lose focus'.

As the students became aware of their epistemological beliefs and challenges during fieldwork, opportunities arose during coaching conversations for them to ask 'what should I do?' and 'how do I bracket/ask without leading?' The techniques explained to the students as well as suggested reading material were actioned during the student's next interview. (Data that resulted from the student being leading or displaying bias was excluded from their data analysis.)

ETHICAL WAYS OF THINKING AND BEING

The debriefing questions relating to ethical ways of thinking and being had limited responses even after we probed extensively. Our concerns regarding these issues were recorded in field notes at the time of the debriefing interviews. When the students were asked if they were confronted with any ethical issues during the fieldwork, both students initially said they needed time to 'think', and then replied that they could not 'think of anything'. After having had time to think and complete the debriefing semi-structure sketches, the students were able to identify aspects regarding participants 'not signing consent prior to the interviews', anonymity and breaches in privacy. Corrective measures included 'making sure they [participants] sign consent, removing names from transcriptions and ensuring privacy in subsequent interviews'.

TRANSFORMATION AS AN OUTCOME

The students noted during the debriefing interview that their 'thinking' had 'changed'. One student now thought differently about her research topic: 'My thinking about the topic has changed'. When probed during a coaching conversation the student was able to pinpoint *where* her thinking had changed. This change happened as she reflected on a response (by her participant) relating to a topic that she had not previously thought about: '... *there* I started thinking differently'. This realisation

culminated in appreciating that 'we [the participant and the researcher] can all make a valuable contribution'.

Further transformation took place at an intrapersonal level: '... I think I have learnt to be more patient ... and open. Personally I think I tend to like things to happen now and finish now, but I have learnt to be patient ... some things are actually a process.' The openness and tolerance culminated in discovering a 'broader view on things', thus encouraging cognitive and affective flexibility.

Evidence of transformation was noted at an interpersonal level as the students became '... more open to the viewpoint of others. Even if I think that the point they are making is silly or irrelevant ...'. Change relating to empathy towards others increased as the students used their thinking to penetrate and try and understand the world of their participants: '... I think that's what they felt ... they were also nervous'. Change also related to 'being with' research participants in future. A coaching conversation explored the question: What will be done differently? The student responded: 'I will take more care in entering the field and being available [being present]' as well as improving '... communications skills by actively listening and showing interest ... I will not talk as much'.

During a coaching conversation, the students were able to identify how these changes, learning and growth could be transferred to other contexts such as the practice of somatology, other research and their personal lives.

> I think as a therapist I have learnt that we can broaden our consultation process. I have learnt to be sensitive to people's opinions; I have been able to appreciate constructive criticism, to pay attention to situations and to be more observant.

EXPERIENCE OF THE DEBRIEFING INTERVIEW AND COACHING CONVERSATIONS

The students experienced the debriefing interviews and subsequent coaching conversations as 'fruitful' and 'enriching' as these provided 'a platform' to 'structure my perceptions and thoughts' and 'go through the reflective process'. The interviews and conversations culminated in a 'learning experience' and 'growth within research'.

> "I've read through the data that I collected, I can recollect my thoughts and think ... wow, this is what happened, this is what I have learnt, this is what I did wrong, this is where I can improve ... it is a good reflective process." It was also "nice to think back to the process and how I grew. It was a huge learning curve for me. Next time I'll be more informed and prepared."

The debriefing interviews and subsequent coaching conversations provided emotional support in that the students were able to 'express how the whole experience was'. One student felt that it provided the necessary 'reassurance' which resulted in a new affective state of 'confidence'.

The students were specifically asked how they felt about the co-supervisor acting as the debriefer. It would seem that the supervisor as debriefer did not have a negative impact on the process as a relationship of trust had developed within a supportive relationship and the aim of the interviews and reflections was understood.

> It was easier, because I know you. I felt comfortable. I think if it had been someone else, I would have been afraid to say the wrong thing.

> I don't think it would have been any different had it been an "outsider", as the purpose is to reflect and learn, so for it [debriefing interview] to have been useful I had to be honest regardless of who is conducting the interview. For me the person conducting the interview basically is irrelevant to me as long as we are reaching the objectives of the interview.

DISCUSSION

Debriefing interviews and coaching conversations could provide students with a stimulating event which activated personal and methodological awareness, transformation, learning and support. Students' awareness was raised as they acknowledged their insufficient knowledge and skills in qualitative research, especially fieldwork. They experienced doubt, anxiety and fear as they entered the field. Although their initial discomfort may have been perceived as vexing, Dewey (1933, 13) and Chabeli (2001, 2) claim that the very nature of this ambiguity is the first step towards reflection. The presence of uncertainty forced the students to learn from the experience.

After initial distress, a process of awakening followed. Students became aware of their personal epistemological beliefs, the challenges in fieldwork and also ethical ways of thinking and being. Although the students initially seemed to merge theory-based and evidence-based sources of their beliefs as a single representation (Kuhn 1999, 21), they were able to move from a realist pre-epistemological unawareness of belief states to multiplist epistemology (anyone's opinion has the same status and deserves the same treatment) indicating a receptivity to knowledge (Chabeli 2004, 62). Remaining in an absolutist epistemology would function as a significant constraint in the students' development of critical reflexivity. As the students' thinking changed and improved, they were able to see new relationships within existing knowledge. This awakening also allowed for transformation to take place with regard to the students' intrapersonal and interpersonal processes, resulting in greater cognitive and affective flexibility, a critical attitude during the interactive constructing process of reflective thinking (Chabeli 2004, 73).

In addition to the cognitive and affective awakening, the students became aware of the challenges in qualitative fieldwork, especially in relation to the interview process and their influence on the data collection process. A critical component of reflexivity is the aspect of self-correcting. In this instance the students were able to identify

aspects that they would pay attention to in future interviews, such as an attitude of unconditional acceptance, openness, empathy and interviewing techniques (for example active listening, attending, removing possible distractions and questioning techniques). These findings also align with those of Spall (1998, 286), who indicates that debriefing interviews allow for research skills to develop continuously. Feelings of fear and panic related to a lack of knowledge and experience were transformed into new affective states of confidence.

The students also noted that the experience involved in fieldwork was valuable in that the learning that took place had implications beyond the world of empirical research. Knowledge appropriation (Boud et al. 1985, 20), internalisation (Chabeli 2004, 73) and extrapolation (Geertsen 2003, 3) consequently took place, indicating a tentative movement towards consolidation and independent research practice.

The final feature of awareness related to the ethical ways of thinking and being in research. An unexpected finding relates to the students' limited ability to recognise ethical dilemmas or to demonstrate explicit ethical reasoning. The students had difficulty in establishing a link between the theory and practice regarding ethical issues during their fieldwork. Ethics is lived and practised in every moment of research and this is therefore a critical area of awareness. A study conducted by Hunick, Van Leewen, Jansen and Jochemsen (2009) on moral issues in mentoring sessions found that students rarely identified ethical or moral aspects of the problematic situations they experienced in their internships. Hunick et al. (2009, 496) warn that if the ethical and moral aspects of a given situation are not identified or discussed, students will not be competent to give an ethical account of their (research) activities. Further consolidation and internalisation is therefore still needed.

The supportive outcomes of the debriefing interviews and coaching conversations are comparable with the findings of Spall (1998, 280) and indicate a continued need for providing emotional support during fieldwork activities and the research process as a whole.

CONCLUSION

Debriefing interviews and coaching conversations are pragmatic strategies that may be utilised by the supervisor to promote student reflexivity and action during postgraduate supervision practice. These strategies could promote personal and methodological awareness, transformation, learning and support. Additionally, these strategies could provide the time and structure for critical reflexive practice and increase students' capability to act and react more quickly to research challenges, consequently increasing the integrity of the inquiry.

The implementation of these strategies has, however, raised various issues. Students need to be assisted to bracket their personal epistemological beliefs and the boundaries of their role as researcher (versus that of therapist). This may be done by introducing bracketing interviews (Rolls and Relf 2006, 290) before data collection. Additionally, students need to gain greater proficiency in making ethical

issues in their research more explicit and also reflect more deeply on these ethical issues. In this way they learn how to evaluate and justify their conduct with the aim of contributing to rigorous and ethical research practices.

Assisting students to think reflexively has limited value if the student has no inclination to use this skill. Kuhn (1999, 23–24) insists that 'people must see the point of thinking if they are to engage in it ... in the end, people think carefully and reflectively not out of habit, because such thinking is not an effortless habit to maintain, but because they are convinced of the value of doing so'. Students need guidance in incorporating their awareness and actions in their research findings. As supervisors we may promote the development and continued use of critical reflexive thinking by modelling a positive disposition to reflection, explaining the value of reflexivity and using debriefing interviews and coaching conversations regularly and consistently during the supervision practices.

A limitation in this inquiry may be the small scale of the inquiry. We suggest the implementation of these strategies within extended populations and contexts of postgraduate supervision and the publication of these findings. We also propose that researchers fully describe debriefing in their reports so that research consumers may judge the processes that contribute to the credibility of the findings. The possibility of electronic debriefing and coaching could also be explored as a means of supporting distance education students or where one-on-one conversations are not possible.

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