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‘Insiderness’ in my Pilot Study Research

Aimee Quickfall, Sheffield Hallam University

Abstract: I am in the second year of my EdD and have just completed my pilot study. My research aims to illuminate and interrogate the stories mothers who are also Primary and Foundation Stage teachers tell about their experiences of this special situation of ‘teacher-motherhood’. My pilot study involved one participant, Sian (pseudonym) in one unstructured, life story interview (Goodson, 2013). The methodological approach for this pilot and the main study is a postmodern feminist narrative approach. The pilot study findings suggest that Sian’s story of teacher motherhood describes her as being ultimately responsible for all of the children she cares for, including her own child, at all times. A major feature of my thinking (and worrying) about the pilot study has been the idea of insider research; what this means and what implications there are for the validity of data if insider research is carried out (Drake, 2010). In this article, I will be considering the insiderness of the research relationship between Sian and I. It has been a recurring theme in my research journal and has touched every aspect of the pilot study project. The issues I faced as an insider researcher are also explored and the definition and need to demarcate research relationships are questioned. It is not my intention to cover the pilot study in detail, but some context will be given for clarity.

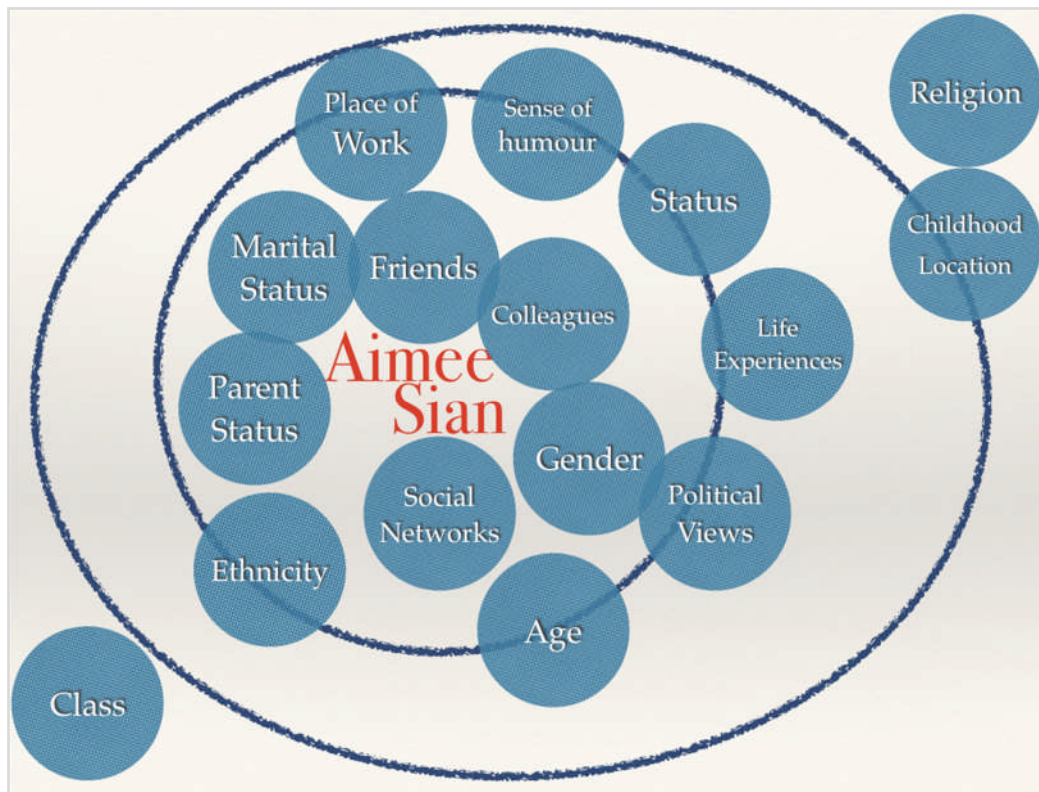
Introduction

My pilot study was designed to be a ‘chip off the block’ of the subsequent main study, to find out if a life history interview would feel like the right method for my participants, and to answer my research question. This was part of the reasoning behind recruiting Sian to the pilot study. She is a friend and ex-colleague of mine, with a long history of giving honest feedback about my ideas and I knew she would be candid in her appraisal of the method. Sian is also a teacher-mother, and well aware of my teacher-mother status. Our children know each other, our partners have met, and we have known each other for over ten years. Because of this close relationship, I became interested in issues around insider research relationships, particularly from a feminist perspective in terms of ethics and co-production of knowledge. Sian has known about my doctoral research focus from the application stage and has been pestering to be involved, intermittently, since I started the programme.

Insider research is traditionally applied to qualitative research (Blythe, Wilkes, Jackson and Halcomb, 2013; Griffith, 1998), particularly ethnographic studies, where the researcher hopes to become part of the ‘tribe’ they are investigating (Acker, 2001). It is generally described using similar terms; insider research is ‘conducted by people who are already members of the community they are seeking to investigate’ (Humphrey, 2012, p.572, also see Coghlan and Brannick, 2005). Insider researchers share a ‘subjective position’ with their participants, based on ethnicity, social class, disability, race or other intersecting signifiers (Malpass, Sales and Feder, 2016; Griffith, 1998). Insider researchers and participants have ‘undergone similar experiences, possess a common history and share taken-for-granted knowledge’ (Hill-Collins, 1986, p.526). These definitions of ‘insider researcher’ all apply to my pilot study. Sian and I are members of the same community - in terms of our social networks (online and in ‘real life’), we have worked at the same place, have been primary school teachers for many years and are both now mothers. We share various other intersecting signifiers, as the diagram in figure 1 illustrates.

Further distinctions have been made in the researcher/researched dynamic, including the idea of 'indigenous and external' (Banks, 1998, p.7), pertaining to the origins of the researcher/participant. Banks sees the insider/outsider distinction as a perspective taken during the research, whereas the indigenous label would denote a more significant and lasting bond between the researcher and the participant, such as being from the same town, or having worked at the same place for many years.

Figure 1: Intersections of descriptors, inner circle denotes significant similarities, outer circle denotes some similarities.



Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards (2011) suggest that motherhood is a core identity for many women, which in terms of my study, makes this 'motherhood' signifier particularly important to the idea of being an 'insider'. Insider/outsider researcher distinctions are often a feature of qualitative studies, when interviews are chosen as a method (Cotterill, 1992; Perryman, 2011; Southgate and Shying, 2014).

Griffith (1998) suggests that as researchers from any discipline, we cannot be 'outside of society' (p.361), suggesting that there is an element of insider work in any research project, just as we may also remain outsiders, based on some descriptors or signifiers (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2013). It would appear, given the definitions of insider research stated above, that most researchers in education are going to be affected by this distinction, whether they are conducting interviews, case studies, netnographies (see Kell, 2016, for an example), or meta-analyses. There will be shared signifiers such as similar backgrounds and beliefs, even in research relationships that are conducted over a distance. What became very apparent from the beginning of the planning stage of the pilot study, is that the concept of the insider researcher is pertinent to my study, as this journal extract (figure 2) demonstrates:

Figure 2: Journal Extract, June 2017 - evening before interviewing Sian.

...because I knew the participant, and know her very well, recruiting her to the project bordered on the ridiculous. Sian has been a friend of mine throughout my MEd studies, she read my EdD proposal through as part of a proof-reading favour and she has heard me talk about my interest in parents and teaching, many times, as has everyone I have worked with. She knows my child and we have talked about our experiences of parenthood and teaching before.

Firstly, this demonstrates a beneficial aspect of insider research to the time-poor doctoral researcher; the possible ease of access to participants (Blythe et al., 2013; Moore, 2007).

Sian is a friend and we have worked together; we also have many 'signifiers' or descriptors in common. I immediately thought of Sian as a participant because I felt that she would be more likely to feedback honestly on methods, having been 'critical friends' for each other in the past, and also because she was interested in the study and therefore an interview would be easy to organise. If insider research is a threat to validity (Drake, 2010; Lather, 1993), then it would appear that I have wasted her time and my own, if the data collected could not be used in the main findings (Butler, 2002). However, researchers disagree on the advantages and disadvantages of insider research. The following is my attempt to untangle the arguments, apply the theory to my own study and to question whether the distinction between inside/outside needs to be drawn at all.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Insider Research

The Issue of Knowledge - Assumed, Presumed and Enhanced

Researcher assumptions are often cited as a major drawback in trying to conduct insider research (Couture, Zaidi and Maticka-Tyndall, 2012; Drake, 2010; Mercer, 2007; Sanger, 2010). Drake (2010) likens this to the difference between an outsider or insider exploring a coastal geographical area. The outsider uses maps to get an overview of the coastline, noticing all of the inlets and spurs in context and in comparison to the rest of the map. The insider is like the local person, who has a working knowledge of the place and many memories of it - but perhaps has a distorted mental map of distances, landmarks and other features. The insider researcher may not describe a situation in the same way, they may assume or presume that everyone involved has the same understanding as them. They may also assume that their experiences and memories are representative of the community (Wilkinson and Kitinger, 2013). In the literature this is usually described as an innocent occurrence, but there is also a suggestion that as well as misunderstandings, there can be deliberate misrepresentations, designed to serve the researcher's interest or that of the community (Wallbank, 2001).

Drawing upon Drake's metaphor of the coastal explorers, I think we sell the research community short if we assume that they are either conscientious outsiders or comfortable, lazy insiders. When conducting research for a doctorate, for a funded project or for our community of peers, the process is more likely to be a mixture of map reading, researching previous expeditions, taking advice from experienced explorers and reflecting on our own experiences of a place. Assumptions can be pervasive and hard to identify - but a thorough literature search (map search!) will uncover assumptions and misremembered or misrepresented information. There is also the benefit of the local knowledge that Drake refers to, and many have suggested that insider studies are likely to

gain deep insight and engagement, because and not in spite of the shared knowledge that the researcher and participants have (Blythe et al., 2013; Cooper and Rogers, 2015; Dwyer and Buckle, 2009; Mercer, 2007). Tacit knowledge, a greater understanding of the participants (Blythe et al., 2013; Griffith, 1998) and the epistemic privilege of the insider researcher could be said to exceed any advantage that the outsider researcher may gain from a position of supposedly increased objectivity (Southgate and Shying, 2014). This sounds like a cosy and winning circumstance, but it is important to consider, throughout the project, that building a relationship that has some basis on being an insider in a community can also be seen as exploitative in nature (Cotterill, 1992). A possible antidote to the exploitative nature of research is the active reduction of 'symbolic violence', which Bourdieu (1999) felt was intrinsic to the research encounter. Insider research is a way to combat symbolic violence as the insider researcher is capable of putting themselves in the respondent's place (Malpass et al., 2016) and have 'engagement through personal involvement' (Bourdieu, 1999 p. 619, also Oakley, 1981).

Linked to the idea of insider researcher assumptions is the question of whether this type of research can have academic rigour (Cooper and Rogers, 2015). Insider research is eyed with suspicion, with questions raised about the possibility of an objective view from the inside (Blythe et al., 2013). Rooney (2005) suggests that insider research has the potential to increase validity through the richness and authenticity of the responses, and Cooper and Rogers (2015), go further and forward the idea that the suspicion aimed at insider research has led to researchers being more reflexive and careful about their assumptions, thus increasing validity.

Tricky Relationships

It has been suggested that when carrying out insider research, a difficulty arises when researchers try to resist the co-production of knowledge (Platt, 1981) - the researcher, as part of the community, will find it difficult to separate their own hopes, fears and opinions, and to stay 'out' of the conversations. Could co-production be productive? Harvey et al. (2016, p.142) suggest that the researcher and participant constantly influence one another and are 'co-creating knowledge together', which has positive effects on the depth and detail of an understanding of experiences. Research of this kind is necessarily a relationship between the researcher and the participant - the concept of self is crucial to building relationships and relationships are two way (Stanley, 1993; Stuart, 1993).

A feminist standpoint perspective on insider research suggests women are the best informants about their own lives (Acker, 2001). A feminist researcher should therefore come as close as possible to 'positioning herself as the interlocutor' (Wallbank, 2001), but there is no guarantee of rapport in the research relationship (Blythe et al., 2013).

Ethical Concerns

My biggest ethical concerns with the pilot have been anonymity and informed consent; which may still have been a concern as an outsider researcher, but the ethical implications for this study are made all the more 'human' because I know the world that Sian has to negotiate. There is a suggestion that it is impossible to anonymise insider data (Murphy and Dingwall, 2001), because members of the community will be able to identify themselves and others. Sian's interview transcripts would certainly make her identifiable. I had considered that being an outsider researcher might be preferable to participants (Blythe et al., 2013), who might feel more assured of

anonymity because there is no physical or social link between them and the researcher: the reported responses could be 'anyone'. An example of how to deal with issues around anonymity comes from Welch, Happell and Edwards (2010), who simply don't promise anonymity, but in their findings and discussion do not give any details about participants or report their responses verbatim. Even the inclusion of Sian's role or the age of her child would 'out' her - because of the web of relationships that I am an 'insider' of - someone who could potentially read this assignment would recognise her from minimum description. This has implications for the inclusion of Sian's responses in the main study, something that she was keen to be a part of.

There are identifiable ethical dilemmas around informed consent (Humphrey, 2012), for example, informed consent rituals are more of a formality than a real consideration of whether to take part or not (Juritzen, Grimen, and Heggen, 2011). Although she received an information sheet and signed the consent form, Sian potentially was not given the opportunity to consent as an informed participant (see Figure 3). Because of our relationship, she had not read the information sheet prior to the interview (by her own admission, during the pre-interview talk). By the time she read and heard about the detail of the interview, we had already met. I had driven an hour to get there resulting in significant pressure of her to go through with the interview. However, consent and understanding could be thought to be a renegotiated situation throughout the research process, rather than a fixed, summative point (Miller and Bell, 2002). Fully informing participants, particularly in this type of qualitative study, might not be possible or desirable as the research methodology and methods may benefit from revision throughout the process (Juritzen et al., 2011).

Figure 3: Journal Extract, week before the interview with Sian.

She responded, slightly exasperated that I had asked if she wanted to take part, as I already knew she did. I sent the information sheet through to her, knowing she wouldn't read it as she already had a fair understanding of what the study is all about. So ethically, I am not really convinced that I will have informed consent - she thinks she knows what it is to be, but actually, I have no way of knowing whether she understands or not.

Insider research is difficult and emotional (Cooper and Rogers, 2015; Coy, 2006) making the researcher question their own 'history, moral position and place in the research process' (Cooper and Rogers, p.6). This can be 'painful, emotional and provocative' (Cooper and Rogers, 2015, p.6). The emotional effects on the researcher can bleed through into life outside the research, as I found in the days and weeks that followed my interview with Sian. I found that I was not able to disentangle myself from the research, after the interview, and supposed that the same experience might occur once the researcher/participant relationship with Sian has finished (Moore, 2007). Detachment can be difficult for insider researchers (Sikes and Potts, 2008).

How would we go back to being friends, with the added dimension of the interview transcript hovering between us? Relationships outside of the research could potentially be damaged (Moore, 2007). However, the researcher may also experience a renewed commitment to the 'tribe'. The ethical implications of this strain on the researcher and their relationships has to be taken into account. As previously discussed, the closeness of the insider researcher to the issues and situations experienced by their participants can be a strength, but in keeping with the BERA ethical guidelines (2011, p.7):

They [the researcher] must desist immediately from any actions, ensuing from the research process, that cause emotional or other harm.

The breakdown of a friendship or professional relationship would surely constitute 'emotional or other harm'. It seems sensible that this potential outcome must be declared in the information sheet and the briefing for participants in the main study, if I have a relationship with them previous to the invitation to take part in the project. Given the depth of Sian's response in the life story interview, her motivation to share her feelings, and the reported benefits she felt following the interview, I would seek to recruit participants from a similar insider group, if possible and if I can be assured that no harm will be done to them because of the research. Professional and personal relationships break down outside of research; this is part of life and not perhaps a reason to consider Sian as a vulnerable participant (Wallbank, 2001). However, research ethics demand that participants be informed of risk. It is arguably unethical to neglect to make a participant aware from the outset that relationship damage may occur.

Power and Politics

Insider researchers may become desensitised to 'potential role-conflicts' (Humphrey, 2012, p. 573). It is suggested that insiders may overlook power relations, (Ryan, Kidman and Aaron, 2011), as demonstrated by the questions we do not ask our participants, the questions we do not even consider asking. Before the interview with Sian, there were in evidence the colliding and converging roles (Humphrey, 2012). Sian asked me to proofread her reports to parents, two weeks before our interview was scheduled (see Figure 4). From her point of view, this was not an unusual request and something we had done for each other in the past, but for me, our relationship now had two realms: our friendship and our researcher/participant relationship.

Figure 4: Research Journal Extract, May 2017.

Was she asking this because she felt that I owed her something? Was this a form of bartering, an interview for some proof reading? I felt like the interview was out of the question, in this situation. As a friend, I didn't feel I could refuse to help her; she was in a tight spot at work and refusing to help her would damage our relationship, besides which, I had time and energy to do her proof reading. I also didn't feel that it would be appropriate to then ask her to complete the interview, if I had turned down the favour - she would most likely be confused and hurt by the refusal, which would make the interview uncomfortable for her and me, and the dialogue certainly different to what it would have been.

I struggled with whether the proofreading 'favour' would constitute something like a bribe or mean that she felt she could not change her mind about participating. I also knew that Sian would be upset if I cancelled the interview, as she was keen to be involved. To add to the complexity of the relationship, I am also still a friend of her line-manager, so Sian's participation in the interview and her request for proof-reading support (from outside of the school) put her at some perceived risk in terms of sharing information and being 'found out'.

The political and organisational complications here have to be carefully managed to avoid participants, researchers and other parties feeling disconcerted by the research (Plummer, 2001), or betrayed (Moore, 2007). Sian could feel that my findings had been used against the interests of

her, or her organisation, family and friends (Wallbank, 2001). I can imagine Sian questioning 'whose side are you on?' (see Acker, 2001 for further discussion).

The individual realities of Sian and I are vital to the understanding of her experiences - 'insider research remains a necessary, albeit messy vehicle in social research' (Cooper and Rogers, 2015 p. 1). In short, it is within my power to protect Sian from the messy, negative impacts to her career, but it is important to reflect on the necessity for this situation to arise, in the first instance. Recruiting Sian as a participant possibly minimised the power differential between researcher and participant, due to our equal standing in our careers and her view of me as a person, rather than as an inspector or evaluator of her performance (Blythe et al., 2013).

Conclusion: The Notion of an Insider Researcher

Thinking about whether Sian would categorise me as insider or outsider gives rise to the idea that the community confers insider status on the researcher: it is not the researcher in isolation that decides what their position is (Zinn, 1979). Boundaries may also shift throughout the research process and during the interview itself (Griffith, 1998). Sian and I might have classed the 'insiderness' of the relationship at different levels. I have considered asking Sian about this but feel that this imposes an uncomfortable task upon her. She would probably feel pressured to respond in ways that would minimise potential damage to our relationship.

The concept of insider/outsider researchers has been questioned and critiqued from several standpoints. As researchers, we are already insiders, and outsiders (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2013). Even in traditional 'laboratory' conditions, as researchers we will feel we have more in common with some participants than others do. They may share a gender, a religion, an accent or some slight gesture that reminds us of a loved one and endears us to them. The 'insider' descriptor relies on a narrow parameter: in my pilot study, I count myself as an insider because of my previous place of work, career and relationship with Sian. However, Sian may not see me as an insider and might find she has more in common, or a better rapport with someone we would both class as an 'outsider' (Tang, 2002). The question is raised: 'How do we know when we are inside or outside or somewhere in between?' (Acker, 2001, p. 153).

It is this richness of human experience and identity that is disruptive to the reductionist idea of an in/out border that the researcher crosses, like a threshold. Sian and I are insiders on some descriptors, very much outsiders on others; 'it may be more useful to blur the boundaries of insiders and outsiders' (Southgate and Shying, 2014, p.223). The in or out distinction becomes something much more like a spectrum or continuum; a myriad of factors that change over time (Perryman, 2011, also Mercer, 2007). 'Groups or collectives that claim Insider status are not themselves homogenous groups' (Griffith, 1998, p. 363). Sian and I might think of ourselves as insiders, but we are clearly not the same. If I was interviewing Sian and the category of religion was raised, the insider relationship would be different; she would need to explain in more detail her beliefs and thoughts, as we do not share a religious faith. In life stories method, any aspect of her life could be included in the interview, as she wishes, so thinking about insider status as purely based in school work, motherhood or shared experience is ignoring all the other experiences, emotions and beliefs that are part of Sian's world.

My struggles with being an insider researcher continue, yet I feel that the strengths of this particular and peculiar situation would encourage me to enter into another insider research relationship. If the ethical issues can be resolved for the participant, the researcher and their overlapping worlds, then the benefits of a shared vocabulary, myths and legends of a friendship group, workplace or locality bring a richness and depth to the interview. What is said and unsaid must be carefully analysed and reflected upon.

Author's biography

Aimee Quickfall is a current EdD candidate at Sheffield Hallam University, researching the stories of mothers who are also teachers in Primary and Early Years Foundation Stage. She is a Senior Lecturer at Bishop Grosseteste University, Lincoln, where she is a teacher educator working on primary undergraduate and postgraduate routes into teaching and researching how being a parent changes the student experience for her trainees.

Email: aimee.quickfall@bishopg.ac.uk

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