

# Some reflections on outsider and insider identities in ethnic and migrant qualitative research

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## Abstract

This article explores some of the methodological issues relating to outsider and insider identities in ethnic and migrant qualitative research. It draws upon two qualitative research studies that set out to examine older (55-75 years) migrant African Caribbean women's experiences of health and ageing in the UK. An aim is to problematise the conceptualisation of insiderness and outsiderhood as polarised and discrete, and provide some examples of how these identities might overlap and intersect. The article takes issue with the argument that it is both possible and desirable to 'match' the ethnic background of researcher and participant.

**Keywords:** Insider, outsider, ethnicity, reflexivity

## Introduction

A number of writers have commented on the methodological issues arising from biographical differences between researcher and research participant's when undertaking qualitative research (for example, Maynard 1994; Edwards 1996; Bhopal 2001; Gunaratnam 2003; Clingerman 2008). This has included discussion of specific aspects of identity, for example those relating to ethnicity, socio-economic class and gender, and how these interact to generate feelings of insiderness and outsiderhood. It has also provided insight into reflexive methodological approaches that engage with questions of identity, power, and how ethnic differences in the backgrounds of researcher and research participant shape the research process (e.g. Stanley & Wise 1990; Bahvnani 1991; Edwards 1996; Gunaratnam 2003; Ramji 2008). In this work, the importance of researcher reflexivity is emphasised as a central component of research methodology. It is also argued that within research 'one's self can't be left behind', and crucially, 'our consciousness is always the medium through which research occurs' (Stanley and Wise 1993: 157-161).

In this article we reflect on some of the insider and outsider issues arising from two research studies examining older (55-75 years) migrant African Caribbean women's experiences, of health and ageing in the UK. Insiderhood and outsiderhood are conceptualised as overlapping interconnected

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status positions (Merton 1972; Clingerman 2008). Throughout the discussion the authors are referred to as researcher A and researcher B. Researcher A identifies her ethnic background as white British<sup>1</sup> and researcher B as British African Caribbean. The parents of researcher B migrated to England in the 1960s from Grenada in the Caribbean. In contrast the parents of researcher A were born in England and have never lived anywhere else. Both researchers describe their socio-economic upbringing and background as working class, which was similar to the majority of their research participants. With regard to religious belief, researcher A does not have a strong affiliation and describes herself as agnostic. In contrast, researcher B describes herself as a practicing Roman Catholic. In terms of age, researcher A was 38 years old and researcher B was 33 years old when their research with older African Caribbean migrant women took place. Thus, there were similarities and differences in background between the two researchers, and between the researchers and their research participants.

### **Insiderness and Outsiderness in Ethnic and Migrant Research**

Interest in insider and outsider status has a long history that can be traced back to the work of sociologists such as for example Merton (1972) and Schutz (1976). Merton's influential work continues to provide an important backdrop to debates on the significance of what it means to be an insider and/or outsider, and the 'matching' of researcher and participant in order to increase the accuracy of research findings (e.g. Labaree 2002; Clingerman 2008). Merton (1972) identifies important issues that are relevant to current methodological debates and the arguments presented in this article. These include; the theorisation of outsider and insider identities as interactive and unstable rather than polarised and discrete, the problems arising from assuming that similarity of background between researcher and participant means they will share similar values, beliefs, and experiences.

Since Merton's (1972) paper, researchers have sought to examine the epistemological and methodological significance of insiderness, outsidership and the processes of 'othering' that may accompany them (e.g. Reinharz 1997; Hill-Collins 2000; Acker 2001; Sherif 2001; Labaree 2002; Sin 2008). Some researchers have focused on the significance of 'insiderness' (Bhopal 2001; Sherif 2001; Labaree 2002; Papadopoulos & Lees 2002) whilst others have examined 'outsiderness' (Edwards 1996; Pitman 2002; Reed 2005). Yet this positioning of insider and outsider identities as opposites is problematic because it does not take into account the ways in which identities interconnect, and 'are marked by the multiplicity of subject positions that constitute the subject' (Brah 1996: 123). Thus identities are not static and fixed but are fragmented and subject to constant alteration (Hall 1990; Bauman 1996). Moreover as Hall suggests, 'identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position our-

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<sup>1</sup> Here whiteness is defined as an ethnic category as discussed by Frankenberg (1993). The authors recognize the heterogeneity of the categories of 'white' and 'African Caribbean'.

selves within, the narratives of the past' (1990: 223). The process of identity disruption and re-formation is an integral part of research. For example, when researcher and participant discuss and compare their different 'narratives of the past', previously held understandings and perceptions that construct aspects of insiderness and outsiderhood are often disrupted.

The fluctuating rather than static nature of ethnic identities has been explored by some researchers (e.g. Naples 1997; Sherif, 2001; Gunaratnam 2003; Clingerman 2008), however these are notable exceptions<sup>2</sup>. One main point of contention is whether it is possible or desirable to 'match' researcher and participant backgrounds, and the extent to which this increases the authenticity and validity of qualitative research (Bhopal 2001; Papadopoulos and Lees 2002). For example, Bhopal argues her insider status, as a South Asian woman, meant that she 'was able to empathise with these women in a way perhaps white women were not' (2001: 284). She goes on to add that white researchers undertaking research with Asian and black participants 'may have preconceived ideas about the particular group they study, which will be rooted in their own whiteness and their own ethnocentrism' (Bhopal 2001: 284).

Others have argued that the greater the ethnic similarities between researcher and research participant the more likelihood there is of accessing information and developing trust and rapport (Edwards 1990; Papadopoulos and Lees 2002). Nevertheless, such approaches tend to essentialise characteristics of ethnic and cultural identity as distinct and fixed. This effectively recreates whiteness as the 'norm' and minority ethnic as the 'Other' (Frankenberg 1993; Moreton-Robinson 2004). Additionally, this perpetuates whiteness as the 'norm' from which difference becomes constructed as the 'Other' (Said 1978).

### **Our reflections on access and trust in the research process**

This section explores the extent to which our different ethnic backgrounds influenced access to our participants and the development of trust. Researcher A negotiated access to the group through a gatekeeper, a white British health promotion community worker. In contrast, researcher B had worked with older women in the Black community for a number of years and was able to contact potential participants personally. Although initially it seemed that gaining access would be easier for researcher B this was not always the case, as she comments:

*From the beginning I felt my insiderhood would mean that all the women would accept and participate in the research. I felt an insider because we shared similarities in ethnic, cultural, and social class backgrounds and*

<sup>2</sup> Researchers have tended to focus on either the significance of 'insiderhood' (Bhopal 2001; Labaree 2002; Papadopoulos & Lees 2002) or 'outsiderhood' (Edwards 1996; Pitman 2002; Reed 2005). This binary positioning of insiderhood and outsiderhood does not take into account the fluidity of these identities and statuses.

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*all had a similar religious affiliation. However, two of the women declined to participate.*

One of these potential participants did not meet the inclusion criteria. The second refused to participate because she did not want to be involved in a focus group discussion with women from the same community. For researcher B, belonging to the 'same community' raised issues about anonymity and confidentiality. There was concern that information from the interview would not remain confidential. This highlights how perceived insiderness may become an obstacle to the recruitment of participants.

In contrast, researcher A's participants all agreed to be interviewed despite what might have been regarded as her 'outside' ethnic status. Here, similarities between the researcher and potential interview participants were important in determining her status within the group as both insider and outsider:

*As I got to know the participants both similarities and differences emerged between us that did not simply place us as 'outsider' or 'insider'. Some of my experiences connected with theirs, particularly in relation to class background. I often find myself occupying insider and outsider status positions at the same time. For example, certain aspects of my identity and biographical details, such as ethnicity and age mark me as 'outsider', whilst others such as class background, gender, and parental status define me as 'insider'. However, these markers of identity status are also subject to continual re-interpretation. This means that my insider and outsider statuses fluctuate constantly and interconnect to produce unexpected effects (Research diary, researcher A).*

Thus, although there were ethnic and cultural differences between researcher A and the participants there were also similarities of experience based on motherhood, social class, gender, and previous occupation. The age difference between the participants and researcher A and B also influenced the power dynamics that ensued in a similar way (Thapar-Bjorkert 1999). Age was regarded as a marker of status so that older age denoted wisdom and was viewed with respect by the participants generally. Interestingly, the younger age of the two researchers did not increase their outsider status as expected. Unexpectedly it meant that the participants described their experiences of past events in more detail because they assumed the researchers were too young to have first hand experience of them. As such, the data that was generated was perhaps more in-depth than it would have been if the participants and researchers had been of a similar age.

Initially being a member of the community enabled researcher B to gain access and contributed to levels of trust (Haniff 1985; Bhopal 2001). However, this development of trust may also have been influenced by her 'outsider' status as a University researcher:

*I think access was gained easily because I shared the same ethnic status and was known to the women. Also, I had already established initial levels of trust. However, maybe access was gained because of my outsidership because the participants are interested in the research and want to be involved, or maybe they have their own 'agenda'? (Researcher B).*

It is interesting that although there are similarities in ethnic and cultural background between researcher B and her participants, her ability to gain access may also have been influenced by her perceived professional 'stranger' identity (Shutz 1976; Agar 1980). This highlights the ways in which presumed outsidership and insidership intersect to create unexpected effects. It also means that it is unclear whether this initial trust was influenced by researcher B's perceived insider ethnic status, or simply a consequence of the participants existing trust in the gatekeeper who had recommended the research to them.

*(...) I have got participants for the interviews. I think they trust me, otherwise, knowing them, they would have said no, or maybe it's because of the trust they have in the person that recommended the research to them? (Research diary, researcher B)*

It seems likely that the participants would not have agreed to participate had they not had some degree of trust in researcher B (Clingerman 2008). Nevertheless, sharing similar ethnic backgrounds was not the only factor in establishing access and trust; the existing relationship of trust between the gatekeeper, who recommended the research to the participants, and the participants was also an important factor.

Researcher A also commented on how getting to know the participants enabled trust to develop:

*Empathy and trust between us developed as we shared stories about our different life experiences. I realised that it was only through spending time together that any sort of trust could be established. Trust is earned and cannot be presumed on the basis of any perceived similarities and differences between us (Research diary).*

Through this process of swapping stories about different life experiences ethnocentric 'insider outsider' identities were disrupted and challenged (Lorde 1984; Brah 1996). Additionally, because researcher A's white ethnic identity was situated in difference to the African Caribbean identities of the participants its visibility as an ethnic category was increased (Frankenberg 1993; Brah 1996).

Differences emerged between researcher A and B regarding the type and depth of information gained from the participants in relation to ethnic background and cultural rules about privacy. Researcher B did not ask her

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participants to self-define their ethnic identities because she felt that the participants assumed that she did not need to ask, due to her similar ethnic background. Additionally, with regard to privacy researcher B was aware of 'cultural rules' about the appropriateness of discussing matrimonial matters outside of the immediate family, this made her feel uneasy about discussing what might be construed as private matters in an interview setting.

Further, we found that because researcher A did not share the same ethnic background the participants were more likely to elaborate on issues relating to history and tradition. In contrast, the shared ethnic background and culture created problems for researcher B because participants would often assume that she had knowledge, passed to her generationally, of Black experiences in the UK. However at times her participants also assumed that her knowledge and experiences of life in the Caribbean would differ, due to her age and the Caribbean island her parents had originated from. Consequently homeland island identities and age could be used as markers of difference to disrupt researcher B's insider status and place her as insider and outsider simultaneously. This example highlights how the process of 'Othering' may still occur regardless of presumed similarities between the ethnic background of researcher and participant (Said 1978; Thapar-Bjorkert 1999).

Researcher B's similar ethnic background meant that her participants assumed she had knowledge of their experiences. Sometimes this meant they did not elaborate on particular issues but instead would say 'you know what I mean don't you'. This was especially apparent when examples of racism were discussed.

*No concerns with discussing racism. The women were very open and I felt comfortable with discussing these issues. At times they would say 'you know what I mean don't you' and expect me to know the full details of their negative experiences. I had to ask them to fully explain. Our experiences were similar, but also different (Research diary, researcher B).*

Researcher B and her participants had a shared understanding of experiences of racism and she found herself personally empathising with their experiences (Bhopal 2001). However although researcher B's knowledge and experience of racism positioned her as insider, the participants' discussion of ethnic and cultural knowledge could quickly move to include topics that she knew nothing about, at these times she felt like an outsider. Subsequently, researcher B often occupied insider and outsider positions simultaneously as her cultural knowledge about the participants ethnic experiences varied throughout the interviews. At times, the participants tended to assume that she had greater knowledge of their lives and experiences than she did; this sometimes meant that they did not elaborate on particular issues.

Her experiences highlight the fluid and unstable nature of ethnic identity construction and insider outsider positions, moreover, why it is unrealistic to

assume that the identities of researcher and participant can somehow be 'matched' (Hall 1991; Khan 1998; Gunaratnam 2003; Clingerman 2008). Instead our experiences suggest that ethnic and cultural differences between researcher and research participant do not simply have a negative or positive effect on the research process. Moreover the assumption that researcher and participant should be ethnically matched is problematically based on the idea that ethnic identities are *essentially* and categorically different (Gunaratnam 2001, 2003). A potential consequence of this is the reproduction and reification of those ethnocentric ideologies that are divisive and likely to create, rather than challenge misunderstandings (Lorde 1984).

### Constructing whiteness as 'Other'

In subtle ways researcher A was constructed as the 'Other' during interview discussion. It is interesting to reflect on the processes through which this occurred. For example, participants inadvertently referred to their own ethnic status as 'other' to the researchers'. This was particularly evident when researcher A asked the participants about their ethnic identity and how they viewed this. Despite this being a sensitive question, all of the participants answered and explained their affiliation to different Caribbean islands and why this was important to them. However the participants did not ask the researcher about her own white ethnic identity but they did sometimes allude to in response to other questions. For example, when discussing the topic of menopause Jane commented on how Black women experienced this differently to white women:

*'We' don't have one. I didn't have anything. At home it's so hot...we don't notice hot flushes. We just carry on. Here it's the same we don't let it stop us doing anything we ignore it.*

Interestingly, although researcher A is not identified as 'white' in an overt way, by Jane or Marie, there is a presumption that she does not belong to the 'we' category. Marie and Jane also referred to skin colour as symbolic of cultural differences between themselves and Researcher A:

*(...) you find that 'our' skin is really....might be darker but you hardly find a lot of wrinkles in 'our' faces. People say 'blimey you haven't got a lot of wrinkles', and you find that white people have a lot of wrinkles. The skin that 'we' get...the skin that 'we' have... (Marie). 'Cause 'we' don't go out in the sun you know...? (Jane) Well black people don't sit in the sun (Marie).*

These quotations reveal the momentary and understated ways in which the process of othering may occur. In these examples, researcher A is constructed as the 'Other' due to her white identity (Said 1978). Thus, being white was sometimes read as symbolic of other differences such as tradition and history. Nevertheless, it was equally apparent that researcher A's 'in-

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siderness', her working class background her experiences of motherhood and gender, overlapped and merged with issues associated with outsider-ness. Moments like this are important in research because they make visible those differences that construct experiences of otherness, insiderness and outsiderhood (Lorde 1984:112). They also reveal the subtle ways in which ethnic identities shift and reconfigure, making it possible to occupy insider outsider positions simultaneously.

### Concluding comments

We set out to examine issues relating to researcher insiderness and outsiderhood. One aim was to problematise the conceptualisation of insiderness and outsiderhood as polarised and discrete and provide examples of how they might overlap and intersect (Naples 1997 Gunaratnam 2003). We have shown that similarity of background between researcher and participant may be less important than the identification, scrutinisation and destabilisation of those power relations that maintain insiderness and outsiderhood and the essentialised categories that re/inscribe the 'Other'. It is this reflexive engagement with difference that serves as a vehicle for social and political change. As Lorde puts it: "Difference must not be merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic" (1984:111).

It is perhaps only through this type of reflexive engagement with notions of difference or 'outsiderhood' that we might move beyond notions of identities and insider outsider positions as static and challenge the false ethnocentric categories these inevitably (re) affirm and (re) create.

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