

Inside out: some notes on carrying out feminist research in cross-cultural interviews with South Asian women immigration applicants

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This article considers a number of important issues raised in the growing literature with regard to the place of ethnicity in feminist research methodology and the woman-to-woman interview. Drawing on examples from the author's experiences of conducting interviews with South Asian women immigration applicants, the article firstly illustrates that because of a different ethnicity, a white feminist researcher is likely to be regarded as an outsider by the minority-ethnic interviewees, regardless of the sharing of gender. Secondly, using the ideas of 'personal' and 'structural' power the article discusses how the researcher's outsider status complicates the power relations between the interviewer and the participants.

Introduction

This article explores the complexities, difficulties and successes of pursuing a feminist research methodology in interview settings where the researcher and her interviewee share the same gender but not the same ethnicity. The discussions in the paper present what actually takes place in the process of the interview, sometimes even before the tape recorder has been switched on, when (as was the case with my doctoral research) the researcher (me) belongs to the majority-ethnic grouping and the interviewees are minority-ethnic (South Asian). These are two ethnic groupings, which in the study's geographical area (West Yorkshire) live largely separate daily lives; educationally, culturally and spatially.

The article firstly provides a context against which the research can be understood, particularly in relation to my motivations as a white woman for carrying out the cross-cultural research. This background information is complemented by an outline of the 30 interviews that I conducted, and focuses on the respondents' profiles, how the participants were accessed, along with the location of the interviews. The article then moves on to consider a number of important issues raised in the growing methodological literature with regard to the place of ethnicity in feminist research methodology and the woman-to-woman interview. Using examples from my experiences of conducting interviews with South Asian women

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immigration applicants, I explore how ethnicity enters into the woman-to-woman interview in complex and unpredictable ways. Firstly it is shown that on occasions my ethnicity led me to be identified as an 'outsider' by some of the interviewees despite the sharing of gender. The article's second area of discussion raised by the literature concerning ethnicity in feminist research relates to how the researcher's outsider status complicates the issue of power in the woman-to-woman interview. Using the ideas of 'personal' and 'structural' power the complex and fluid nature of power relations active in the cross-cultural feminist interview is examined.

The research context

In October 1999 I embarked on a journey into the unknown: I became a PhD student. With my research proposal as my compass, I set out to examine the ways in which an individual's gender and ethnic identity simultaneously enter into their immigration application, resulting in them being categorized as a certain type of applicant to be viewed with or without suspicion by the British immigration authorities. In order to investigate the above I focused on South Asian¹ women who had entered the immigration system, either to gain entry into the UK for themselves or to be joined in Britain by an overseas family member. My aim was to explore the role and input South Asian women played in their applications, along with their opinions of and treatment by the British immigration authorities. I chose to research the interaction of gender and ethnicity within the context of immigration, by focusing on South Asian women's place in these controls due to the gap in existing research, which has resulted in the voices of these minority-ethnic women being silenced. Despite the availability of material examining how Britain's system of immigration control operates with both gendered² and racialized³ outcomes, there has been relatively little research examining how Britain's system of immigration control operates with gendered and racialized outcomes for applicants.⁴ There has certainly been no recent research exploring the ways in which gender and ethnicity interact and merge in the operation of these controls. In addition, although there has been a proliferation of important studies documenting South Asian women's lives, few have been dedicated solely to the area of immigration.⁵ Because of the gap in the literature I felt that the research project, and the in-depth interviews could provide a platform through which the South Asian participants could air their views about British immigration control however positive or negative; thus giving 'a voice to those previously silenced' (Strauss and Corbin 1998: 43). Overall the 30 women who participated in the study welcomed the opportunity to talk about an aspect of their lives, which they had not previously been asked to share with others.

Before embarking on the research project, a great deal of consideration was awarded (indeed I had to satisfy the University's research committee) as to why as a white female researcher I should be carrying out the cross-cultural study. In agreement with Rhodes (1994: 554) I felt that portraying South Asian female immigration as a South Asian and/or minority-ethnic

issue, which should only be researched by individuals from that ethnic group was extremely damaging, and ultimately runs the risk of marginalizing the issue as a solely minority-ethnic concern.⁶ Contemporary Britain is a multi-ethnic society in which the majority and minority-ethnic populations should be encouraged to understand the lives and experiences of each other. At the start of the new millennium sections of Britain's majority and minority-ethnic communities continue to live polarized existences in relation to residence, education and employment. Indeed, I grew up on a council estate in a predominantly white village situated in a northern multi-ethnic town (Huddersfield), which has a high concentration of South Asians. Throughout my formative years contact with South Asians was occasional and limited to stereotypical encounters such as the local newsagents or corner shop. Living in this white community has provided me with important insights into how racial prejudice, stereotypes and tensions directed at South Asians are created often out of ignorance towards a group of people and lifestyles, which the white population has not had the opportunity to comprehend.

Background to the interviews: respondents' profiles, access and interview locations

April 2000 to July 2001 was spent carrying out the data collection. Thirty South Asian women living in the West Yorkshire region were interviewed and asked to explore their experiences of British immigration control. Seventeen of the interviewees had emigrated to the UK from India or Pakistan between 1966 to May 2000. Ten of these overseas women had left the Asian sub-continent because of marriage to a male already in this country, whilst four overseas respondents entered the UK as children, and three with the purpose of studying. The remaining 13 participants were British-born women of South Asian heritage who had applied to be joined in the UK by a husband/fiancé or a dependent relative. The minimal research that has been previously carried out on South Asian women's immigration experiences has tended to focus on overseas women, ignoring their British-born female peers who apply to be joined in Britain by a partner. Therefore inclusion in the study of this latter group was firstly aimed at addressing this gap in research, and more importantly to demonstrate that South Asian women immigration applicants are not exclusively entrants into the UK but are often initiators of family settlement.

The citizenship status of the 30 interviewees was varied. All of the British-born women held British citizenship, with five of the British-born women with Pakistani heritage simultaneously holding Pakistani nationality. In relation to the overseas respondents all but three had permanent stay in the UK. Under current British immigration legislation it is not necessary to acquire British citizenship in order to remain permanently in this country. All overseas South Asian spouses must however undergo an initial probationary year upon arrival, whereby at the end of their first year in the UK they must satisfy the immigration authorities that their marriage

is 'subsisting'.⁷ It is because of the probationary year that two of the overseas interviewees had not yet gained permanent stay. One Pakistani woman had only been in the UK for seven months at the time of the interview, whilst another Pakistani had been in this country for three years. During this time her husband had left her and her small daughter. As this woman was not aware that she had to apply to stay permanently after the first year, and had no husband willing to support the application, this interviewee and her daughter were unfortunately in this country illegally, and subject to removal by the British immigration authorities. A third exception was again an overseas Pakistani who was travelling on a student visa whilst she completed her doctorate at a West Yorkshire university.

Of the remaining 14 overseas interviewees, nine had been naturalized, and therefore possessed British citizenship. Of this 14, all of the Pakistani women had kept their Pakistani citizenship, so therefore held dual nationality. Indian nationality must however be rescinded when British citizenship is taken, hence of the six overseas South Asian interviewees who had not taken British citizenship, four were Indian nationals.

Using the classificatory categories employed in the 2001 census; seven and 23 of the interviewees identified themselves as Indian and Pakistani respectively. All 23 Pakistani participants classed themselves as Muslim, and of the Indian respondents four were Hindu, two followers of Sikhism, whilst one interviewee did not follow a religion. The age range of the overseas participants ranged from 18–56 years, with the ages of the British-born women ranging from 22–33. The 30 South Asian women held various educational qualifications; some had degrees and higher degrees, diplomas, GCSEs/O-Levels or no qualifications. A range of occupations were also revealed, such as bilingual support workers, administrators, teachers and self-employed. At the time of the interviews some of the women were not in paid employment due to ill health, unemployment and child-care responsibilities.

The women were contacted informally through local South Asian organizations, women's groups, playgroups, friends, acquaintances, and local authority departments mandated to work with West Yorkshire's South Asian communities. Often these contact routes led me to meet participants directly, or I made contact over the telephone. Regardless of whether the women were contacted face to face or over the telephone I always briefed them about the research project and myself, and offered to send them a copy of the interview schedule along with contact numbers for my PhD supervisors. About one third of the interviewees took me up on the above offer. In addition the women were always encouraged to ask further questions.

After carrying out a number of interviews, future participants were selected mainly through the snowballing technique. This appears to be a technique commonly adopted, as highlighted by Egharevba (2001: 231) in an earlier volume of this journal, in projects researching South Asian women's lives. In terms of my research, the snowballing technique consisted of women I had previously interviewed telling their friends or relatives about me. I found these recommendations of my research and myself particularly encouraging. Perhaps this suggests that these South

Asian women regarded me positively, or at the very least felt comfortable with me to allow me access to their friends and family. The snowballing technique proved to be indispensable for accessing participants, as without recommendations from people known to the interviewees I would certainly have had problems accessing South Asian women. My contacts were a crucial link to the South Asian community, a link, which as a white woman, I simply did not possess. The outcome of this snowballing technique allowed me to interview sisters, mothers and daughters, thus providing a rich source of data relating to the range of immigration experiences within one family. In one particular case I interviewed an overseas South Asian woman, whose daughter attended the interview to help out with translation. After this interview the daughter came up to me and said that until about half an hour ago she never knew that her mother had been refused a visa from her first application.

At this stage of the article it is useful to award a little more attention to language and the role it played in my interviews with South Asian women. Language differences in cross-cultural interviews can be a potential hurdle, particularly when the interviewee does not speak English as their first language (Song and Parker 1995: 252, Keats 2000: 128–129).

In agreement with Song and Parker (1995: 252) ‘the choice of language (almost certainly) structured the interview process’. Twenty-nine of the 30 interviews were conducted in English, even though all of the interviewees were given the opportunity to be interviewed in the language of their choice via a translator.⁸ The South Asian interviewees whose first language was not English generally had a high standard of spoken English, including those who had recently arrived in West Yorkshire. Despite this situation it must be noted that these particular interviewees were ‘bound to feel more constrained and less comfortable in expressing themselves throughout the interviews’ (Song and Parker 1995: 252). It was not uncommon for the overseas respondents to ask me to re-phrase or clarify words that I was using. On occasions if a relative or friend was in the same room during the interview, as was the case with the mother and daughter example, the overseas women would ask them to translate the English into their first language. This seemed to be an effective means of clarification for the interviewees. Unfortunately my command of South Asian community languages did not stretch to being able to translate many words myself. Yet as a white interviewer it proved extremely useful to be able to speak a few words of Urdu, Hindi or Punjabi, even when this only allowed me to use the correct religious greeting and farewell, or to say a few introductory words about myself. Such attempts seemed to amuse the interviewees, perhaps because they were unfamiliar with white people trying to speak their language. Speaking their language with a Yorkshire accent also raised a couple of smiles.

On the one occasion where an interviewee spoke no English, a translator was required. I was aware that care needed to be taken in relation to the appropriate usage and selection of translators in cross-cultural research (Keats 2000: 129–130). I was also aware that attention must be awarded to selecting a translator who is not only proficient in speaking the interviewee’s language, but is culturally acceptable to the interviewee, in

relation to ethnicity, gender, caste and religion. Indeed one of the study's interviewees who worked in a South Asian community organisation lucidly commented:

I would say that I strongly recommend that if there are translators they should be qualified. They might be misused. Because working for organizations I have found that the translator, often this is a family member, have been involved in unlawful immigration, unlawful abortions. I was involved in a case where a woman was carrying a female foetus, and the husband said that she wanted to have an abortion. Things like that . . . also translators must have rigid tests to check that they are neutral and not biased. And that interpretations should be word for word, not putting your own views in.

During the interview where a translator was used both the interviewee and translator were Pakistani Muslim women from Azad Kashmir, in their early twenties, with Urdu being spoken. Due to the particular circumstances of the interview, which took place at very short notice, the translator was in fact a neighbour and friend of the interviewee. The unpredictable nature of interview based qualitative research meant that I had pre-arranged to interview the translator about her own immigration experiences. It transpires that earlier during the day the translator had told the non-English speaking woman that I was coming, resulting in the non-English speaking interviewee, who was having immigration problems, calling round to her neighbour's home to ask my advice. This is what led me to interview her after the neighbour offered to translate. In this particular interview the translator was not qualified, but did closely match the cultural profile of the interviewee. It was extremely fortunate that the first interviewee offered to translate, otherwise the interview would have had to be re-arranged whilst a suitable translator could be found.

Community centres, work places and my office at the university were used to carry out the interviews. However, most participants preferred the interview to take place in their own homes. Like, for example, Rhodes (1994: 555) the home visits appeared to give the interviewees a greater confidence because the interview was taking place in 'familiar territory'. In addition being invited as a 'stranger' and 'outsider' into an interviewee's home was an important signifier that the South Asian women accepted me. This went some way in legitimizing my role as a researcher. During many of these home visits children ran excitedly around the room, which often resulted in the frequent pausing of the interview so that order could be restored. Husbands and other extended family members were also present during many of these home visits. Phoenix (1995: 59) prepared me for what I might encounter in such situations when she wrote of how 'ethnic-minority women occasionally request that a male partner attends the interview, (where he will) often answer some of the questions: an awkward situation when it is the woman's constructions being sought'. My actual experience of this type of situation did not confirm Phoenix's observation. At no stage in any of the interviews did a male relative want to sit in on the interview. Rather male relatives appeared eager for me to hear the woman's narrative, particularly if her immigration history was complex.

As the primary motivation of the study was to elicit the meaning and nature of these women's experiences, I required a research methodology

that would uncover the 'intricate details about phenomena, feelings (and) emotions' (Strauss and Corbin 1998: 11). This led me to adopt the semi-structured interview as the method through which I could grasp the detailed meaning and nature of being a woman who has had both her gender and ethnic identities categorized by the British immigration service.⁹ Furthermore, as the research project was essentially woman-centred, I acknowledged from the outset that 'taking account of women and adopting a feminist perspective affects the research process' (Maynard and Purvis 1995: 1). Therefore, the decision to adopt feminist principles in the conducting of the qualitative study seemed a fitting choice.

Locating ethnicity in the woman-to-woman interview: a review of the literature on feminist research methodology

As an inexperienced researcher I retreated to the university library to consult the now very well documented material by authors such as Harding (1987), Finch (1981) and Stanley and Wise (1983) concerning woman-centred research. These texts located the genesis of feminist methodology within the wider qualitative research paradigm, which claims that the research process cannot be looked upon as a 'value-free, neutral, uninvolved approach' (Mies 1983: 119–120). Feminism has however injected a distinct challenge to this positivist model of research, and has also come to challenge aspects of qualitative research. These early feminist challenges focused on the omission of women from 'most forms of codified knowledge', which created a world 'mainly experienced in terms of male interests and male ways' (Afshar and Maynard 2000: 805). Male interests were absorbed into the research process inhibiting the acquiring of knowledge about women and their understanding of the world around them. Such feminist challenges demonstrated that gender should no longer be regarded as an invisible element in the research process within the social sciences, and importantly that the 'self is an instrument of the data collection and analysis process' (Strauss and Corbin 1998: 6).

By focusing on gender, questions about the 'issues of power within research, the relations between researcher and researched, and issues of exploitation and appropriation' (Appleby 1997: 139) were scrutinized. The early feminist position advanced that exploitation could be negated in those research situations where the researcher and their participant were both women, due to their shared membership of an oppressed gender (Finch 1981: 76, Edwards 1990: 480). Thus the woman-to-woman research situation, often one utilizing the interview, was felt to produce a relaxed, non-hierarchical, cosy research setting based upon 'woman talk' (Devault 1990: 98), whereby the sharing of gender meant that the researcher could automatically listen and understand the social reality being expressed by her participant.

This affinity based on gender oppression was held to erase the hierarchy present between the researcher and her participant towards a more reciprocal relationship, encouraging the co-ownership and authorship of the research project. This is a sentiment often espoused in the statement

'research for women, not on women' (Duelli-Klein in Bowles 1983: 94, Edwards 1990: 479, Maynard and Purvis 1995: 7). At the heart, therefore, feminist research methodology aims to create a research experience that is as positive and empowering for the participant as possible.

As the intention from the outset of my research was to make the interview a positive experience for the women taking part, I ensured that all of the South Asian women were given the opportunity to give feedback on the interview itself. Two out of the 30 interviewees commented that there were too many questions making the interview too long. A Pakistani interviewee also took issue with my usage of the words 'Indian sub-continent'. She stressed that she was a Pakistani and did not want to be associated with India. Consequently, in future interviews and written work I began to use 'Asian sub-continent' instead. I also offered to send the participants a copy of the transcript from their interview for comment. It is interesting that of the interviewees who requested to see their transcript, none re-contacted me to make any comments, although one woman told me that she did not realize that she said so many 'hums' and 'ahs'. Of course this does not automatically indicate that the women were 100% happy with the interview and transcript, although I did try to ensure that the transcript was as close as possible to what was recorded during the interview. Some participants may have felt uneasy giving feedback to my face or over the telephone. This zero re-contact rate probably best reflects my participants' busy lives.

Having read the numerous texts on feminist research, I decided to investigate literature concerning the usage of a feminist research methodology in interview situations where the researcher and the participant share the same gender but not the same ethnicity, as would be the case with my own research project. My adoption of a Black feminist epistemology suggested, to repeat Maynard's quotation, that 'taking account of women', in my case South Asian women, and 'adopting a feminist perspective', in my case Black feminism, 'affects the research process'. The literature produced by white (for example Edwards 1990 and Rhodes 1994) and black women (for example Phoenix 1995 and Egharevba 2001) has reflected on the experiences of researching with women not of the same ethnicity as themselves. Research by Song and Parker (1995) adds a further dimension to the discussion of how ethnicity enters into the interview setting by considering those research situations where the minority-ethnic researcher shares the same or partial ethnic background as the interviewees. This literature exposed a gap in early feminist thinking towards uncovering social reality from women's viewpoints; a gap it was argued that was comparable to the partial and biased understanding of the research situation which men had entrenched in their research. Consequently because of the specific social location of the early advocates of feminist methodology, namely white and middle-class, the 'cultural beliefs and behaviours of (these) feminist researchers shape(d) the results of their analysis no less than those of sexist and androcentric researchers' (Bhopal 1995: 166). At the heart of the debate therefore rests the argument that, just as male researchers failed to identify their gender as a factor determining the dynamics of the research situation, likewise early advocates of feminist

methodology had failed to see how their ethnicity was a significant factor determining their selection of the research topic, along with the collection and analysis of data. Therefore 'cross-cutting differences amongst women' (Devault 1990: 112) such as ethnicity affect carrying out research, and 'race infuses itself into the research process and into the interview situation' (Edwards 1990: 281). Indeed as the article will now discuss, there were two occasions during the research where my ethnicity (white, British) entered into the interview setting, and awarded me an outsider status which overrode the sharing of gender with the South Asian interviewees.

An outsider's observation of the interview process

On one occasion my outsider status provided me with access to an interviewee, which had I been a member of the South Asian community I would probably not have been granted. Initially this woman voiced reservations about taking part in the study, and would not give a 'yes' or 'no' answer until she had consulted her husband. At first the husband said that she should not talk with me, as they had almost sorted out her immigration status in this country, and that they did not want to jeopardize her application. After hearing this I decided to make one final attempt at securing the interview, so I gave her a copy of the interview schedule with my name written on to take home and show her husband. Fortunately (for me) when the husband read the questions and more importantly my name he gave his permission to interview his wife. The interviewee later told me that to her husband my whiteness symbolized that I was neutral and had no community links.

The interview was arranged to take place at the woman's home rather than at the playgroup where I first met her, because she did not want to talk in front of other South Asian women. She felt that these women would inform her mother-in-law that she had been talking to a 'white person'. Furthermore, on the day of the interview I had to make sure that I left the interviewee's home by midday as the mother-in-law was expected for lunch. Even though in this particular interview situation my 'outsider' status provided me with access, this very same profile meant that the interview had to be conducted in secrecy, without the knowledge of the mother-in-law or other community members.

This woman's reservations were extremely unsettling for me, especially as I was still at the early stages of my data collection. All the South Asian women I had interviewed before had been acquaintances of mine, so gaining access had not been an issue. I went to this woman's home half expecting her not to be there when I arrived. After knocking on the door I was relieved to say the least when she opened it. Once inside I was made to feel extremely welcome. After numerous cups of coffee, I was given a guided tour around her home, and shown the contents of her wardrobe. She was particularly keen to show me a *salwaaz kameez*¹⁰ that she would be wearing at a friend's wedding. This guided tour was perhaps a gesture of hospitality, or maybe she was happy for company from somebody of her own age.

During another interview my 'outsider' status produced a negative experience with one of the study's interviewees. I asked this particular South Asian woman for an interview during a *mela* festival celebrating International Women's Day. Although she agreed to take part, every time I set out to conduct the interview she announced that she would 'do it later'. This delay may have been a result of a number of South Asian women requesting the interviewee to put *mendhi*¹¹ onto their hands. Whilst I was waiting she began talking in Punjabi, where she kept referring to me as a '*gori*'. Translated literally this word means 'fair' as in 'fair skinned', but it is also an insulting term used to describe white people, or South Asians who are perceived to have adopted 'western' ways. There is a very similar sounding word '*ghora*' meaning 'horse', but from the context I think that she was referring to me in the former derogatory meaning. I only understood what had been said because prior to the interviews I had undertaken a year's course in learning to speak South Asian community languages. My motivation for taking this course was to introduce a positive element into the cross-cultural interview setting, so that I would be able to converse, albeit at a basic level, with the interviewees. I had not considered that these skills would lead to a negative experience in the interview setting, in that I would be able to recognize a prejudiced comment directed at my ethnicity.

This negative experience certainly affected me, particularly by causing me to feel powerless and rather self-conscious about my ethnicity. The residential area in which the *mela* took place, along with the festival's attendees was exclusively South Asian. Throughout the day I was certainly aware of being in a minority due to my ethnic identity, even though all of the adult attendees were women. With hindsight I probably approached the interview and the *mela* naively. I recall feeling that once the South Asian organizer had introduced me, and I had explained my presence at the festival that the attendees would automatically accept me. I now know that I took the interviewees' acceptance for granted, as unconditional.

I decided not to let this particular interviewee know that I had understood what she had called me, and this led me to feel particularly powerless. This insecurity was partly due to my minimal competency in Punjabi, despite the year's training course I had attended. I just did not feel confident enough to challenge the interviewee who spoke Punjabi as her first language. More importantly, my reluctance to challenge the interviewee was lodged in my position as outsider and guest at the *mela*. Confronting the South Asian interviewee would have certainly been inappropriate behaviour. I left the *mela* feeling confused and slightly upset as to why this woman acted the way she did towards me. Nonetheless, after calling me a *gori* she let me interview her. This was the first and only time in the research project where an interviewee has acted in this way towards me. Reviewing this has forced me to acknowledge that I have an ethnicity, which I bring to bear in the context of the interview, even though I want to keep it outside of the interview setting. As a member of the majority-ethnic population I must accept that some people will look at me as a 'white person', and attach assumptions to this.

In the majority of the interviews my 'outsider' status did not appear to be an issue. One interview in particular was reflective of those interview situations where the gender or the ethnicity of the researcher and interviewee are not the most significant factors in the research relationship (Edwards 1990: 488–489, Phoenix 1995: 62). A South Asian woman stated that she would only talk with me on the proviso that I gave her some advice about an immigration application she was making (which I did). In this interview, the participant's need for advice appears to have outweighed any concerns about gender or ethnic differences or commonalities. There was therefore a certain amount of self-interest on behalf of this woman taking part in the study in terms of her need for advice. Had she consulted a solicitor she would have been charged for the advice, whereas I gladly gave the advice freely as a 'way in which I could give something back to the researched beyond the interview situation' (Egharevba 2001: 233). On at least one other occasion I have sent an interviewee who hoped to enter politics information on minority-ethnic parliamentary candidates. Hopefully, these acts helped to establish a reciprocal, albeit minimal relationship between the interviewees and myself, whilst demonstrating that I did not forget about the South Asian women as soon as the interview finished.

Outsider status and the complexities of power

The outsider status of the researcher by virtue of her majority-ethnic membership also impacts on and complicates the power relations active in the cross-cultural feminist interview. My personal experience as an outsider suggests that a complex interchange of power takes place during the course of the interview, as power relations are not necessarily 'zero-sum' in favour of the majority-ethnic researcher, but 'multidimensional' (Squires 2000: 45). Power relations between the researcher and interviewee are therefore clearly not 'fixed dichotomies (as) the balance of power shifts over the course of a study' (Phoenix 1995: 55). When considering how the researcher's outsider status effects her relationship with the minority-ethnic interviewees a clear distinction must be made between personal and structural power held by the white feminist researcher.

The personal power held by the researcher in comparison to her participants during the interviews may at times shift and be weighted in the direction of the interviewees. In relation to personal power held by myself during the research there were occasions where the South Asian women were able to refuse an interview, or to withhold information. This situation is discussed by Bhopal (1995: 164) when she considers how the power relations between herself and her South Asian interviewees were 'two way' and 'in some instances it was the women who had the power, as they decided what they wanted to tell me and hence were able to keep and control power by withholding information'. I certainly became aware of this during one particular interview. I had known the interviewee for a couple of years prior to the interview, and on numerous occasions she had tearfully revealed her unhappiness at having married an overseas South

Asian male. She added that she had only gone ahead with the arranged marriage due to parental pressure. This woman belonged to the second highest Hindu caste and because of her high educational attainment along with her having entered her thirties, her parents feared that they would be unable to find her a husband of the same caste and educational background. Yet during the interview she told me that she had selected her own husband without parental involvement and had had a love marriage. I still do not know which account represents the woman's marriage choice, as I never mentioned this discrepancy to the interviewee. Perhaps this interviewee regretted being so open with me previously, and did not want these feelings recorded during the interview. Perhaps both explanations sit alongside each other by reflecting the complexity of this interviewee's marriage choice. This situation certainly highlights that caution is required when approaching interview data. Furthermore, it is paramount that the researcher acknowledges that the qualitative interview is not conducted in a vacuum, free from contamination by the structural relations and oppressions in wider society. Therefore the researcher, because of her outsider status will undoubtedly hold structural power over the minority-ethnic participants. After completing 15 months of cross-cultural interviews and almost upon completion of my doctorate I find this realization of holding structural power uncomfortable, unpalatable and particularly difficult to reconcile with my commitment to embrace racial equality in the research project.

As shown by Rhodes (1994: 552) and Bryson (1999: 64) gender and ethnicity are not the only dimensions of power and integrity active in the cross-cultural interview. Indeed compared to myself, some of the interviewees held higher professional, and class backgrounds. Nonetheless, as none of the interviewees had studied higher than masters degree level, my doctoral studies set me apart educationally from the 30 respondents. Age was an additional factor that altered power relations within the research. Approximately two thirds of the interviewees were older than me, with some women having children the same age as myself. The fact that I have no children may also have set me apart from the interviewees on lines other than ethnicity or gender.

Class positioning between the researcher and interviewees can also be a significant factor in determining power relations, and is for some just as important as ethnicity or gender (Coole 1996, Ramazanoglu quoted by Bryson 1999: 57). Although the research concentrates on the interaction of gender and ethnicity only, the adoption of a black feminist theoretical perspective as a foundation to the study demands the acknowledgement that class positions majority and minority-ethnic women differently within and across ethnic groupings (Davis 1982). However, personally I feel that class differences between myself and the interviewees, and the role they played in structuring power relations was less explicit. I recognize that although like myself some of the South Asian female participants came from the 'working class', it must be acknowledged that the working class is itself internally stratified and segregated by ethnicity (and gender), with many, but not all minority-ethnic groupings being located in the lower strata of this class. There is no denying that as a working class white female

research student I hold a structurally privileged position in representing and interpreting these South Asian women's narratives.

Conclusion

This article has explored the complexities, difficulties and successes of pursuing a feminist methodology in research projects where the researcher and interviewees share the same gender but not ethnicity. It is now widely acknowledged amongst feminist researchers that 'gender is not enough' (Kohler-Reissman 1987) when conducting woman-centred studies. The ethnicity, class, age, along with personal and structural power; the list seems endless, of the interviewer effects many elements of the interview. The ethnicity and gender of the researcher are not irrelevant to the research process, but the ways in which they are relevant, as this paper has shown, are extremely complex and cannot simply be read off from these characteristics.

Because of a different ethnicity, a white feminist researcher is likely to be regarded as an outsider by interviewees of South Asian heritage, regardless of the sharing of gender. It has been shown within this article that this outsider status has unpredictable effects on the researcher's relationship with her interviewees, producing both positive and negative outcomes. Therefore within the cross-cultural feminist interview there are always 'costs and benefits to being an "insider" and "outsider" by virtue of one's group membership' (Kohler-Riessman 1987: 191). It is also important to note that in some interview situations the researcher's ethnicity, gender and/or class may not necessarily be the focus upon which the minority-ethnic participant relates to the majority-ethnic interviewer.

The researcher's outsider status also effects the extremely dynamic and fluid power relations in the woman-centred cross-cultural interview. There have been occasions during the data collection where I have felt powerless and extremely self-conscious. However my social class and ethnicity located me in a structurally privileged position vis à vis the interviewees, since I have the ultimate responsibility to interpret and present the 30 South Asian women's narratives in the middle class forum of academia. This acknowledgement has been difficult for me to reconcile with my commitment to promote racial equality. My experience of conducting woman-centred cross-cultural research is that it can unravel the complexity of the relationship between the researcher and participant, especially power relations both inside and outside the interview by reflexively taking into account ethnicity, gender and social class.

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Notes

1. Usage of the term South Asian throughout this article refers to women who have come from the Asian sub-continent: Pakistan and India, along with British-born women of South Asian heritage. This term acts therefore more like an umbrella, encompassing diverse nationalities, castes, languages, dialects and religious observances.
2. For an insightful examination of how women have historically been treated differently from men in British immigration law refer to Bhabha and Shutter (1994).
3. Spencer (1997) and Layton-Henry (1992) are excellent examples of texts discussing the racialization of British immigration control.
4. There has been one PhD thesis written on minority-ethnic women and the operation of immigration control, see Cheney (1993).
5. The following references provide examinations of South Asian woman in contemporary Britain; Khan (1999), and Bhopal (1997). Wilson's 1985 text represents one of the earliest accounts of South Asian women's experiences of British immigration control.
6. I am not however arguing that the current under-representation of minority-ethnic academics in Britain's universities is acceptable and should go unchallenged. See the *Guardian's* Education supplement 15 January 2002, pp. 8–10 for an insightful discussion of the status of minority-ethnic researchers in academia.
7. Under the government's new immigration White Paper, 'Secure borders, safe haven: integration with diversity in modern Britain', Cm 5387, the one year probationary year will be extended to two years. The purpose of this extension is to uncover 'sham' or bogus' marriages, and will subject couples to a longer period of scrutiny so that the genuineness of their marriage can be tested.
8. Many of the councils that serve West Yorkshire have a well-established translation service for the South Asian communities. A racial equality organization, which acted as the collaborating agency during the study, had offered to make available, free of charge, translators who matched the gender and ethnicity of the interviewees. However this service was not utilized due to the vast majority of interviews being conducted in English.
9. Historically within the formulation and administration of Britain's post-1945 immigration control, Black Caribbean/African and South Asian female applicants have been stereotypically categorized through presumptions concerning women from different cultures. This has resulted in a specific type of Black and South Asian woman being regarded as a typical, and therefore, legitimate immigration applicant. Black Caribbean/African women are perceived as lone parent mothers, whereas the South Asian woman is viewed first and foremost as a wife, a passive and dependent appendage on her male kin. For an illustration of the above see Cheney (1993), chapters four and five and Hall (2002).
10. The long tunic, baggy trousers and long scarf worn by South Asian women.
11. The ornate patterns drawn in henna on the hands, arms, feet and legs. There is a myth within sections of the South Asian communities which state that the darker the henna the more a mother-in-law is supposed to love her son's wife.

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