'Insider' or 'outsider'? Conducting qualitative psychological research with British South Asians

Rusi Jaspal: Department of Psychology, Royal Holloway, University of London.

IN RECENT YEARS SOCIAL psychologists, as well as scholars from a variety of other academic disciplines, have become increasingly interested in identity among Britons of South Asian (BSA) descent, using a plethora of methodological approaches, both quantitative and qualitative (Cinnirella & Hamilton, 2007; Ghuman, 2003; Vadher & Barrett, in press). Although there is now a burgeoning academic literature focusing upon BSA identity, it does not appear to be matched by scholarly enquiry into methodological issues such as the 'insider'/ 'outsider' dynamics as experienced by researchers and participants (for an exception, see Archer, 2001). This is perhaps not entirely surprising given traditional psychology's focus upon quantitative research, which expects and assumes a degree of 'objectivity', whereby the researcher and 'the researched' are entirely separate and independent of one another (Coyle, 2007). However, in qualitative psychological research this is rarely possible. But what can be said about the relationship between the researcher and the participants? What is the importance of the researcher within the broader context of the research?

Being a primarily, though not exclusively, qualitative researcher who identifies as 'British Asian', these issues are only too close to home. Having been sensitised to the 'dangers' of reflecting my own personal experiences and 'informed' views onto those of participants and thereby overwriting them, I had always convinced myself that in my research this was not the case. However, upon reflection, this has been problematic possibly due to the frequent 'blurring' of the boundaries between researcher and participant. Through a discussion of some of my recent research on language and identity among British Asians (Jaspal,

2008; Jaspal & Coyle, 2009a, 2009b), which sought to explore qualitatively participants' cognitions towards the languages associated with their ethnic and religious identities, I provide an account of the 'insider'/ 'outsider' dynamics underlying the research process. This article is based upon notes from a research diary in which I reflected upon my interpretations of these dynamics. It explores how aspects of my identity as a male, British Asian social psychologist may have shaped the research process.

Researching 'us'

Although I was mindful of the differences in background between myself and many of the participants, I still felt that I was able to position myself alongside them in a number of ways. Like many of the participants, I had one parent who was from the Indian subcontinent and one who was not and thus I had experienced the same bilingual upbringing which many of them invoked. Furthermore, like many of the interviewees, I was in my early-twenties, which, I felt, would almost certainly be advantageous given that researchers have identified the researcher/participant age gap as a possible methodological shortcoming in research among BSA young people

(Harris, 2006). And most importantly, or so it felt at the time, the most salient commonality between myself and participants was our common ethnicity. I was of South Asian descent and so were they, so it seemed self-evident why I had decided to conduct research on them. In short, these three commonalities seemed to provide optimal conditions for 'discussions' among 'us' rather than detached interviews with 'them'. This, I felt, would certainly generate rich qualitative data allowing a glimpse of participants' social and psychological worlds. Consequently, despite others' implicit warnings that I should be wary of positioning myself alongside participants, I simply saw no compelling reason why I should not.

'Us' or 'the Other'?

Participants frequently exhibited their expectation that I, as an Asian man, should be entirely familiar with all aspects of 'British Asian culture', constructed by many individuals as a homogeneous culture. To position oneself as a BSA meant that one was expected to possess a high level of familiarity with the specific customs and speech patterns associated with the ingroup. Thus, having positioned myself in this way, I found myself being

addressed in interviews as an 'insider'. There was, for instance, an overt expectation for me to understand their linguistic idiosyncrasies. These idiosyncrasies included specialist terms associated with their ethnic cultures and, in some cases, words and phrases which they referred to as 'Slang', a variety of English influenced by Jamaican Creole (Harris, 2006; Jaspal, 2008). However, it soon became apparent to me that I was perhaps not as in touch with my ethnic identity as many of the participants expected. Paradoxically, it was my own identity which was increasingly under question since, although I identified as BSA, there were significant linguistic and social differences between me and the participants. Both they and I were becoming acutely aware of this fact.

I was particularly surprised that so many (particularly male) participants chose to address me in 'Slang'. In retrospect, I realised that this was partly due to my initial insistence upon conceptualising and constructing the interviews as 'informal discussions' rather than formal interviews, in which presumably participants would have felt under considerable ideological pressure to converse in Standard English. Participants perhaps assumed that 'Slang' was the most appropriate linguistic code for (informal) interaction with another Asian man (an 'insider'). This seemed to constitute an expression of identification with me. Consequently, I was rather embarrassed to find that much of the vocabulary used was unfamiliar to me and that I was compelled to seek clarification on several occasions. I was in fact a linguistic 'outsider' – a member of the (linguistic) out-group. In this case my position as BSA was under jeopardy, as my naïve questions were often met with surprise and sometimes hostility. How was it, some perhaps wondered, that I, a BSA, did not understand Slang, the dominant linguistic code among BSA young men?

Moreover, despite my initial expectation that my identity as BSA would be most salient in interviews, I found that many participants in fact viewed me primarily as an 'expert researcher' rather than as a BSA (layperson) like them. One participant commented:

"Yeah, you with all your degrees, you're streets ahead of us [..] I'm sure you know the reasons why there's all this [Islamophobia] going on because you're into psychology".

I was viewed by some individuals as possessing skills that I clearly did not possess, namely the ability to unlock the secrets of their psychological worlds and to provide answers to questions with which I myself was grappling. Accordingly, I began to wonder whether participants were omitting relevant details due to their presumption that I, as an 'expert researcher', was already aware of them:

"Racism's around because it's like [..] I don't need to tell you that. You probably know more about it than I do".

This was in fact a severe limitation since it was precisely their theories, meaning-making and cognitions which interested me. This led me to explore ways in which to emphasise my primary interest in the diversity of their personal experiences without jeopardising my credibility as a genuinely interested researcher.

As the research progressed, I began to realise that I had erroneously assumed that participants would accept me as 'us' in a consistent manner. My 'Otherness' was made explicit on an additional level, namely, in terms of more specific inter-ethnic differences. Participants often expressed their curiosity vis-à-vis my own ethnic origins

and most were able to ascertain my Indian heritage from my surname. Possibly since most British Indians are in fact Sikh or Hindu, there was the general assumption among participants that I was either of the two. Participants' knowledge of this seemed to play a role in how they shaped their accounts. Thus, some Muslim participants, for instance, criticised Hindu varieties of their heritage languages, but much of this criticism was offered in a very subtle and tentative manner lest they caused any offence.

"No offence but Sikhs speak Punjabi really badly".

Why would an 'insider' take offence? Clearly, on ethnic (and more specifically, religious) grounds, I was being positioned as a member of the out-group.

'Common ground' with participants.

Undoubtedly, my personal familiarity with the BSA community was, in many ways, positive for the research process. I was mindful of issues that other researchers in this domain have apparently neglected, such as the issues of language proficiency and authenticity. For instance, as a child, I had often wondered why it was that first generation BSA complimented my

command of Punjabi despite my occasional grammatical lapses, but that in India Punjabi-speakers tended to snicker at my 'foreign-sounding' Punjabi. How was it that in one context I was seen as a good speaker by Punjabi-speakers, but in others I was seen as having scant knowledge of the language? This led me to delve into participants' accounts of their linguistic experiences and to explore both their understanding of 'proficiency' and its perceived impact upon identity. I sought to explore what they meant by 'good Punjabi'. This in turn enabled me to explore questions of ethnic and religious authenticity (see Jaspal, 2008; Jaspal & Coyle, 2009a, 2009b).

Furthermore, in contrast to the preceding discussion of my 'Otherness', it is noteworthy that there were some commonalities between me and participants, which undoubtedly allowed common identification on some grounds at least. For instance, some participants were overtly critical of Asian appropriation of 'Slang', which they viewed as belonging to an ethnic outgroup, and found it utterly unfathomable that young BSA men, in particular, would want to adopt such an image. Possibly due to my own previous experiences of exclusion and isolation from other BSA, which I saw primarily as a consequence of my own rejection of 'Slang', I found myself implicitly agreeing with participants who voiced these opinions. I came to view this level of identification with participants primarily as a shortcoming since my cogent feeling of personal empathy with them may have restricted the data which could potentially have been derived from the interviews. This led me to reflect upon the level of identification which was desirable for qualitative research with a group for whom I could be both 'us' and 'the Other'.

Overview

I have demonstrated several ways in which the research may have been affected by aspects of my identity as male, British Asian, social psychologist, speaker of Standard English etc. These included the expectations that participants had of me, the level of detail in which accounts were offered and the level of identification between researcher and participant. While my 'insider's perspective' may have been advantageous in terms of understanding the participant's psychosocial worlds, conversely it

proved difficult to ensure that this did not negatively affect data generation and obstruct my (partial) access to their cognitions (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

It was particularly difficult to reconcile the opposing positions of 'informed insider' and 'curious researcher' since the former appeared to encourage the assumption that detailed explanation would be superfluous whereas the latter clearly positioned me as an out-group member.

Perhaps qualitative researchers will have to accept that during the various stages of research they may be positioned differently in distinct contexts, depending upon the level of identification or personal involvement. In my research participants seemed to position me as 'insider' in the context of ethnicity, but as 'outsider' in the context of language. Remaining mindful of the various positions which the researcher may occupy, or be viewed by participants as occupying, seems to be an important aspect of conducting qualitative research and perhaps it is time that researchers began to reflect upon this systematically. Conducting qualitative research can be a dynamic learning process in which the researcher and participant continuously explore and discover aspects of each other's identities with various implications for the 'final product'.

References

Archer, L. (2001). Muslim brothers, Black lads, traditional Asians: British Muslim young men's constructions of race, religion and masculinity. Feminism & Psychology, 11, 79-105.

Cinnirella, M. & Hamilton, S. (2007). Are all Britons reluctant Europeans? Exploring European identity and attitudes to Europe among citizens of South Asian ethnicity. Ethnic and Racial Studies, 30(3), 481-501.

Coyle, A. (2007). Introduction to qualitative psychological research. In E. Lyons & A. Coyle (Eds.), Analysing Qualitative Data in Psychology. London: Sage.

Ghuman, P.A.S. (2003). Double Loyalties: South Asian Adolescents in the West. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Harris, R. (2006). New Ethnicities and Language Use. Basingstoke: PalgraveMacmillan.

Jaspal, R. (2008). Exploring language and identity through the reflective accounts of British Asians: A qualitative approach. M.Sc. thesis: University of Surrey.

Jaspal, R. & Coyle, A. (2009a). "My thoughts and feelings are ruled by a language that isn't really my own": A social psychological approach to language and ethnic identity among second generation British Asians.

Jaspal, R. & Coyle, A. (2009b). "Arabic is the language of the Muslims. That's how it was supposed to be": Exploring language and religious identity through reflective accounts from British Asians.

Rampton, B. (1995). Crossing: Language and Ethnicity among Adolescents. London: Longman.

Smith, J.A., & Osborn, M. (2008). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In J.A. Smith (Ed.), Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Methods. London: Sage.

Vadher, K. & Barrett, M. (In press). Boundaries of Britishness. Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology.

Correspondence
rusi.jaspal@gmail.com