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From the Outside Looking in: How an Awareness of Difference Can Benefit the Qualitative Research Process

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Abstract

While much has been written on the problems that can arise when interviewing respondents from a different social group, less attention has been paid to its potential benefits for the research process. In this paper we argue that, by being conscious of one's outsider status, an interviewer can use it as a tool through which to elicit detailed and comprehensive accounts from respondents, and ensure rigorous and critical analysis of the data produced.

Keywords

Outsider, Insider, Research, Ethnicity, Interviews, and Qualitative Research

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From the Outside Looking in: How an Awareness of Difference Can Benefit the Qualitative Research Process

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While much has been written on the problems that can arise when interviewing respondents from a different social group, less attention has been paid to its potential benefits for the research process. In this paper we argue that, by being conscious of one's outsider status, an interviewer can use it as a tool through which to elicit detailed and comprehensive accounts from respondents, and ensure rigorous and critical analysis of the data produced. Key Words: Outsider, Insider, Research, Ethnicity, Interviews, and Qualitative Research

It has been widely argued that the researcher must be part of the social group he or she is researching in order to truly understand participants' experiences. This is particularly the case with communities that are disadvantaged or disempowered. Women (Devault, 1990), religious and ethnic minorities (Barrett & McIntosh, 1985; Carby, 1982; Shah, 2004), and disabled people (Charlton, 1998) have all criticised research undertaken by "outsiders" for failing to comprehend or accurately represent their experiences. However, aside from a few notable exceptions (Bridges, 2001; Hall, 2004; Haw, 1996), much less has been written on the ways in which outsider status can be used to positive effect. Reflecting on our own experiences of being perceived as outsiders, we argue that the differences between researcher and respondent can be used as a tool to provide a particular perspective. We are not claiming that being an outsider is preferable to being an "insider," but rather that acknowledging one's outsider status can help the researcher to gain detailed and comprehensive accounts from his or her interviewees. Furthermore, it can encourage thorough and rigorous analysis by enabling the researcher to maintain a critical distance from the data.

Carrying Out Research as an "Outsider"

Before exploring the potential benefits of acknowledging one's outsider status, we first wish to problematise the insider/outsider dichotomy and examine some common criticisms of outsider research. A key problem with ideas of insiders and outsiders is that they essentialise categories, overlooking the significant differences within as well as between groups, and failing to take account of the flexible and multifaceted nature of identity. Researchers can differ from, or be similar to, the people they are researching in a variety of ways: age, caste, ethnicity, religious belief, physical ability, personality,

sexuality, and class to name but a few. A similarity in one of these spheres does not necessarily make an insider, just as a difference in one area does not necessarily make an outsider. Researchers are always both insiders and outsiders in every research setting, and are likely to oscillate between these positions as they move in and out of similarity and difference, both within and between interviews. Given the flexible nature of these positions, it would be infeasible to restrict researchers to interviewing those who they see, or who see them, as an insider.

There are several other practical problems with constraining researchers to exploring groups of which they are considered an insider. Such a system would require the classification of people into categories, forcing researchers to identify themselves as either insiders or outsiders of a series of groups. It would also require decisions to be made about precisely where the boundaries of groups lie, and whether those on the margins of groups fall inside or outside. Matters of identity are ambiguous and constantly in flux, and the categories themselves are imprecise, making such decisions extremely problematic (Gunaratnam, 2003; Haw, 1996; Young, 2004). Another question to arise would be: How many criteria of similarity do researcher and interviewee have to have in common in order for them to be considered matched? Can a Pakistani Muslim woman only be interviewed by a Pakistani Muslim female researcher, or will any Pakistani person do, or any Muslim, or any woman? Restricting researchers to interviewing people with whom they perceive themselves as sharing key characteristics would also lead to minority researchers being extremely limited in the research they can conduct (Rhodes, 1994). Such a system would in practice be infeasible, and even if it were feasible it would not necessarily be desirable.

Underlying many criticisms of outsider research is the assumption that some accounts are more accurate or reliable than others. In defending the value of outsider research, we would argue that the responses given by an interviewee should not be judged as either accurate or distorted representations of reality (Gudmundsdottir, 1996). Rather, they should be perceived as context specific and equally valid accounts (Rhodes, 1994). The value of both insider and outsider perspectives was famously discussed by anthropologist Kenneth Pike who, in 1954, coined the terms “emic” and “etic” to describe different standpoints on human behaviour. Pike (2003) claimed that etic (outsider) accounts should not be considered superior to emic (insider) accounts, as all claims to knowledge are ultimately subjective. We share Pike’s view that, while insider and outsider researchers may receive different responses, each account is interesting and meaningful in its own right. By reflecting on their relationship to their respondents and making this explicit, researchers allow their accounts to be judged alongside a range of others in any research area. As well as allowing contrasting accounts to be openly evaluated, an explicit awareness of one’s outsider status can also benefit both data collection and analysis.

In order to explore these potential benefits, we draw on two separate studies in which each researcher was aware of being considered an outsider. The first study (conducted by the author, CT, and referred to as the Education Study) examined the debate over the state funding of Muslim schools in Britain, exploring the arguments used by the main stakeholders involved, including representatives of religious organisations, politicians, Muslim parents, and head teachers (Tinker, 2006). The second study (conducted by the author, NA, and referred to as the Health Study) explored lay women’s

views, understandings, and experiences of cervical cancer screening in the context of the National Health Service Cervical Screening Programme operating in England at the time (Armstrong, 2004, 2005).

Although these two studies may in some ways appear very different, there are a number of important similarities that are valuable to explore, particularly in terms of their design, the biographies of the researchers, and how an awareness of their outsider status played out in the research process. Both studies were conducted as PhD theses, used qualitative semi-structured interviews, and included significant numbers of participants whose ethnic and/or religious background was different from that of the researcher. In terms of the similarities between the researchers' personal biographies, both were in their mid-20s, female, white, British, and not formally religious. Consequently, both researchers experienced being considered outsiders on numerous grounds, but particularly in terms of ethnicity and religious belief (examples to follow). This is in line with Shah (2004) and Young's (2004) conception that researchers are outsiders when interviewing participants from different ethnic and/or religious groups.

As postgraduates working in the same institution, we informally shared our experiences of interviewing members of ethnic and religious groups different to our own. This led us to recognise that we had utilised our outsider status in similar ways. We then began to consider our experiences more systematically. Initially, we reviewed our interview transcripts and research diaries to identify our individual experiences. Then we listed and compared the ways in which we had used our outsider status in different situations. In the course of discussion and debate between ourselves and our research supervisors, we consolidated this list into the broad categories discussed in this article. Through this process of critical self-reflection (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003) we identified four ways in which researchers can use their outsider status to elicit detailed and thorough accounts from their interviewees. By acknowledging their lack of cultural knowledge the researcher can: (a) elicit detailed responses, (b) minimise the respondents' fear of being judged, (c) ask some questions that a researcher from the same cultural group may not feel able to, and (d) maintain a critical distance from the data.

Lack of Knowledge Can Elicit Detailed Responses

Reed (2000) explains that during her research, exploring the health beliefs and behaviours of British Asian mothers, the differences between herself and her respondents were constantly shifting within interviews and were rarely equal. While at times she was perceived as a "medical expert," at others this was subverted and the position of dominance shifted to the respondent as they moved on to topics with which she was unfamiliar, such as advice on alternative, non-western medicine. Reflecting on our research experience, we will demonstrate that allowing the respondent to adopt the position of "expert" can empower the interviewee and help produce detailed and comprehensive interview data.

In the early stages of the Health Study, NA was initially concerned about how to explore religious and cultural ideas with which she was largely unfamiliar in an interview context, particularly in terms of avoiding offence or misrepresentation. Instead of trying to educate herself about these issues outside of the interview context, she adopted a strategy of presenting herself as someone who was largely unfamiliar with the topics

being discussed and asked for further information and explanations. Therefore, instead of trying to “play down” her outsider status, NA actively drew attention to the differences between herself and her participants, and used this as a means through which to seek further detail. This commonly took the form of saying something along the lines of, “It seems that X is important in how you think about this but I’m afraid I don’t know much about it. Can you please explain it to me and say why it is important?” This strategy enabled the acquisition of in-depth accounts by asking respondents to explain their underlying beliefs and assumptions.

The strategy of cultural ignorance can also have the benefit of empowering the interviewee by putting him/her in the position of authority about the topic in question. This was evident in the Education Study in which stakeholders were interviewed about their views on state funded Muslim schools. Many of the Muslim interviewees assumed that CT had absolutely no knowledge about Islam, and were keen to explain the central elements of the religion to her. Rather than try to demonstrate her knowledge of Islam, CT allowed these interviewees to describe their faith, encouraging them to take on the role of educator. Putting less confident interviewees into a position of authority encouraged them to talk more freely, thereby eliciting more detailed and in-depth accounts. Although we did not explicitly ask interviewees about their experience of this approach, some did mention that they found being able to take on this role, and to talk in such detail, enjoyable.

Less Fear of Judgement

A second potential benefit of the researcher being of a different religious or ethnic group to his or her respondents is that it may enable interviewees to share their views without fear of judgement. Research on interviewer effects has focussed primarily on race, claiming that in order to get the most accurate and truthful answers, interviewer and respondent should be racially matched. This was based on the concern that respondents have been found to be more likely to give the socially acceptable response to interviewers of a different race, particularly when asked race-related questions (Anderson, Silver, & Abramson, 1988; Hyman, 1954, as cited in Fielding & Thomas, 2001). However, other studies have challenged this finding, claiming that some respondents may speak more freely to an interviewer of a different ethnic or religious group (Haw, 1998; Jayaraman, 1979). One possible explanation for this is that respondents may choose not to disclose their views and experiences to a person who shares their value systems and therefore poses the risk of judging them negatively.

In the Education Study, Muslim parents were asked their reasons for choosing to send their child to a certain school, and the relative importance placed on academic standards and religious ethos. Bearing in mind the arguments put forward above, we would suggest that if a Muslim researcher had asked these questions there may have been a concern on the part of the respondents that if they did not emphasise the religious element of education they would be judged negatively. It is therefore possible that, if speaking to an interviewer of the same faith, Muslim parents may have focussed on the role of religion in their choice of school, perceiving that to be the socially acceptable response. Arguably, a non-Muslim researcher might therefore get a response that is less inhibited by social sensitivity and fear of judgement.

Comprehensive Interview Questions

In Kaye Haw's (1998) research on Muslim school children she observed that the researcher's closeness to the subject of investigation can blunt his or her criticality, causing them to overlook, or take for granted, aspects which are familiar to them. We concur that if researchers assume that they share common cultural values and experiences with their respondent, this may impact on the interview questions they pose. Firstly, it is possible that they may neglect to ask some questions, believing the answer to be too insignificant or obvious. Secondly, there may be some questions which a researcher might think to ask, but would not do so for fear of appearing "stupid". The distance created by outsider status can help the researcher to avoid these potential pitfalls. It may be interesting to consider how far this "uninformed outsider" position is maintained, as it is conceivable that, after carrying out multiple interviews, the researcher may begin to present himself/herself as becoming an insider, or at least an informed outsider. In our experience, we found it worked best to maintain the uninformed outsider position, and that this was relatively straightforward as we interviewed each participant only once. We were also beginning to appreciate that, although we may have been developing an awareness of what the issues were in the respective studies, the way(s) in which these were interpreted and understood could vary enormously among different interviewees.

In the Health Study, it became apparent that stressing NA's relative ignorance enabled exploration of the varying ways in which the same issues were discussed by different participants. For example, she was able to ask interviewees to explain their understanding of Islamic teachings on women's modesty before going on to explore their impact on women's cervical screening decisions. Rather than NA making assumptions about an individual's appreciation of particular cultural and religious ideas, she was able to explore the differences in how they were understood and employed. NA's outsider status enabled her to ask questions that a researcher of the same ethnicity or religion may not have felt free to ask.

Maintaining Criticality in Analysis

Closeness to the subject of investigation might also prevent researchers from approaching their data analysis with the necessary criticality. Critics of cross-cultural research (e.g., Shah, 2004) have suggested that the analysis of data in outsider research is likely to be less accurate than in insider research. Misunderstanding and error are risks in all qualitative data analysis, but it is alleged that the likelihood is increased when there are cultural differences between the researcher and the interviewee. The lack of shared culture is argued to increase the risk of the researcher misunderstanding or misinterpreting an interviewee's statements.

We suggest, however, that closeness to the data can hinder a researcher's ability to be rigorous in his or her analysis. Perceiving oneself as holding similar values or beliefs to a respondent may lead a researcher to assume a particular interpretation of the data. In contrast, a sense of distance may enable him or her to remain detached and view data critically. According to Bauman (2001), an ability to go beyond everyday assumption is fundamental to sociological understandings. A researcher who has a lack of

familiarity with a respondent's lived experiences may be well-placed to critically evaluate the respondent's everyday assumptions. While we acknowledge that outsider status could potentially limit a researcher's understanding of the material, it can also improve data analysis by allowing him or her to maintain a sense of critical distance from the topic of investigation. It is, of course, important to stress that this approach is far more suited to research in which the aim of the analysis is to develop a grounded theory from the data, rather than to re-present the lived experience of the interviewees. In the case of the latter, continual checking of interpretation and analysis would be necessary in order to ensure that the final rendering was meaningful to the participants. However, this is much less of an issue in the case of the former, of which the two research studies discussed in this paper are examples. In this type of work, the focus is on ensuring that the analysis is credible through discussion and debate with co-researchers/ supervisors, and the interrogation of peer reviewers through the publication process.

Conclusion

We began by asserting that the insider/outsider dichotomy is simplistic, as it fails to recognise that we are all insiders and outsiders to varying extents in every research setting. By reflecting on the extent to which we were different from our research participants, we have challenged the conclusions of Shah (2004) and others that outsider status necessarily impacts negatively on interview research. Drawing on examples from our research experiences, we have argued that being from a different ethnic or religious group to one's respondents can in fact have potential benefits for the research process. It can enable the researcher to elicit detailed responses, ask comprehensive interview questions, minimise the respondent's fear of being judged, and maintain criticality in data analysis. There are, of course, certain circumstances in which emphasising one's outsider status may hinder the research, perhaps because of reluctance on the part of potential interviewees to talk to a researcher presenting themselves as an outsider, or fear of recrimination if they do. However, in some instances, being "on the outside looking in" can provide a valuable sense of distance, which can allow the researcher an insight into other people's social worlds.

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