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Exploring commonality and difference in in-depth interviewing: a case-study of researching British Asian women

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Abstract

This paper draws on the experience of researching British South Asian women's lives in London as a female British Asian researcher to explore how cultural commonality and difference is shaped by agency and interaction in the research process. It examines these issues through a discussion of how the *shared cultural identity* of the researcher and the interviewees emerged as both a point of commonality and difference in the research process; with the researcher being 'positioned' in terms of both as a result of the interviewees' agency in interpreting their cultural commonality. In particular, issues of 'Indianness' and religion emerged as points on which interviewees exercised agency and interpreted the researcher's cultural identity. This was the basis on which they claimed commonality or difference and this assessment consequently impacted on their interaction with the researcher. The article suggests that more attention needs to be given to how assumptions made by interviewees regarding the cultural identity of the researcher through their agency and interaction in the research process shapes interview dynamics.

Keywords: Cultural identity; in-depth interviews; commonality; difference; British Asians

Introduction

There has been a burgeoning literature in the last few decades addressing the politics and ethics of social research. More specifically there has been growing attention given in the literature to the actual 'doing' of research, particularly open-ended, in-depth interviews (Tang 2002). This has built upon feminist, race and other critical theorists' work regarding the interdependent nature of knowledge and power and the need for the researcher to be 'reflexibly' aware

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about how knowledge is generated in the research process (see Ali 2006 for further discussion). In recent years this concern has aligned itself with a growing analysis of researching marginalized groups, such as the British Asian women upon whom this paper focuses.

Whilst earlier literature concentrated on the *difference* between the researcher and the interviewee, and consequently focused on the importance of sensitizing researchers to the difficulties and dilemmas encountered in in-depth interviewing race/ethnic[1] boundaries are crossed (Anderson 1993; Gunaratnam 2003), recently attention has been devoted to the difficulties that 'sameness' between the researcher and the researched may present (Bhachu 1991, 2003; Mand and Wilson 2006; Song and Parker 1995). Bulmer and Solomos (2004: 2) have noted the growing racial and ethnic diversity amongst the group of scholars researching race in academia, a marked contrast to the picture a generation ago when the area was dominated by white researchers.[2] This increasing presence of non-white researchers in academia has brought to light the significance of the similarity and difference of racial and ethnic identity between the researcher and researched within the research interview process in a number of current debates.[3] It is important to point out at this juncture that most of this literature focuses on race, not cultural identity, but it nevertheless serves as an important context setter for this paper, because culture is frequently conflated with race (Song and Parker 1995).

There is an established literature which argues that the greater the racial/ethnic similarity between the researcher and the researched the greater the likelihood of accessing information and establishing a more egalitarian and less exploitative research relationship (Ram 1996). This is evidenced by the experience of a number of white researchers. For example, some white feminists have addressed the difficulties and issues surrounding white researchers' relationships with black interviewees in terms of access to respondents, potential disjunctures of understanding and interpretation, and issues of power (Reissman 1987; Edwards 1990; Reed 2000). For instance, Edwards (1990) found that as a white female researcher interviewing Afro-Caribbean women she had difficulty recruiting respondents and engendered their suspicion. In carrying out her interviews, Edwards also had concerns about her interpretation of black women's lives as a white female researcher:

> I worried that my assumptions about Black women's family lifestyles and cultural practices might be based on false understandings. I also worried (as it turns out with good reason) that Black women would not relate to me woman-to-woman, but as Black person to white person, and that this would affect the information I received from them. (Edwards 1990: 483)

Unlike the experiences of white female researchers interviewing white females, in which the interviewees were reportedly responsive and open to talking about themselves (Oakley 1981), the racial and ethnic difference

between Edwards and the Afro-Caribbean women she interviewed, tended to disrupt the 'woman-to-woman' connection between them (1993: 184). This is echoed in American research, for example Reissman's (1987) experience of interviewing Anglo and Hispanic women.

More recently, Reed (2000: 5.1) expressed concerns about how she:

> as a white researcher could [. . .] understand and conduct research with South Asian women with variable class positions, which in some cases were far removed from my own? How could I do this without in some sense 'othering' and re-invoking a fixed hierarchal relationship between my respondents and myself?

Reflecting on these concerns Rhodes (1994) and others have raised the issue of the feasibility of white researchers undertaking research with non-white respondents. Papadopoulos and Lees (2002) suggest that white researchers should not, in spite of their best intentions, interview black people, given the potential pitfalls, and instead advocate a strategy of 'ethnic matching' between researchers and research participants to avoid the types of difficulties encountered by white researchers discussed above.

There has been growing momentum to problematize ethnic matching strategies as the 'solution' to the problem of racial and ethnic difference in interracial interviews. There are many risks and dangers when trying to match for any social and political constructions. Matching is far from a 'solution' to bridge the difference between the interviewer and research participant. In fact, matching poses its own, very difficult political and methodological questions that can unsettle assumptions about relations of commonality and difference (Gunaratnam 2003; Mand and Wilson 2006). As Fine (1998: 151–2) reminds us 'if poststructuralism has taught us anything, it is to beware the frozen identities and the presumption that the hyphen is real'.

The writers discussed could be critiqued for overemphasizing the racial gulf between researcher and researched. Moreover, they tend to operate with ideas of race as an essentialized category, without interrogating whether these concerns are natural/cultural or political/structural, and what this means for conducting research. For example, Ali (2006: 474) argues that 'we cannot ever hope to escape (non) hierarchical power relations in research and that all research is inevitably, to an extent, racialising'. Matching for one social identity not only essentializes each social identity but also fails to take account of the dynamic interplay of social differences and identifications. So even when there is a shared language between researchers and research participants, other differences, such as religion, can have a significant effect upon communication and the interpretation of meaning. Brah (1996: 207) suggests that racial 'positionality' can create specific opportunities for the understanding of difference, but does not in itself assure a vantage point of privileged insight. Lived experience of 'race' and ethnicity does not necessarily mean that all minoritized

people will possess a 'natural', politicized understanding of power relations. It is not just the potential of such spaces to enable more readily accessible understanding, but also their potential to obscure, skew, contradict and destabilize meanings and identifications that should be recognized (see Mand and Wilson 2006). Failure to recognize the contingency and the ambivalent complexity of lived experience maintains an essentialist view of 'race', where experience can be seen to be wholly (pre)determined by racist categories (see Smaje 1997). Nor do they engage with the implications this has for racialized researchers and subjects. It is useful to link these discussions, for instance, to the contradictory position of the 'othered' researcher. Much sociological debate has revolved around the epistemological and methodological implications of occupying an 'insider' or 'outsider' position as a researcher. This can be illustrated by a brief examination of the position of the 'native'[4] researcher. The native researcher conventionally occupies a position of ambivalence (see Geertz 1983; Baumann 1996; Alexander 2000). On one hand, they are gatekeepers of knowledge thus lending authenticity to any research project concerned with 'race' issues and on the other they are accused of not possessing the same level of objectivity as a non-native researcher[5] because their cultural/racial identity makes them too close to the subject matter to form an objective study (see Ahmad 2003 for an insightful discussion on this).

Drawing from this debate Gunaratnam (2003) advocates a move from an emphasis upon 'commonality' to 'connectivity'. The work of Song and Parker (1995) provides a valuable starting point in exploring aspects of the distinction between a 'natural' racialized commonality and a politicized move to establish points of connectivity between the researcher and researched. Points of connection in the research interaction are not assumed to be pre-established and guaranteed by the commonalities of 'race', ethnicity and culture, rather they are worked for. So whilst conducting research on professional Asian women, my embodiment as a British Asian woman did no doubt aid my research, not least in establishing the initial contacts to make what would eventually become my research sample, this was not a sufficient basis on which to build interview rapport and thus disclosure. Points of connectivity had to be worked for.

The dual categories of 'black/white', as well as 'insider/outsider' then, have not only tended to obscure the diversity of experiences and viewpoints between and within various groups, but these categories have also obscured the diversity of experiences which can occur between the researcher and the researched. Dichotomized rubrics such as 'black/white' or 'insider/outsider' are inadequate to capture the complex and multifaceted experiences of some researchers, such as myself, who find themselves neither total 'insiders' nor 'outsiders' in relation to the individuals they interviewed. As a result, my positioning vis-à-vis my Asian interviewees, was not a prior concept readily apparent or defined. This paper suggests that the unfolding of the researcher's

and the interviewee's cultural identities is central to the ways in which the researcher and the researched position themselves in relation to each other.

My experience of the complexities of commonality and difference apparent in the shared cultural identity between myself and my respondents demonstrates that the politics of the research relationship is no less complex or fraught with power relations. It suggests a more complex nuanced understanding of cultural identity is beneficial. No singular identity between interviewer and interviewee is always enough to create common understandings or equalize the power relations between the two parties. Ali (2006) and Gunaratnam (2003), amongst others, have emphasized the multilayered and dynamic nature of power in research interviews. In the accounts of the women I researched, difference and diversity was sometimes experienced and expressed as hierarchical or contradictory and at other times as complimentary or in dialogue.

Cultural identity

Relatively little attention has been given to how the cultural identities of researchers may shape the research situations of researchers interviewing persons of the same or partially shared background. This has been observed as a lacuna in current literature by a number of authors (for example Bhopal 2001; Dunbar, Rodriguez and Parker 2002; Song and Parker 1995; Tang 2002; Thapar-Bjorkert 1999; Twine 2000). This paper concurs with this literature's assertion that such research situations, although related to, cannot be subsumed into debates around race and ethnicity in the research process. Questions of what issues arise, and what difficulties and/or advantages are there for the researcher who shares some cultural commonality with the interviewee, consequently tend to be omitted in the literature on 'doing' research.

The debates on the hybridity and multiplicity of cultural identities (Bhabha 1990; Hall 1992) have remained frustratingly disconnected from epistemological and methodological concerns. This paper hopes to connect these suggestive, but often abstract, formulations in examining in-depth interviewing. It works with Hall's concept of cultural identity, as neither static nor essentialized but in constant negotiation (Hall 1992). Cultural identity is generally thought to consist of norms and values shared by a group, which are derived from a variety of common foundations, these include a shared history, tradition, homeland, religion and language. However, the boundaries regarding any shared culture will be differently drawn, as indicated by Hall's conceptualization. Wallman notes two people may not put 'the line of difference' between them in the same place (1978: 212). Whilst acknowledging that the *perception* of difference and/or commonality often occurs along these markers of cultural identity, the implications and effects of perceived differences and/or commonalities are somewhat variable and unpredictable in

shaping each interview encounter. Indeed, it is precisely these varying definitions which are the focus of this paper. British Asian women are particularly interesting to explore in this regard because not only does their culture tend to be both reified and essentialized, but their role within it is simultaneously marginalized (Ramji 2003, 2005). Bhachu (1991, 2003) and Ramji (2003) amongst others have outlined the complexity of Asian cultural identity and how Asian women are active agents its creation.

The term 'positioning' is used in this paper to indicate the potentially unstable and shifting nature of the relationship between the researcher and the interviewee where they share some cultural commonality. The actual experience of researching the lives of British Asian women as a young British Asian female researcher might show that the process of disclosure could be made more complicated by difference than would at first be expected or anticipated, given the shared cultural identity of the researcher and interviewees. It was felt that this experience would highlight some important gaps in the existing scholarship of research methodology. Before embarking on this discussion however it would be useful to provide an overview of research project the article draws on.

Research summary

My study involved forty semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with members of London's Hindu Gujarati[6] community. The research was interested in inter-generational patterns of continuity and change in experiences of work and family. Half the interviews were with British-born, professionally-employed married women whose ages ranged between 30–35 years (daughters' cohort) and the other half with their mothers whose ages ranged between 60–65 years old (mother's cohort), whose education was more limited and who had a varied employment history. As there is no random sampling frame for South Asians in Britain a snowball sample was utilized. It was derived from contacts made through community networks and participant observation in London. The names of all the respondents have been changed to preserve their anonymity. This paper is concerned with the process of this research rather then with its findings.

The relationships which developed between the researcher and interviewees were characterized by a persistent tension between commonality and difference regarding shared cultural identities, in spite of the fact that my research did not directly focus upon issues of cultural identity. The extent to which interviewees' assumptions and perceptions of the researcher and the researcher's cultural identity would shape the course of the interviews was unanticipated. The researcher constantly found herself in situations where interviewees either overtly or indirectly claimed points of commonality and

difference in relation to her, based upon both known and presumed information about their cultural identity. The discussion of the interview material is organized around two aspects of culture which emerged as significant in interview discussions: 'Indianness' and religion. The paper will first discuss how they emerged as points of cultural commonality and then of difference.

Cultural commonality

At the beginning of my field work, the shared Indian background between the respondents and the researcher formed a source of commonality which became an important part of my strategy for access. My Indian background helped me recruit participants for the research. This was invaluable in doing research amongst a hitherto under-researched community. Although there were still concerns regarding privacy and trust, for instance it seemed important to respondents to establish why I was doing the research, at the same time my Indian cultural background was interpreted as a safeguard against any potential 'mis-reading' or mis-representation of the Indian community I was researching.

My 'Indianness' however was also subject to constant scrutiny in the interviews as respondents sought to establish just how similar it was to theirs. Upon meeting me in person, my physical appearance tended to substantiate claims of common ancestry on the part of the interviewees. I looked like my respondents, indistinguishable from the general British Indian community. Connecting my visual appearance to my surname enabled respondents to guess in advance, that I was of Indian Hindu origin. Even so many respondents sought confirmation of my Indian cultural identity, eliciting questions such as; 'You're Indian aren't you?', 'Are your parents from Gujarat?', [7] 'Which part of Gujarat?'

When this was established, the finer, more nuanced aspects of British Hindu Gujarati identity were enquired after, for example, whether I was born in the UK, what caste I was, which part of Gujarat my parents were from, whether my parents had migrated directly from Gujarat or via East Africa and so on. My competency in answering these questions seemed important for the respondents in verifying how *Indian* I was, and more importantly if I was *their* kind of Indian.

> Like your parents we came from Uganda . . . but I'm sure just like yours we were always Indians first. India will always be our homeland no matter where we settle, won't it? (Mrs V, 64, retired)

In addition, it seemed that I was having to verify and constantly being tested on the validity of claiming this cultural identity throughout the interview process itself. Surprise or hesitation in responding to these questions engendered suspicion about sameness:

> I can tell that you're Gujarat because you know all the details about how you came to be here [UK], no-one else is as obsessed with their histories as Indians, but I suppose that's because we can trace our histories, not like some immigrant groups, you know who arrive with shattered homelands. (Nita, 31, Accountant)

Religion

Religion is an important marker of differentiation amongst the British Asian community (Ramji 2005). My religious sameness was an important factor to establish. The respondents because of our shared background could determine from my name that I was of a Hindu background. Again, sameness could only really be confirmed once the respondents had interpreted details about my religious up-bringing and affiliations. Since caste is an important factor in determining the type of Hinduism observed by Gujaratis this was also enquired after:

> Your surname that's a *Patidar*[8] one isn't it? If you're a *Patidar*, then you must be a Swaminnarayan[9] are you? Which type? (Jyoti, 31, Solicitor).

From this it can be seen that the respondents were keen to establish whether I was of the same or higher caste than themselves. Lower caste Gujaratis were somehow thought to be lesser Hindus. This is indicative of the inter-connected relationship between caste status and religion in Indian culture: a similar caste Gujarati would share a similar perception of Hinduism. Effort was also directed at ascertaining how religious my upbringing had been and/or how religious I was:

> Which temple does your family go to, we go to the Willesden [an area of North-west London] one, that's the oldest, but I suppose Stanmore [another area of North-west London] is closer to you, but its more modern . . . ? (Vandana, 30, Finance Analyst)

> I think our religion is really important don't you? I mean its really important that our generation keep up our religious practices like vegetarianism and *ahimsa* [non-violence]. I think Gujaratis have been the most successful at maintaining their Hinduism. Other *jats* [castes] don't really seem to observe their food laws any more. (Deepika, 34, Finance Analyst)

The more like the respondents I was the more Hindu I was perceived as being. Indeed one of my most immediate experiences with the interviewees was that both cohorts often used their similarity and difference to me to define themselves as Hindus. This also occurred more indirectly through revealing their perceptions of what a Hindu Gujarati's identity was. It was equated with public

sphere 'success' in British society with the safeguarding of 'cultural difference' in the private sphere. All the respondents knew my status as a researcher, and thus I experienced the following comments:

> Hindus have done really well here [in Britain], pushing themselves forward in education and the professions. But then you know this . . . you're doing a PhD and they're can't be too many other [non-white] people doing that . . . but I bet nearly all of them are Indian. (Hansa, 32, Finance Strategist)

> Your parents must be really proud, especially as you're still taking an interest in your culture. (Mrs. P, 64, mother of Hansa [respondent above])

Clearly, my educational status and assumed pride regarding my cultural identity was being used to buttress the interviewee's strength in being an Indian Hindu. It was usually made clear that I had suitable credentials to be spoken to as a Hindu Gujarati and not simply as a researcher, who could have been anyone studying in an English university and doing research on the Hindu Gujarati community in London.

There were also several ways in which commonalities with me were claimed by those who I was interviewing on the basis of being a *British* Hindu. On learning that I was a British born Gujarati for example, many of the daughter's cohort used this fact to assume that I'd understand their sense of the 'difficultly of being Hindu' in Britain.

> You know what sorts of stereotypes Hindus have to contend with . . . (Meena, 34, Accountant)

> It's so difficult isn't it explaining our religion to others? Why we have so many gods when most people only have one? (Aruna, 34, Pharmacist)

Experiences of commonality were also assumed by respondents who had had been brought up as I had in Britain regarding racial harassment. The ubiquitous 'Paki' label was something that particularly riled British Hindus striving for recognition of their separate identity.

> Whenever someone wants to have a go at you they can use the 'Paki' slur. It makes you feel like nothing . . . it doesn't matter how nice a job you have or how nice a house you have because you are still just a 'Paki' to some white people [. . .] I just feel like screaming back I'm not from Pakistan . . . I am *Indian*! (Sunita, 34, Accountant)

The shared understanding of the racism that British Indian Hindus experience was used by respondents to outline their commonality with me. The experience of commonality was assumed not just on the basis of racial harassment by white groups, but also other non-white minority groupings; particularly Muslim South Asian groups who, it was claimed, had a derogatory attitude towards Hinduism:

> I remember being at primary school and having these Muslim kids tell me why my religion was stupid, worshipping an elephant god [Ganesh] and all that . . . I was . . . 8 years old and hadn't really started learning about my religion yet, it was really embarrassing because I didn't . . . have a reply for their taunting . . . (Aruna, 34, Pharmacist)

> You know what attitude Muslims, especially Pakistanis, have towards Hindus . . . they are taught to ridicule us. (Jyoti, 31, Solicitor)

For many interviewees these early experiences had a profound effect on their attitude towards their own religion and the importance of understanding and observing it. Moreover, they were concerned with creating positive representations of British Hinduism which they assumed as a Hindu I shared and was advancing by doing a PhD focusing on Hindu Gujaratis:

> If Hindus don't actively put forward their own distinct culture and identity everyone is just going to assume that we're the Muslims [. . .] and we don't want that. (Jyoti, 31, Solicitor)

The respondents assumed a shared commonality with me in their anxiety to distinguish themselves from Asian Muslims. The positioning of me as someone needing to prove how Hindu/Gujarat/Indian they were, particularly by those anxious to assert *their* sense of being Hindu, could be suspended when shared experiences of discrimination were being discussed. There was an element of commonality as experienced through shared racism which defined a British Indian cultural identity. So when racial discrimination was the subject matter, shared experience could override attributions of the researcher having a questionable Hindu identity. My *British* Hindu cultural identity, and what that meant to the interviewees, was often the basis for their assumptions of commonality between us by constrasting *us* to other groups which lay outside of the Indian Hindu boundary within which they operated. This echoes Song and Parker's (1995) findings on the British Chinese community.

Difference

Whilst being a British Hindu engendered a sense of commonality, my non-London locality engendered a sense of difference, particularly with reference to shared 'Indianess' and religion. Typically, my first contact with the interviewees was by telephone. The interviewees I called had been contacted via community contacts and networks, or via snow-ball sampling. The interviewees had been told that I was of Indian heritage, but not from London, rather from somewhere 'up North'. Many of the interviewees seemed to experience a kind of cognitive dissonance upon speaking to me for the first time: a number of women expressed surprise that, although I was of the same heritage as them I

sounded so different from their London accent. It was the first indication that some interviewees did not know what to expect, and were uncertain about how to 'place' me. London seemed a 'natural' place in which to nurture a Gujarati Hindu identity, as it was the most familiar to the respondents. Amongst the questions I encountered were: 'So what do people do up North anyway?', 'Where did you say you were from again?', 'Where is that exactly?', 'There can't be many Indians there . . . you must have been really lonely . . . were there any temples at all?'

The exclusivity the respondents attached to London as *the* centre of British Hindu cultural identity was in evidence when they sought to establish cultural difference with me. Beyond discussions of racism, interviewees with a strong sense of cultural identity, for instance, seemed to wish to establish that their cultural identity was more Hindu or Indian than mine. This was done by seeking a parallel recognition and acknowledgment from me in terms of a feeling of 'not being Indian' or 'Hindu enough'. A sense of defensiveness seemed to accompany such discussions, where the interviewees marked themselves off as Indian or Hindu and me as (too) British. This feeling of defensiveness and guilt about 'not being Indian enough' was a recurrent feature in the interviews. Those talking with me often made sense of their own identities by laying bare their assumptions about mine:

> Some people might think that by needing to study your community you don't know your own community . . . that you've lost touch with your own culture . . . (Jyoti, 31, Solicitor)

> Because of where you're from I bet a lot of your friends are white . . . in fact I bet you don't really know that many Indian people at all. (Sunita, 34, Accountant)

The creation of a fixed sense of cultural community was a recurrent theme in such discussions. This was particularly interesting as my research demonstrated the complexity of identifications and dis-identifications with culture, indicating that many dimensions of cultural sameness and difference could be operating at any given moment. Jaya, a 30 year old accountant and mother of one, for example, articulated exasperation at my inability, to understand what her experiences were at work and in the family as a British Hindu Gujarati – Why did I need 'to ask so many questions about things [I] should already know about?' Thus shared cultural identity seemed on this occasion to hinder disclosure. The respondents' sense of being better 'Hindu Gujaratis' is particularly articulated well in discussions about proficiency in the Gujarati language.

The interviews were conducted in both English and Gujarati. In the course of the interviews, I asked interviewees which language they used with their families. Interviewees who spoke little or no Gujarati at home often seemed embarrassed by this. In turn, I was almost always asked if I could read and write Gujarati as well as speaking it. When interviewees were told that my

ability to read and write Gujarati was rather limited, and that English was my first language, those who spoke little or no Gujarati seemed to be comforted by this fact. However, this disclosure risked disapproval from interviewees who were fully bilingual, and made a purposeful attempt to speak Gujarati at home. They saw this as an important tactic in ensuring their children's exposure to the Gujarati culture. In addition, the ability to speak Gujarati seemed to reflect a 'good Hindu upbringing' by parents who were not 'too westernized' and who continued 'traditional cultural practices at home'. The lack of the ability to speak Gujarati was thus interpreted as indicating being deprived of a good Gujarati upbringing. Language fluency, as a marker of cultural identity, seemed to provide a base-line of sorts by which interviewees measured 'how Hindu Gujarati are you?'

In another interview, my being a Hindu Gujarati 'but different', where difference was demarcated by age, being a student of un-married status and not from London, meant that I was seen as different from the interviewee, and this paradoxically formed the basis of greater disclosure.

> You're different being young [and] not married or a mother, I suppose you don't have the same experiences I do, so I have to explain things to you. (Deepika, 34, Finance Strategist)

Deepika expressed feeling more comfortable talking to me about her life at home and work:

> It's good you're not from London because if you had been brought up here [. . .] I'd be worried that maybe you'd know all the people and places I was talking about, so I'd feel I had to be careful about what I said.

Deepika, did not worry about me knowing about her experience of work and family, perhaps because I was a 'safe' person to talk to as I was neither 'the same (age/married status/locality)' nor totally different (e.g. white).

Another contentious marker of cultural identity was people's intimate relationships with others. As with not being able to speak in one's 'mother' tongue, having relationships with individuals who were not Indian, or Hindu, was assumed to indicate a cultural deflection. Since the interview was concerned with the family life of the women interviewed, discussions regarding their personal lives were touched upon. All the women interviewed had married within their own community. Many were quite willing to discuss this, and my exchanges with them seemed to be on the assumption that although I was as yet unmarried, when I did marry I would also marry within my community. This was apparent in comments such as:

> You'll understand all of this moreover when you have a [Gujarati] mother in-law of your own! (Kalpana, 34, Manager)

> You don't want to leave marrying for too long, it will be difficult for your mum to find you someone suitable if you're too old. (Mrs M, 63, retired)

However, some interviewees seemed reluctant and/or uncomfortable about discussing their personal lives, precisely because of my unmarried status and because interviewees did not know how I might feel about what was revealed.

> I suppose it's difficult for you to understand . . . you haven't yet made a commitment of marriage to anyone yet, and maybe you don't even have a set idea of who you'll end up with anyway . . . (Sushila, 32, Accountant)

In a few interviews, I was either directly or indirectly asked about my own personal life, before they spoke of their own. Aruna, a 34 year old pharmacist and married mother of one, for example, hinted strongly that she thought it was important that young people 'married within their own community' in order to ensure that the Gujarati community identity did not become 'diluted'. Although, she did not explicitly ask me about my own personal life, that she wanted to know, and that she would not have discussed this issue without knowing 'where I stood' was implicit in all our exchanges.

One way I was able to encourage disclosure in the interview process was by disclosing information about myself first. Not only did I feel I should share some personal information with people I interviewed, if they were interested, but I also hoped that my disclosure would encourage a more open interview. Throughout the interviews I was constantly assessed; knowledge (or assumptions) about me provided a yardstick of sorts to gauge what was deemed 'safe' disclosure by the person I was interviewing.

Multiple positionings and connectivity

Claims of commonality or difference by interviewees did not necessarily shape the interview process in predictable or systematic ways; such claims were contingent upon each moment in each interview. Attributions of difference or commonality by interviewees did not consistently or predictably result is either 'good' or 'bad' effects, in terms of the richness or 'validity' of the interviewees' accounts *per se*. For instance, interviewees' accounts which were premised upon difference in the researcher/interviewee relationship could be just as revealing as accounts premised upon a point of commonality.

Interviewees' assumptions about my cultural identity were central in shaping what they chose to disclose to me, as well as the manner in which they disclosed information about themselves. Throughout the interviews, it seemed that the interviewees were judging me on certain aspects of my cultural identity – especially on the issues of Indianness and religion. Interestingly, this 'judging' seemed to be due to concerns about the reciprocal disclosure of information about themselves and justification of certain markers of cultural identity they felt were required by these disclosures. It seemed that at the same

time as judging they too were concerned about being judged, for example on how Indian or Hindu they were and the feelings of defensiveness or nervousness I observed were in large part engendered by fears that they were seen as not Indian or Hindu 'enough'.

Both aspects of commonality and difference were important in shaping relationships, with the interviewees. Binaries such as 'black/white' and 'insider/outsider' often put too much emphasis upon difference, rather than on partial and simultaneous commonality and difference between the researcher and the interviewee. Such oppositional rubrics are based upon notions of fixed identities which are based upon readily identifiable and socially recognized points of difference. Unlike the situation between a white researcher and black interviewee, where racial difference is immediately recognized as the basis for difference, the relationships with interviewees in this research project where cultural identity was shared were much more ambiguous. The perceptions of each other's cultural identity, for example, developed over time in the interviews. Both I, as researcher, and they as the interviewees, had to disclose cultural information about ourselves to each other in the course of the research process, from the first points of contact, via letters, telephone, direct introduction, to the extended interviews themselves. Various markers of cultural identity, such as language fluency and accent, physical appearance, and personal relationships, were used by interviewees in claiming either commonality or difference in relation to me. In addition, the positioning between the researcher and the interviewee was often unstable and required revision as the process of disclosure and justification gradually revealed more information about ourselves. Interviewees could distance themselves from me on one dimension and yet seek commonality on another and vice-versa. As a result, there tended to be multiple positionings throughout the course of an interview.

Disclosure and power in the research relationship

Although, in theory, both the researcher and the interviewee engage in the construction and collapse of social boundaries during interviews, the paper has emphasized the ways in which the researcher was positioned by interviewees in terms of their perceived cultural identity. Traditional caveats about reactivity in the interview relationship have focused upon the fact that interviewees' accounts are subject to social desirability bias – that they will say what they think the interviewer would approve of. However, many interviewees taking part in this project were active in eliciting information about me. There were many 'cues' to reveal myself, ranging from calculatedly provocative remarks to direct and hinted questions. The research experience suggests that whether or not the substantive area of research concerns issues of cultural identity,

perceptions of cultural identity are an element shaping research relationships where the researcher and the interviewee share the same or partially shared racial and/or ethnic background.

By stressing how the researcher was positioned by interviewees in the interview process it does not necessarily mean their participation in these interviews undercut their power and privilege. The vulnerability of interviewees to researchers' objectification of them has rightly received attention (Ali 2006). However, interviewees who are of the same cultural identity as the researcher are not necessarily less vulnerable to objectification by the researcher than in situations where they are of different ethnicities and 'race'. For instance, perceptions of cultural identity can provide a different set of criteria along which objectification may take place. For instance, in the case of this research project contention around what a Hindu Gujarati identity ought to be.

This paper argues that more attention needs to be paid to how researchers themselves may be actively constructed and perceived by interviewees. Furthermore, researchers may feel, for various reasons, that they want to respond to their being 'positioned', and that this is an integral part of any interview dynamic. Researchers' responses to these positionings, are likely to be made more difficult and fraught in a relationship, where they feel and are seen to be more powerful and 'different', by interviewees.

Conclusions

This paper has drawn upon the experience of a young female British Asian researcher researching British Asian women to suggest that more attention should be given to how assumptions made by interviewees regarding the cultural identity of the researcher feature in the interview process. Such assumptions were observed to shape interviewees' accounts in both contradictory and unpredictable ways. Interviewees withheld or disclosed certain kinds of information depending upon their assumptions about the researcher. Moreover interviewees might describe aspects of their lives and identities, based on the assumptions they have made about the researcher, by their making comparisons between themselves and the researcher.

Markers of cultural identity, such as 'Indianess' and religion, can be the basis for claims of either commonality or difference. The paper argues for greater recognition that rather than a unitary sense of identity, it is *multiple* positionings and (dis)identifications, which shift during the interview process that occur in the course of an interview. This understanding of how identification and dis-identifications actually occur in specific moments of the interviews are important ways in which some of the debates about cultural identity and the research process can move ahead.

Recent literature on the ethics and politics of social research, particularly around 'difference' needs to be brought into dialogue with the emerging literature on new formations of cultural identity (Ramji 2005). The partial and unfixed modalities of identification shown to be operating in my research experience adds weight to the formulations of authors such as Bhabha (1990) and may help our understanding of 'unclosed' cultural identities more generally. The processes through which multiple cultural positionings and identifications are ascribed, disclosed and contested, need further examination in many other kinds of research relationships involving extended interviews.

(Date accepted: August 2007)

Notes

1. Ethnicity and race are two concepts that are commonly closely linked. However, these concepts are not synonymous they have separate intellectual histories and (sometimes) spheres of application, but they are closely identified and often operate in tandem. Ethnic identity refers to the individual level of identification with a culturally defined collectivity, to the sense that an individual has that she or he belongs to a particular cultural community. Race is more strongly aligned to 'physiological' differences (Knowles 2003).

2. Institutionally, in Britain, despite increasing numbers of academics from 'ethnic minorities', numbers are still relatively small, especially in the social sciences (Fenton, Carter and Modood 2000). Mand and Wilson (2006) have further commented how South Asians are particularly underrepresented in senior positions. It is interesting to note that with the increased presence of non-white researchers has been the emergence of a broadening of the race research agenda. Race for example now increasingly includes critical whiteness studies (Frankenberg 1993). However, in comparison to research on non-white race and ethnicity the study of whiteness is almost completely dominated by white researchers.

3. Foe example the debate around 'racial matching' (see Gunaratnam 2003; and the ambiguous position of the native researcher (see Alexander 2000).

4. Although I use the 'native', racialized and minority researcher interchangeably in this article for convenience, I am fully aware of the difficulties of doing so. My use of the term native researcher beyond the simple conceptualization reflects the loose way I see the term being used and applied to non-white researchers concerned with racialized communities. Thus, though of Indian and Hindu dissent if I was to conduct research on Pakistani Muslims I would still be perceived as a 'native researcher' to the general academic gaze.

5. It is interesting to parallel discussions of 'race' as a methodological difficulty to the wider discussion of race as a burden. This is evident in the persistent trend of race research to concentrate on 'race' as a problem (Ramji 2003; 2005). The persistence of the enlightenment ideal of 'objectivity' in social research entails that race, class and gender are all seen as obstacles to be overcome to attain real knowledge. The pursuit of knowledge has long since been seen as a social product much the same as any other which merely articulate the social, economic and political forces at play in a particular society at a particular time. As such the 'objectivity' of any researcher is questionable but as a racialized researcher it is your 'race', which is usually cited as the source of any partiality (Gunaratnam 2003). As Puwar (2000) argues whilst South Asian women make for

good subjects of social research, once they try and claim a piece of the academic terrain, their knowledge ceases to be viewed as 'academic' and is viewed as at best subjective. Similarly Alexander (2000) comments native researchers are always seen to be politically motivated and professionally suspect. Postmodernism has fuelled the suspicion for those who seek recognition for racialized embodied existence. For a good recent intervention in these debates and its implication for higher education in the UK see Mand and Wilson (2006).

6. A large 'British Asian' community which has it's origins in the North-West Indian state of Gujarat. The community were all from the Patidar (Patel) caste and were adherent to the Swaminnarayan sect of Hinduism. I use the term Indian, Gujarati and Hindu flexibly in this article to reflect the respondents use of these terms to describe their cultural identity.

7. A North West Indian state.

8. *Patidars* are a large Vaishnav sub-caste.

9. An influential Hindu sect enjoying a large Gujarati following.

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