

# Maintaining Ontological Humility When Doing Research

By Marilyn K. Simon and Jim Goes

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Ontology answers the question: What is the nature of reality or truth? We demonstrate **ontological arrogance** when we see our perspective as privileged, and claim there is only way to interpret a situation; the way that we see it! Samardzic (2004) posited that ontological arrogance is normal and even cute in children (broccoli is gross! If you like broccoli you are gross!), but is much less charming in adults.

If you have ever referred to someone as an “idiot” (and who hasn’t?!), consider whether the person was truly an *idiot* and if this condition lead to his or her disagreeing with you, or was it by this disagreement that you concluded that this person was an *idiot*? It is unlikely that you would call someone who agrees with you an idiot. Naturally, it is arrogant to call or think that a person lacks intelligence because they do not agree with you. Each person has in any given situation a finite number of congruent choices and responses available to them (although the universe may offer an infinite number of choices), and can only operate out of a perceived finite set of choices, not out of the universal choice bank. The complexity of perceptions allows for incongruent behavior and vast differences across and between people. When we can accept these differences, we start to exhibit ontological humility.

**Ontological humility** is the admission that we do not have a special claim on reality or truth, or that particular perspectives, values, interpretations, or even religions have a special claim to reality, and that other perspectives and interpretations can have equal validity and deserve respect and consideration. We demonstrate ontological humility when we are open to seeing a situation from the perspectives of others and valuing those perspectives. Indeed, doing so may enable us to challenge our natural or comfortable ways of viewing and knowing “reality”, and help us to widen our perspective!

Ontological humility is maintained in our research when we are aware of our biases and consciously “bracket” them [See

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As researchers, we have an obligation to understand and present a balanced view, and scrutinize research that both supports and refutes our beliefs, hypotheses, and perspectives. Brown (1996) noted that the awareness of our biases, blind spots, and cognitive limitations is a priority in conducting scholarly research. Denzin (1989) suggested that all research is really about the researcher; but in order for the research to be of value, it must move beyond the researcher and researcher's situation, and demonstrate a respect for other, and even opposing, views.

To truly appreciate the complexities of the world and the intricacies of human experience, Gilovich (1991) argues that we need to understand how we can be misled by the apparent evidence of our experiences. We need to think clearly about our experiences, question our assumptions, and challenge what we

think we *know*, even when the data *agree* with what we believe is true. We should not accept a research study at face value just because the conclusion supports our belief or view of a situation.

Humility has the root in Latin word *humus*, meaning the earth which is beneath us. It enables us to not see other ideas as lesser or beneath our own. Ontological humility occurs when you acknowledge that there are many ways to look at the world and that some are more practical and *true* for *you* than others. Nevertheless, they are only *your* views. There are very few objective truths; most view points are interpretations that fit in with our personal maps, built by our limited senses, passing from our individual and unique filters that are woven from our past experiences and situatedness.

Ontological humility makes sense intellectually, but it is not the natural attitude of a human being, and often not learned in traditional education. It requires cognitive development and the ability to be open to ideas counter to your own. Ontological humility does not mean you have to disregard your own perspective. It is perfectly humble to state that the circumstances are *problematic* as long as you add *for me*. Such a statement acknowledges that the same circumstances may not appear problematic *to you*, but they may to others. When conversing with a person who has an opposing view, you can choose to truly listen to their arguments and seek to understand commonalities, if any, and try to ascertain the roots of the differences.

According to Kofman (2004, p. 34), “ontological arrogance is stiff and hard, ontological humility is flexible and supple.” When we become cognizant of our own mental models and how this effects what we see as the truth, we can be open to resolving complex situations and enhance the quality of our research. We need to understand the worldview of others and be open to the possibilities that our pre-conceived ideas may be erroneous. This will strengthen and enhance our research findings, and our own reasoning ability as well.

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