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Gender, identity and experience: Researching marginalised groups

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SYNOPSIS

This article will examine the status of the researcher when conducting research with Gypsy families and Asian women. It will explore how the positioning of the researcher as an outsider and insider can affect the research relationship and can be a useful and privileged position from which to engage in the research process. Gender, identity and experience can create a shared empathy and a shared understanding between the respondent and the researcher in which trust and rapport can encourage respondents to open up and discuss their personal experiences. The article also examines the complexities and tensions associated with how the status and identity of the interviewer can affect the research relationship and how an appreciation of difference is fundamental to this process.

Introduction

There is a sizeable body of literature that has explored feminist methodological issues (Cook and Fonow, 1990; Nielsen, 1990; Reinharz, 1992). Some writers have focussed on epistemological concerns (Harding, 1991; Stanley and Wise, 1993) whilst others have outlined the benefits of 'woman to woman' interviewing (Finch, 1984; Oakley, 1981). Such researchers have argued that research/interview relationships should be non-hierarchical, non-exploitative, reciprocal and work on a 'participatory model' in which the researcher shares their own biography with the researched. However black feminists criticised early feminist research for focussing on the experiences of white, middle class women whilst neglecting those of black working class women (Carby, 1982; Hill Collins 1991; Phoenix, 1987). Hill Collins (1986) has argued that by using their personal and cultural biographies and their 'outsider-within' status, black female academics are able to engage with the Academy from a particular black feminist standpoint.

Researchers have begun to recognise how the interrelationship of factors such as 'race', class and gender can construct and reproduce difference in the research process (Hill Collins, 1991; Phoenix, 2001). As a result, a growing literature has attempted to explore the effects of 'race' on the interview process and the complexities involved in this (author ref; Mirza, 1998; Phoenix, 2001; Bhopal, 2009) such as the commonalities and differences between the researcher and the researched (Egharevba, 2001) and how distance can encourage disclosure as well as highlight the difficulties associated with commonality by the researcher (author ref; Song and Parker, 2001). Edwards (1990) has examined the process of interracial interviewing and argued that 'race' plays a fundamental part in the research relationship which affects how the interviewer and the interviewee are *placed*. In her research (a white woman interviewing black women) acknowledging difference *encouraged* black respondents to discuss private and intimate details of their lives. Her focus on reflexivity encouraged an active engagement with difference. Egharevba (2001) in her research (a black woman interviewing South Asian women) emphasised how a shared experience of racism between the researcher and the interviewee may affect the research relationship more significantly than shared gender, language, religion and culture can. This is also supported by Rakhit (1998) who articulates how her gender and shared identity encouraged respondents to discuss their experiences of racism in schools. Such research has highlighted the complexities and tensions associated with how the status and identity of the interviewer can affect the research relationship.

This article will examine the outsider and insider status of the researcher when conducting research with marginalised

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groups. It will provide a reflexive account of my research with Gypsy[1] mothers and Asian women in England, UK. It will examine the ways in which our status positions us within the research process. The paper will draw upon two research projects. The first piece of research examined issues of educational achievement, attendance and social exclusion experienced by Gypsy communities.[2] The second piece of research examined Asian women's participation in higher education and their views on arranged marriages, dowries and their experiences of being 'othered' within the university environment.[3]

The research context

In both research projects I sought to develop a feminist research methodology. Whilst there is no general agreement to the definition of such a methodology, there are certain principles which can be applied to using such a method. Allen and Walker state, 'Feminism is a perspective (a way of seeing), an epistemology (a way of knowing) and an ontology (a way of being in the world)' (1992: 201). I aimed to challenge the 'passivity, subordination and silencing of women' (Maynard, 1994: 23) in order to encourage women to tell their stories. I agree with Campbell and Wasco (2000: 783) that the aim of feminist research is 'to capture women's lived experiences in a respectful manner that legitimates women's voices as sources of knowledge'. I also took the view that within the research process, we are as researchers *part* of the research and as Stanley and Wise state, research 'is a process that occurs through the medium of a person — the researcher is always and inevitably *in* the research. This exists whether openly stated or not' (original emphasis) (1993: 175). I wanted to 'identify the ways in which multiple forms of oppression impact women's lives and empower women to tell their stories by providing a respectful and egalitarian research environment' (Campbell and Wasco, 2000:787). I did this by adopting an interpretive approach belonging to the tradition of qualitative research methods in which I wanted to guard against any type of exploitation and create a process which would empower the research participants. This was achieved through the respondents having an active and direct involvement in the research in a collaboration which existed between the researchers, the participants and the communities. Women's responses were discussed and they agreed the content of their interviews which would be made public and shared with academic and non-academic audiences. If women were uncomfortable with some of their responses, then the responses were not disclosed.

Research with marginalised communities (such as Gypsies and Asian women) can involve researching sensitive issues such as challenging stereotypes and addressing issues of racism. Gypsy women spoke about their marginalised status by referring to the racism their families suffered on a daily basis. Many of the Asian women also mentioned racism in relation to how they were seen inside and outside of the Academy. For such research qualitative methods were used as they are flexible, fluid and better suited to understand the meanings, interpretations and subjective experiences of those groups who may be marginalised, 'hard to reach' or remain silenced (Hutchinson et al., 2000).

Gaining access and the role of gatekeepers

Accessing Gypsy families

In researching Gypsy families, access was gained via the Traveller Education Service (TES). The TES was set up in the late 1970s to provide support and assistance for nomadic families in securing access to schools. The TES is known to assist families in many ways, from finding school places for children to filling out forms and attending meetings with and on their behalf. The TES have consistently been defined as providing the most effective means of improving Gypsy children's experiences and access to education (author ref, Bhopal, 2004 Tyler, 2005). Members of the TES work closely with Gypsy families and most have built long term relationships with families over time and as a result families place a great deal of trust in the TES. The TES were critical in gaining access to the Gypsy families as Gypsy communities are seen as being close knit communities who have their own social norms of conduct and behaviour. Outsiders who do not identify with the group are regarded as suspicious and it would be extremely difficult (unthinkable even) to walk onto a site and ask to speak to parents about their educational experiences. Middle class well dressed researchers with their digital recorders and lap tops would immediately be assumed to be from social or educational welfare services. The trust the families placed in the TES was demonstrated by Mrs Cox[4] a Gypsy parent,

> We know and trust Jane (TES member). If we have any problems we know we can go to her and she will sort them out. She won't judge us and she will be on our side.

The schools also emphasised the important role of the TES in gaining access to the Gypsy families, as demonstrated by Mrs Jones (head of secondary school).

> You have to speak to Paula first (head of the TES). I think once and only then if she is ok with the research she will then explain it to the families and then it's up to them. Then they will give you permission to speak to the children. If it comes from me or you they won't want to be involved. They won't trust you. It has to come from her. They know her and trust her.

The TES were cautious in agreeing to the research project as in the past some researchers had used the research situation to exploit Gypsies and Travellers. As Paula said,

> Sometimes when people ask to do research here [with the Gypsy and Traveller communities] I have to question their motives. I don't know if all they want to do is to reproduce the stereotypes that exist. I don't know if they just want to exploit them because there is a lot of prejudice against them [Gypsy and Traveller communities] so I don't always say yes to them.

The TES agreed to negotiate access to the Gypsy families. One reason for this may have been the recognition that the research was funded and supported by the local education authority (Ethnic Minority Achievement Service) and would be instrumental in improving the educational experiences of

Gypsy children and their families. I was accompanied by the TES to the site to meet with the families and was introduced to the families by the TES. Once this contact was established, it was possible for the research team to visit the site alone to conduct the interviews (although in reality this did not happen as all of the families requested the TES to be present at the beginning of, but not during the interview). I was introduced first to Mrs Smith who was the matriarch of the community. It was evident that I had to be accepted first by her, and seen as 'legitimate' in my role as researcher before I was given access to other families on the site. As Paula said,

> You know Mrs Smith she's the one who knows everyone on the site and she has to be happy with the research. She will tell all the other families about it and they will listen to what she says. You know that word of mouth can be a powerful thing in the Traveller communities.

Mrs Smith was quite happy that I wanted to speak to members of the community and indicated that if there was anyone I needed to speak to, she would happily put in a 'good word' for me.

In accessing Gypsy families, both formal (TES) and informal (community members) gatekeepers were used. If the TES did not trust the research team access would not have been granted. Groups such as Gypsies who are 'marginal, hidden or unwilling to speak about their experiences' may be reluctant to enter into the research (Dickson-Swift, 2005: 25) and the role of gatekeepers (such as the TES) can be crucial in gaining access, 'having a visible and respected individual who holds a position of authority, high respect or leadership' to introduce researchers to the groups is often essential (Tewksbury and Gagne, 2001: 78). The person in authority will 'act as a bridge to link into a new social world, as a guide who points out what occurs and how culturally different actions are locally meaningful, or as a patron who helps to secure the trust of community members' (Tewksbury and Gagne, 2001: 78). The TES as gatekeepers held the keys to the community and influential community members held the keys to the families. At each stage of the gate keeping process, approval had to be obtained. It was only then that the interviews with families were able to take place.

Accessing Asian women

As the research focus was the experiences of Asian women in higher education, it made sense to access the sample from universities where women were currently studying. Initially several university departments were contacted about the research and asked for data on the ethnic background of students who were attending particular courses, along with a list of names and contact details. I was told by one university that they were 'not allowed' to give out such information and that the only information that was available was by department and not by course. Another university refused outright to cooperate and said that they simply had no time to give me such information and also questioned what the research was for, with an indication that my focus was to criticise the university's equality policies. I did assure them that the research was about the *experiences* of Asian women at university and not university policies, but was still refused access. I then decided to use personal contacts in other universities. I sought to speak to individuals who worked in universities where I knew there was a large intake of minority ethnic students. After having spoken to colleagues at one of the universities which expressed an interest in the research, we proceeded to get ethical clearance from both my own university and the participating university. Once ethical clearance was granted notices were displayed around the campus requesting Asian women students to participate. The notice provided details of the research such as ethical considerations of anonymity and confidentiality as well some personal information about myself — that I was an academic at a different institution and that I was a British woman of Asian Indian descent. Initially the notices attracted little attention. After receiving only two responses over a period of three weeks, I asked a colleague to make an announcement during several lectures to inform students about the research. This prompted only a handful of students to make contact. However, many of the Asian women (as with the Gypsy families) said they would recommend friends to participate who they thought may find the research interesting. As a result of this snowballing technique the numbers of respondents increased. Even though respondents were aware they were going to speak to an Asian woman, shared ethnicity did not necessarily guarantee access to respondents (see also Phoenix, 1994), but once access was obtained shared ethnicity *encouraged* respondents to open up and trust to be established. Other researchers have spoken about the difficulties of accessing minority ethnic communities (author ref, Mirza, 1998; Bhopal, 2009) in which researchers have had to use snowball sampling methods to gain access to respondents. Phoenix (1994) for example found that being a black researcher did not necessarily guarantee her access to the black respondents she approached for her study, rather several black women did not want to participate as they were afraid that black people may be portrayed in a negative light. In my research once access was obtained shared gender and shared experience created a shared empathy between myself and the respondents.

Shared experience and shared empathy

For both research projects, shared gender was crucial in building trust and *rapport* with Gypsy and Asian women. The relationships that members of the TES have with Gypsy communities consist of close relationships with *female* members of the communities and it is predominantly women who work for TESs. Equally, it is mothers who maintain relationships with schools and other official bodies. I was told by the TES (on more than one occasion) that I would have to make initial contact with the mothers (via phone) and they would expect a female to carry out the interviews. Working with male team members meant that this situation had to be closely monitored. To ignore the advice of the TES would have been seen as insulting and offensive to the communities. The strict rules associated with gender and moral codes in Gypsy communities dictate that is unusual for women to be in the company of men unknown to them.

> Interviewer: Oh hello my name is…and I am carrying out some research looking at Gypsy families and their

experiences of education. I think Paula from the TES has spoken to you about it?

Mrs Brown: Oh yes she has, what's it about?

Interviewer: It's about your views and feelings about your children going to school and what sort of things you think can be improved in schools for them. Would it be ok to come and speak to you about this?

Mrs Brown: Yes that would be ok. When were you wanting to come?

Interviewer: Is it ok for my colleague John to come and do the interview with you?

Mrs Brown: Er….well…..not really I would prefer if it was you, d'you know what I mean? It's easier if it was you, it should be a woman really. It's easier for me.

Interviewer: Yes that's no problem I understand. It will be me, that's fine.

Mrs Brown: It's just that if it's a man, it's sort of like I don't know him and I don't know who he is. If a man does come then can you come with him? Or perhaps Paula can be here? If you want to, you can ask Paula and she will explain it to you?

Interviewer: No that's absolutely fine I do understand. It will be me. When can I come and where exactly are you? Is it the….site?

When I met Mrs Brown she went to great lengths to explain the reason why she did not want a man to conduct the interview. She explained that within Gypsy communities it was not considered respectable for women to be in the company of a man they were not related to. She indicated that the men who lived on the site were either related to her directly or were people she had ancestral connections with and had known for many years from living on the site. Being a woman (although still a stranger) I posed no threat to Mrs Brown. On entering the site I felt as though I was being 'checked out'. Many people saw me arriving and made a point to ask me where I was going and who I was going to see and where I was from. They also saw me leaving the site. I was told later by Mrs Smith that strangers entering and leaving the site were closely monitored.

We like to know who comes on this site — did you notice we have CCTV in some places? We need to know who comes, what they want and who they want to see. We have children here who play outside and so we have to be careful of strangers, of people we don't know — and that's not just men, it's women as well. It's people we don't know nothing about.

Once I had visited the site several times I became known to many families and they were happy to stop and chat to me and ask me how the research was progressing. Although gender was a key factor in gaining access to the Gypsy families, this posed an initial problem for the research team which consisted of myself and two male colleagues. As a result it was me who conducted the interviews rather by default than choice. We did wonder how the research would have progressed had the team been entirely male. Difference can sometimes be critical in the interview situation. If the interviewer is perceived as an outsider their status can create difficulties in gaining access, establishing *rapport* and understanding the situation of the 'other'. There is a danger in assuming that an insider status guarantees a more valid and reliable interview situation, when in fact the insider status is ambiguous, complex and fraught with tensions. Papadopoulous and Lee (2002) advocate 'ethnic matching' between researchers and participants and argue that ethnic matching will produce more accurate details in the research process and an insider view will encourage 'ethnic sensitivity' which individuals who are not members of the communities will be unable to bring to the research (Ashworth, 1986; Kauffman, 1994). Ethnic commonalities are not just seen as a way of addressing cultural differences, but rather as reducing intersubjective distances between the interviewer and respondent (Bhopal, 2009). However, some researchers warn against ethnic matching and argue that it can be exploitative of research participants (Phoenix, 2001) and can lead to misunderstandings of the research (Riessman, 1987). Even when shared identity ('race' or gender) exists in the research process, other differences (such as class and status) can have significant impacts on communication and the interpretation of data. There is a need to be cautious of the risks and dangers associated with matching for difference and to guard against making implicit assumptions based on shared identities, as well as to question and challenge how we separate our own cultural expectations from the narratives that we share with women of different backgrounds to ourselves.

Gender and shared experience also played an important role in conducting research with Asian women. One the one hand I was an insider, I was an Asian woman who had shared experience and knowledge of particular aspects of cultural identity, but on the other hand I was an outsider. I was not a student and I was part of the academic elite, part of the middle class establishment in which many of the women felt they did not entirely belong. However, when speaking to women about their experiences of arranged marriages and dowries, several of the women felt that I was able to understand these cultural practices as I had lived them, just as they had. As Anita indicated,

There are things I can say to you that I don't have to explain. You know what I mean because you have experience of the same things that I know about and may have been through – like arranged marriages and dowries – and I know that you won't think they are strange or unusual you know they are part of our culture. You have also been through similar things as me and so you will always have a better understanding than someone who is not from the same culture as me — they would just not see it, because they haven't lived it like you have.

Meera felt glad that she was able to discuss issues she felt were often misunderstood by wider society.

I'm glad we can set the record straight about arranged marriages, because there's so much stuff going on in the

media and when you mention arranged marriages, people immediately think that you're being forced to do something that you don't want to do — and it's not like that, not for me or my family anyway.

Our shared identity enabled us to speak about shared experiences in relation to the racism we experienced. Ameera revealed how she was made to feel 'different' in some situations because she did not fit the stereotype of being white and middle class. We spoke about our feelings of being 'othered', of things we couldn't quite put our finger on, but we knew how we were made to *feel*. As Ameera said,

It's just the way they [white people] look at you sometimes. They don't have to say anything. It's how they move out of the way when they look at us, they make us *feel* that we're different to them, that they are better than us (original emphasis).

I revealed to Ameera my experiences of living in a white, rural village on the South coast of England. How a neighbour told me on a hot summer's day that I should not be complaining about such weather as I should be used to it! How I was approached by my children's primary school head teacher to do something on Diwali, since it would be great for the children to have someone 'authentic' to do it! Ameera spoke to me about how it was assumed by her university lecturers and some of her fellow (white) students that she would have an arranged marriage, so it didn't matter if she didn't do so well and get a first class degree. The more I revealed about my own personal experiences, the more I felt the women began to trust and open up to me. Shilpa said,

I think because you have told me about your sister and your own experiences I trust you because you have opened up to me and told me something personal. So I feel ok to tell you things about myself and my family because I know you won't abuse what I tell you. It's important to be able to trust someone if you are going to tell people things about your life.

When discussing women's views on the giving of dowries and the practice of arranged marriages, many of the respondents used a sense of familiarity in their language which revealed a shared empathy and a shared understanding.

You know what it's like in *our* culture. Some of the things they make *us* do must seem so strange to other people. Like *we* do have to touch the feet of our in-laws don't *we*? Although I'm not sure how much that happens now, but it is a traditional custom in *our* culture (author emphasis).[5]

Many of the women used Hindu and Punjabi words that they knew I would be familiar with, some of which had no literal translation. Some of the women spoke about family respect and honour and how this related to women's position in the family.

You know it's about *izzat* (translated as honour and respect) and *sharam* (translated as shame) it's what this means to our parents and how we are able to make sure we do the things that are not seen as making our family look bad, but as showing them respect for the things they do for us and the way they bring us up. You know how important *izzat* and *sharam* are.

Similarly, many of the Gypsy women spoke about a shared language between Gypsy and Indian communities.

Mrs Thompson: where are you from then?

Interviewer: er…well I was born here, but I'm Indian. My parents are from India.

Mrs Thompson: yes I thought you were. That's where we're from, did you know that? Lots of our Gypsies come from India originally. A lot of our language is the same as yours as well. Do you speak any Indian languages?

Interviewer: I do actually. I speak fluent Punjabi.

Mrs Thompson: Yes there are some words in Romani that are the same as yours in Punjabi.

As with the Asian women, many of the Gypsy women spoke about the racism they had experienced. Although not a member of the Gypsy community, I was able to empathise with Gypsy women about the racism and social exclusion they faced on a daily basis. Mrs Cox said,

Yes, we know you get it [racism] as well, being black. But we get it as well and we are white. People say things to us that hurts us – like dirty pikey – and you must know what that feels like as well, people must call you names because of your colour, 'cos you're different, you're not white and we're not seen as white because we're different.

Shared culture

Within traditional Gypsy and Traveller communities men and women have distinct gender roles. Men are primarily responsible for supporting their family financially and being the breadwinner. Women take prime responsibility for the home and children and their role is that of homemaker. There are certain roles that are assigned to women such as those relating to pregnancy, personal care and teaching household and hygiene skills to girls. Men take care of employment, finance and the maintenance of property. The health, education and homemaker role is the responsibility of women. Gender relationships are also related to issues of morality and parents place great emphasis on the purity of their daughters. Young girls are expected to be chaste before marriage and traditional values remain central to the upbringing of girls. Many girls tend to marry young and stay close to their families, although this is increasingly changing (Clark and Greenfields, 2006). Similar traditions also exist in many Asian communities (see author ref; Wilson, 2006; Bhopal, 2008) and I was able to share with Gypsy women my experiences of growing up in a strict traditional Asian Indian family in which certain norms were expected of girls and boys as well as the expectations of purity expected for Asian girls before marriage. I explained to Gypsy women

when I lived at home with my parents that we would not have allowed a strange man to enter into our private homes to conduct interviews. Yet this would have been acceptable if the interviewer was a woman. I also shared with Gypsy women the ways in which Asian and Gypsy culture were similar regarding the division of gender roles and the strict moral codes attributed to girls and their protection. Towards the end of the research project, I felt a certain closeness to some of the women I had spoken to. I was invited back to their homes as well as being invited to several Gypsy and Traveller events.

As researchers we cannot always expect to find answers or even the 'truth', nor even provisional truths about the research phenomena in question. I agree with Jarviluoma et al., that 'the analysis of gender particularly when studying one's own culture demands that the analyst sees and 'reads' differently from cultural conventions' (2003: 38). When conducting research with Asian women it was crucial to maintain a distance (if possible) between myself as researcher and my knowledge of Asian women's experiences such as arranged marriage and dowries. I aimed to achieve this by 'manufacturing distance' (McCracken, 1988) between myself and the respondent, by encouraging respondents to explain details of their lives but being aware that we may both have shared knowledge about particular experiences. Although shared experience and shared identity can reveal a shared empathy between respondents and researchers, there is also the danger that researchers may become too close to the subject matter and take certain things for granted. Respondents may not explain things to researchers which they think they have prior knowledge of. Here it is important for the researcher to obtain and keep a certain distance (if possible) from the respondent, to be close enough that respondents feel comfortable and safe to be open about their experiences, but at the same time to ask respondents to explain issues that are 'taken for granted' and assumed.

> Devi: It's like we have arranged marriages in our culture, don't we and our parents expect us to have one.
>
> Interviewer: What do you mean by an arranged marriage?
>
> Devi: Oh you know what I mean, the way we get married in our culture.
>
> Interviewer: I am interested in what you think it is. Can you explain that to me, what you understand by an arranged marriage?

To encourage respondents to be explicit about their views enables us as researchers to guard against making assumptions about respondent's lives.

Power and reflexivity

Power in the research relationship is an issue that has been discussed widely. Some have stressed that it is the researcher who has the ultimate control over the research material as he/she takes away the data and has control over it (Cotterill, 1992; Ribbens, 1989; Ribbens and Edwards, 1998; Stacey, 1988). Reinharz has argued, 'the researchers take hit and run…they intrude into their subject's privacy and give little or nothing in return' (1983: 95). Similarly, Maguire (1987) maintains that it is the researchers who have control over the research project and 'knowledge creation' and rarely empower the groups that they study. Stacey (1988) however emphasises that self-reflection is important as it can decrease the power differentials between the researcher and the researched. The researcher still has the power to analyse and interpret the respondent's narrative which can give them little or no voice. One way of attempting to address power imbalances in the research is giving back the findings to respondents, but Patai (1991) argues that this may simply act only as a 'feel good measure' for the researchers. Feminist researchers may attempt to equalise research relationships through empathic or friendly methods, but such methods 'do not transform the researcher's positionality or locality' (Wolf, 1996: 35) and there will always be unequal hierarchies of control which exist before, during and after the fieldwork.

The dynamics of power in the research relationship can shift, as respondents can have power by withholding information and controlling what they disclose. Issues of power in the research relationship are and will always be complex. There is always the assumption that that researcher is in control of the research process and is the one who holds the balance, but often power relations are more complicated than this implies. Researchers may have the objective balance of power throughout the research process, but power is not a simple have/have not aspect of a relationship and the subjective experience of power is often ambivalent for both the researcher and the respondent. Power relations are based on a continuum and can never be fully equalised in the research process (Bhopal, 2009). It is simplistic to assume that an approach which includes the respondents at all levels in the research process is ultimately empowering for respondents. Power is multilayered, dynamic and changing. As researchers we have to be critical of notions of power – who holds it and why and how it affects the research process – and we have to question those who speak *for* and *on behalf of* marginalised communities. This also includes the researcher deconstructing their own ideas to critique and question their personal perceptions of the research process by appreciating and recognising that from the beginning of a research project, who and what we choose to study is based on our appreciation of *difference*. Harding (1993) uses the concept of 'strong objectivity' in which she encourages researchers to consider their own standpoint at every stage of the research to maximise objectivity. This ensures that it is the respondent's voice that is represented, listened to and understood rather than the researcher's. Harding encourages researchers to examine the questions they ask during the interview process as these may actually reflect their own values, attitudes and personal agenda, rather than the main aims of the project. It is through their reflexivity that researchers can be sensitive to the dynamics of the research process.

Reflexivity is crucial in adopting a feminist research methodology as it is a tool for researchers to become more sensitive to 'silence' in the research process. Reflexivity encourages respondents to break their silence and talk about their feelings. Research is not just about thinking but about *feeling*. As Biber and Leckenby state feminist research methods,

'allow for 'new' types of questions about women's lives and those of 'other/ed' marginalised groups to be addressed within their respective fields of research' (2004: 210). As researchers we have to be self-consciously reflexive in the research process. Reflexivity includes taking account of difference. Difference can enter all facets of the research process; the research aims, the questions we ask as well as our relationships with our respondents. Our status, our difference and our similarity is fluid and constantly changing both within a single interview as well as during the research process itself and is one which has to be constantly negotiated and re-negotiated.

Conclusions

The relations that make up any research project considering a minority culture are inevitably complex. In researching marginalised groups such as those of Gypsy communities and Asian women there is an increased complexity developed in the relationship between the researcher and the respondent, both parties are divided by boundaries which affect how the researcher is positioned within the research. In my research with Gypsy and Asian communities it became clear that there was not only a complex set of relations to be navigated and understood between my position as researcher and that of the community, but there were also relationships to be negotiated with the gatekeepers — the TES and the universities. These wider relations are far harder to understand perhaps because they are not the central topic of investigation and the full energies of the research process are not focussed on them. Perhaps also, they are less fully understood because they are relations in which the principal actors are rarely challenged about their positioning. The meanings that dictate their actions are presented more covertly, they are people who need to be kept on side to deliver the circumstances for the research to take place. Within this set of relationships there is perhaps not the questioning of what influence they have in terms of access gained and denied but how one's role as the researcher has been presented to the community. Within the specific world of professionals working with Gypsy communities such as the TES there is a protective layer of expertise that surrounds the communities. This position results from the specific set of circumstances of Gypsy culture and its relation to the dominant culture. The relationship of marginalised communities is one of mutual exclusion, just as the marginalised are not a part of the prevailing culture so too the professionals are not part of Gypsy culture.

As researchers we have to be aware of the realities and difficulties of being an insider or outsider which enables us to question our own position in the research process. All qualitative research is predicated on establishing personal, moral and political relationships of trust between the researcher and the researched. Self-disclosure involves a process whereby researchers can be open to their participants by revealing personal details of their lives. Self-disclosure helps to create a 'level playing field' to enhance *rapport*, show respect for the participants and validate the participant's stories (Dickson-Swift, 2005: 101). In both research projects, I sought to use 'creative interviewing' which included strategies 'to optimise cooperative mutual disclosure and a creative search for mutual understanding' (Douglas, 1985: 25). I aimed to find common ground between myself and the respondents so that we were able to 'share a familiar narrative space' (Dunbar, Chris, Rodriguez, Dalua and Parker, Laurene: 286), by revealing personal details of my life as well as encouraging respondents to ask me questions which they felt were relevant to the research encounter. However, our position within the research process can be both a powerful and powerless one and can affect how the relationship between the researcher and respondent develops. By constantly questioning our own positioning and our own expectations, research *with* women *by* women can have positive benefits for both the respondent and the researcher. Our personal background, our gender, our 'race' and our ethnicity as well as our scholarly experience and the political and methodological choices we make will continue to influence the positions from which we conduct our research.

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Endnotes

[1] The terms used to describe those who are nomadic are contentious and problematic. The diversity of groups who are nomadic consists of English, Irish, Scottish, Welsh and more recently New Age Travellers. All of the Gypsies who participated in the research were English Gypsies (Romanichals). This paper uses the term Gypsy to describe the communities as this was the term used by respondents themselves.

[2] The main focus of the research was to examine the educational experiences of Gypsies. One primary and one secondary school participated in the study. A total of 60 interviews were conducted with heads teachers, classroom teachers, learning support assistants, members of the Traveller Education Service (TES), parents and children. The interviews were tape-recorded and the data transcribed. The data was analysed using methods of grounded theory and indexed in relation to particular themes and categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

[3] Twenty Asian women participated in the study. All of the women were attending a 'new' (post-1992) university in the South East of England. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with women on university premises, in private. All of the interviews were tape-recorded and the data transcribed. The interviews lasted approximately 1–2 hours. All of the respondents had been born in the UK and their parents and/or grandparents had originated from the Indian sub-continent (India, Pakistan or Bangladesh). Women were aged between 25 and 30 years. Six of the women described themselves as Hindu, seven as Muslim and seven as Sikh. The data was analysed using methods of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) and examining women's views in relation to particular themes (Charmaz, 2006).

[4] All names are pseudonyms.

[5] Women (and brides) are expected to touch the feet of their in-laws and senior members of their husband's family as a marker of respect. This is a custom which has existed for generations in some Sikh communities.

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