Ethics in the Cross-Cultural Oral History Interview

Jo Herbert University of Leicester

This paper is a personal account of some of the particular ethical issues which arose during the process of researching first generation Asian communities in Leicester.[1] Research was based on in-depth life stories and aimed to capture the subjective experiences of the respondents including motivations, perceptions and feelings. A salient theme was the difficulties encountered by the newcomers and the coping strategies they developed to pursue viable lives. The respondents were from diverse backgrounds including different socio-economic background, religion, place of origin and timing of arrival into Britain, though the majority had migrated in the 1960s and 1970s. My identity as a white 'English' female researcher undoubtedly shaped the research process and posed numerous challenges and ethical problems. This paper will reflect on some of the most salient concerns: Was my ethnic identity a barrier to establishing trust and rapport? Were other aspects of my identity important? Were the respondents more willing to discuss particular issues? What were the dilemmas involved in representing and theorising sensitive experiences?

The main ethical question concerned the power of the researcher in relation to the 'researched.' It has been contended that white researchers should avoid researching minority ethnic communities. This argument emanated from criticisms of sociological 'race relations' research in the 1980s which, it was argued, served to reproduce racism and stereotypes of minority ethnic groups.[2] The structural inequality between middle class academics and the communities they sought to study came under close scrutiny and whites were attacked for 'prying into the black community' and acting as spies for the government.[3] Alongside this was the belief that because whites do not experience racism they could not empathise or understand experiences of discrimination and disadvantage. Attempts to overcome power hierarchies have lead to the methodological practice of 'matching' to ensure for example, that only women interview women. This is founded on the premise that the researcher and participants share a common social location and can establish rapport and trust on this basis. It is also argued that this commonality will help to minimise the possibility of an exploitative power relationship.

My research questioned some of these arguments as although I was positioned as an 'outsider', throughout the interviews I was able to establish a degree of trust with the respondents. This was partly due to the 'gatekeeper', who worked at a local community centre for over twenty years and had migrated from Kashmir in the 1960s. During the early stages of the research when I attempted to contact potential participants on my own, I encountered considerable suspicion and despite my reassurances the respondents were

---

[1] 'Asian' is used as shorthand throughout this paper to describe collectively those who can trace their ancestry to the Indian subcontinent, namely, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Kashmir. This does not encompass all Asian countries and therefore excludes the Chinese and Vietnamese.

[2] See for example E. Cashmore and B. Troyna, 'Just for white boys? Elitism, racism and research', *Multiracial Education*, 10 (1981), 42-8.

[3] J. Bornat *et al*, 'Oral history and black history conference report', in *Oral History*, 8 (1980), 21-3 and J. Bourne and A. Sivanandan, 'Cheerleaders and ombudsmen: the sociology of race relations in Britain', *Race and Class*, 21, 4 (1980), 338.

reluctant to talk due to fears that their interviews would be publicised in the media. However, my contact with the local community worker proved extremely fruitful and he not only helped to arrange the interviews but explained to the respondents the aims and rationale of the research and was vital in gaining their confidence. Consequently, the participants did not seem resent the interview process, or view it as an intrusion, rather they welcomed me into their homes and many stated the importance and value of telling 'their story'.

It was also clear through the process of interviewing that ethnic identity was simply one marker of 'difference.' In reality people inhabit multi-faceted identities based on gender, age, religion, sexuality, occupation and so on; differences that constitute particular world views and subjectivities and are overlooked in a simply dichotomy of 'insider' and 'outsider.' Thus, I was able to establish common ground and affinity with the respondents based on a variety of criteria, such as their education, or experiences of living in Leicester. However, my gender had a paramount impact on the interviews. My relationships with the Asian men were conducted on a friendly albeit formal basis and my university status seemed to accord me with a degree of respect.

Conversely interviews with the female respondents were generally more relaxed and the women were remarkably open and honest with me. Many launched into in-depth narratives of their private lives, and spoke spontaneously and movingly about tragic and pivotal events, family problems and reflected on their feelings and emotions. Some women openly stated that they would talk candidly to me 'as another woman' and my location as an 'outsider' offered them the space to criticise aspects of their own communities. For instance, they were consistently critical of the extended family and equated it with 'a burden', 'no privacy', or 'no freedom', whilst others surmised, 'Indian community they never blame men, they always blame women.'[4] Many women revealed the ways in which their lives had been constrained by discourses of shame and honour which defined the parameters of 'appropriate behaviour.' In adolescence this resulted in rules pertaining to clothing or an exclusion from further education to prevent potential relations with Asian boys. They also disclosed the subtle and often hidden ways in which they negotiated and subverted these restraints. In these cases, gender as a social category effectively superseded ethnicity as a basis for identification and rapport. The experience proved that my ethnic identity was not an insurmountable barrier or divide and that 'insider' 'outsider' boundaries were not fixed or immutable but could be negotiated.

Nevertheless, I was fully aware throughout the stages of the research of the potential difficulties involved as a white researcher. I could not dismiss the possibility that Asian participants would be unwilling to discuss certain issues for fear of causing misunderstanding or negative judgement.[5] In particular, would they be willing to discuss racism with a white interviewer who did not share these experiences and may not be able to comprehend them? Initially direct questions on whether the respondents had experienced racism often provoked palpable unease. Some simply stated that 'racism was there' and were reluctant to elaborate further, whilst others insisted that they had

---

[4] See for instance, British Library, (BL) National Sound Archive (NSA) C900/09149 M. Bhambra, C900/09083 B. Kotecha. Interview with Devi 24 June 2002.

[5] For discussion see S. Leydesdorff, 'Genres of migration', in M. Chamberlain (ed.), *Caribbean Migration Globalised Identities* (London 1998), 81-91.

never encountered racism. However, this defensive response was overcome by employing a more subtle approach and framing indirect questions to elicit information, such as asking them to describe their relationships with their neighbours or work colleagues. As a result, many respondents spoke freely and at great length about their experiences of racism and hostility.[6]

It also became clear that it would be erroneous to conclude that some respondents did not discuss racism simply because they did not want to share their experiences with me. Rather, the sample of respondents possessed varying conceptions and different levels of awareness of racism.[7] So for instance, one woman recalled the verbal harassments her family received from her white neighbour, yet she did not interpret this as a manifestation of racial prejudice but instead simply viewed him as pathological. Another important approach was to prioritise the respondents' experiences and views rather than strictly pursuing my own research questions. This showed that for some, racism was not a defining part of their lives instead they faced other problems that were of greater concern. Learning to listen and adapting a more flexible interview technique not only offered new insights and changed the direction of the research but may have helped to shift the power imbalance between the 'researcher' and the 'researched.'

My research experience showed that it was possible to overcome some of the difficulties which arose during the interview process, however the greatest dilemma concerned the analysis and representation of the findings. Some respondents expressed derogatory remarks towards Asians from different religious backgrounds or to recent immigrant groups, yet I felt uncomfortable including these views within the thesis as I did not want to undermine their experiences of racism. However, perhaps I should have contested these views and by excluding these issues it could be argued that I failed to capture the complex nature of racism.

Furthermore, Western feminists have been criticised for presenting pathological accounts of monolithic 'third world women' who are inherently 'traditional'. Another stereotype is of the Asian woman as a victim, possessing no freedom, suffering endemic disadvantage and in desperate need of help and liberation.[8] In particular, black and Muslim feminists have challenged the feminist perception of the family as the main site of oppression by highlighting the honourable role women occupy within the home and emphasising the ways in which the household acts as a site of resistance against white

---

[6] This was also the experience of P. J. Rhodes, quoted in F. W. Twine, 'Racial ideologies and racial methodologies' in F. W. Twine and J. W. Warren, (eds), *Racing Research, Researching Race* (Cambridge 2000), 12-3. Twine suggests the topic of racism may provoke unease regardless of 'race'.

[7] See R. Aziz, 'Feminism and the challenge of racism, deviance or difference?' in H. S. Mirza, (ed.), *Black British Feminism* (London 1997), 74.

[8] For recent comment see N. Puwar 'Melodramatic postures and constructions', in N. Puwar and P. Raghuram, (eds), *South Asian Women in the Diaspora* (Oxford 2003), 21-41. See also H. V. Carby, 'White women listen. Black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood', in H. S. Mirza, (ed.), *Black British Feminism* (London 1997), 50. Mohanty is extremely critical of the stereotypes produced by western feminists, in C. T. Mohanty, 'Under western eyes, feminist scholarship and colonial discourses', in C. T. Mohanty, A. Russo and L. Torres, (eds), *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington 1991), 51-75.

domination.[9] However a key theme throughout the life stories of the Asian women was the constraints placed upon them within the household.

The pressure to marry was widely reported. Balbir for instance claimed that when her father discovered she was meeting male friends in a local park in 1972, the family went to India and planned her marriage without her knowledge. She claimed, 'after a couple of months dad decided to marry me off, that was the punishment for having male friends.'[10] This was accompanied with the threat of violence from her father. In her words,

> If we were in India we would have been chopped up he would have killed us straight away there and then he said that. He said ''you're in England that's why you're safe you know I wouldn't do anything to you but if you were in India I would chop you up in little pieces and you know chuck you in the river and nobody would ever found you'' I think I'm almost lucky to be alive, because that's how strict my dad was. [11]

This triggered feelings of fear and immense helplessness. She recalled, 'I was just crying and I wanted to commit suicide you know I was just crying I wanted to run away from home I just didn't know what to do to myself.'[12]

This pressure to marry in the 1970s was a dominant theme throughout the women's life stories, yet by focusing on these issues was I conforming to a stereotype of Asians as 'backward', 'traditional' and 'uncivilised', whilst also presenting women as passive victims? Would I also, unwittingly, contribute to the negative image of arranged marriages as perpetuated by the media?[13] Despite these concerns, I could not simply ignore or silence these experiences, particularly when the women themselves had prioritised these issues. I decided, therefore, to include them in the thesis and attempted to avoid conceptualising them within a western, Orientalist framework. For instance, it was vital to highlight the agency of the women to avoid presenting them as essentially disempowered. This involved stressing their resourcefulness and creative capacity to adapt to constraints and develop survival strategies. It was also important to situate these experiences within the context of the life cycle; as this showed that certain constraints were not a permanent aspect of their lives, but were often transient.

Finally, despite these attempts to be reflective throughout the stages of the research project, I only became fully aware of the impact of my identity during the final

---

[9] b. hooks, *Yearning Race Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston 1990), 46. V. Amos and P. Parmar, 'Challenging imperial feminism', *Feminist Review,* 17 (1984), 3-19. See also G. T. Nain, 'Black women, sexism and racism', in S. Jackson, (ed.), *Women's Studies A Reader* (Cambridge 1993), 220-2. H. Afshar and M. Maynard, 'Gender and ethnicity at the millennium: from margin to centre', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 23, 5 (2000), 805-19.

[10] BL, NSA, C900/00009 B. Kaur.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] *Ibid.*
[13] See R. Penn and P. Lambert, 'Arranged marriages amongst South Asians in contemporary Britain', *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences*, 1, 1 (2003), 1-9.

stages of the analysis. It became apparent that many 'stories' represented an attempt to contest racial stereotypes or educate a white interviewer who may be ignorant of British history. To illustrate, the male respondents consistently stressed the colonial links with Britain in their narratives. Those from East Africa typically documented their family history, such as how their grandfathers migrated from India to East Africa to work on the Kenya Uganda railway and their crucial role in effectively building the British Empire. Others explained how their father's acquired a British passport and the consequences of this. The decision by the men to detail the legacy of colonialism imparted the significant message that 'we are here because you were there.' It highlighted that they were not 'black immigrants' or 'strangers' but were actually British passport holders with full legal rights to settle in Britain. The interview, therefore, provided an opportunity for the Asian men to remind a white interviewer of the ramifications of the colonial legacy, to reinstate their integral place within British history and to reaffirm their British citizenship. This demonstrates how the respondents attempted to negotiate the power imbalance within the interview; the interviews were not simply characterised by the exploitation and appropriation of the 'researched.'

To conclude, this paper has reflected on some of the ethical concerns that I grappled with whilst conducting cross-cultural interviews. Despite arguments that posit the dangers of whites researching minority ethnic groups, my experience showed that it was possible to overcome and negotiate some of the problems. As an 'outsider' I was able to establish trust and rapport with the respondents, particularly with the female participants and I also learnt the importance of prioritising their experiences. However, the interpretation and representation of the findings posed more intractable difficulties, particularly when deciding which issues to include and exclude. Moreover, I gradually realised that although my ethnic identity did not prevent me from empathising or establishing rapport with the respondents my whiteness was far from unproblematic and actually had a paramount bearing on the type of 'stories' the respondents decided to tell. Clearly the position of the oral historian as an 'insider' or 'outsider' not only entails different disadvantages and advantages, but it also generates different types of knowledge. At one level then, the cross-cultural interviews offered a unique insight into the experiences of otherwise hidden groups, particularly the women, yet a closer inspection reveals how the respondents also actively used the interview as an opportunity to challenge negative white perceptions and racial stereotypes.

References

H. Afshar and M. Maynard, 'Gender and ethnicity at the millennium: from margin to centre', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 23, 5 (2000), 805-19.

V. Amos and P. Parmar, 'Challenging imperial feminism', *Feminist Review,* 17 (1984), 3-19.

R. Aziz, 'Feminism and the challenge of racism, deviance or difference?' in H. S. Mirza, (ed.), *Black British Feminism* (London 1997), 70-7.

J. Bornat *et al*, 'Oral history and black history conference report', in *Oral History*, 8 (1980), 21-3.

J. Bourne and A. Sivanandan, 'Cheerleaders and ombudsmen: the sociology of race relations in Britain', *Race and Class*, 21, 4 (1980), 331-52.

H. V. Carby, 'White women listen. Black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood', in H. S. Mirza, (ed.), *Black British Feminism* (London 1997), 45-53.

E. Cashmore and B. Troyna, 'Just for white boys? Elitism, racism and research', *Multiracial Education*, 10 (1981), 42-8.

b. hooks, *Yearning Race Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston 1990).

S. Leydesdorff, 'Genres of migration', in M. Chamberlain (ed.), *Caribbean Migration Globalised Identities* (London 1998), 81-91.

C. T. Mohanty, 'Under western eyes, feminist scholarship and colonial discourses', in C. T. Mohanty, A. Russo and L. Torres, (eds), *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington 1991), 51-75.

G. T. Nain, 'Black women, sexism and racism', in S. Jackson, (ed.), *Women's Studies A Reader* (Cambridge 1993), 220-2.

R. Penn and P. Lambert, 'Arranged marriages amongst South Asians in contemporary Britain', *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences*, 1, 1 (2003), 1-9.

N. Puwar 'Melodramatic postures and constructions', in N. Puwar and P. Raghuram, (eds), *South Asian Women in the Diaspora* (Oxford 2003), 21-41.

F. W. Twine, 'Racial ideologies and racial methodologies', in F. W. Twine and J. W. Warren, (eds), *Racing Research, Researching Race* (Cambridge 2000), 1-34.