

Negotiating Constructions of 'Insider'/'Outsider' Status and Exploring the Significance of Dis/Connections

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Harshad C. Keval, Independent Research Consultant

hkeval@yahoo.com

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to discuss the negotiation of identities within fieldwork in the context of a qualitative exploration of the experience of type 2 diabetes among Hindu Gujarati people in the United Kingdom (UK). The focus of the paper is to highlight the 'insider' / 'outsider' debate within qualitative and ethnographic research. The emphasis is on several aspects of identity interactions which emerged in the study, such as ethnicity, language, religion and biographical history. The notion of 'cultural validations' is central to this as it eschews static ideas of 'culture', 'identity' and the myth of authenticity in accordance with the consensus in literature. Instead, it utilises a processual telling of researcher / researched interactions. These interactions are seen as flowing and changeable, contingent on a variety of social, cultural and personal biographical action. They are demonstrably fragile and dynamic. It is against the backdrop of this dynamicism that I present examples of the processes of access, connection and disconnection within the fieldwork and interviews. The links between me and those I interacted with were fluid and, as many authors have argued, these entities are unstable, thus problematising the excavation of an objective and single truth. Although this paper concurs with this consensus, it also maintains that within this fluidity of acceptance, rejection, access and interaction, it is in the dialectical tensions of the process where many examples of enduring connection existed. These moments transcended general interviewer skills and rapport, and extended to biographical histories, cultural-linguistic nuances and shared migration experiences. While fully supporting the rejection of traditional race-matching concepts in research, the paper recognises the merits of both 'outsider / insider' status, and the changeability therein. I also maintain that a simple binary rendition of this relationship is not sufficient to explore its complexities. Rather, the relationship can be characterised by what I have termed processes of 'cultural validations', which allows multiple possibilities in the way in which aspects of our selves as researchers – ethnicity, language, biographies and experiences – can connect and sometimes clash with those

of participants. It is hoped that this multi-dimensional rendering of identity connections can contribute to critical reflective qualitative methodology and the critical analysis of difference.

Introduction

The combination of researcher identity and social research for the purposes of exploring social and cultural worlds is not new. Feminist researchers (Stanley and Wise, 1993) and critical race theorists (Ladson-Billings, 2003) have already explored how identities of all concerned shape research and are mediated by power relations. As Ladson-Billings (2003) states 'my research is a part of my life and my life is a part of my research' (p. 417). The overt and explicit acknowledgement of researcher biography connecting with aspects of the participant identity facilitates a need for reflexive qualitative methodology.

This paper explores the ways in which aspects of my identity connected and sometimes disconnected with my research participants' identities. This occurred as interactional dynamics and processes both inside and outside the fieldwork situation. The aim is to examine aspects and notions of my own identity (linguistic, cultural, class, professional, ethnic and religious) and look at the ways in which these were connected to each other and to the research study. I have called these processes cultural validations; they are contingent, fluid, dynamic and flexible, and yet within these fluidities lay enduring elements of identity in terms of narrative and biographical life accounts.

This relative endurance is not about unchanging or unmoveable ideas of who we think we are, and more importantly of course for research who we think other people are. Rather, people's perceptions and experiences of, for example, notions of origin, caste belonging, language, cultural and linguistic etiquette and family history, will have an impact on the changing landscape the research sits within. Who people think we are will have a huge impact on the research and of course vice versa. As Agar (1980) argues, the endeavour is more than a professional one, it is personal. In a sense, one of the issues this paper aims to discuss is the notion of being an insider or outsider – what do we mean when using these terms and can they be used in any consistent way in qualitative and ethnographic research?

The physical and embodied experience of fieldwork requires an explicit engagement with one's location physically and socially. The result is a contextualisation through the interaction of bodies, personalities and social and cultural frameworks. This echoes the work of others in the field, such as De Andrade (2000), who argues that the insider position is dynamic and

constantly re-created throughout the fieldwork. The dynamic nature of negotiated identities in research is also echoed by Reinharz (1997) who discusses the existence of multiple-selves in fieldwork. The changeable and fluid yet tangible nature of identity connection and formation in the field is an underlying theme in this study. Similarly, early anthropological observations by Kelman (1980, taken from Fahim and Helmer, 1980, p. 658) reflect that the positioning of the researcher should be located on a continuum, with many positions in between two extremes. As Naples (1996) identified in her study of two towns in rural Iowa, the fluidity of these positions often stems from social and cultural processes within the communities and lives being studied, therefore resulting in multiple repositioning of relationships.

The consensus in this debate is that trying to match aspects of identity such as race or colour is pointless, because it assumes there is an objective truth to these ideas which can then be mapped onto its counterpart in the participant (Phoenix, 1994). I wish to problematise this further by calling upon the dialectic nature of this process and warning against binary polarised notions of insider / outsider status. I refer to Reed's (2003) use of dialectical tension (itself based on Schrijver 1993) where multivocal discourse and a plurality of views inform a reflexive approach. Hence instead of a polarised view of identity or status, it is through tensions in dialogue, communication and contexts that relationships exist. The tensions that can exist in the dialectical relationship can be called cultural validations for they are representative of neither complete acceptance or complete rejection. Rather, they are demonstrative of everyday social action, a back and forth movement along Kelman's (1980) continuum. Within moments of acceptance it is perhaps a combination of identity markers which help to create and sustain the rapport between participant and researcher. The combination in this study may have been age, gender, assumed status or public demonstration of approval by a gatekeeper. Equally, the presence of connections and familiarity related to the combination of ethnicity, skin colour, language, assumed religion, migration history and family relations may also have played a role. These markers appeared to be quite integral to the formation of these interactions. They are by no means, as many authors have shown previously (e.g. Alexander 2004, Gallagher 2000), enough to sustain the process, but in this study they were a powerful component in the machinery. I may have been able to secure access, but its maintenance and sustenance thereafter would be contingent on social and cultural processes and serendipity. Cultural validations are at the heart of this dialectical tension. While accepting current consensus on the fluidity of identity, locating these spaces of connection is acknowledging that there are enduring socialities that people often use to interact and connect with each other, and sometimes with researchers.

The invisibility of culture, as Van Maanen (1997) has called it, is remedied somewhat by its representation. As Nayak (2006) argues the ethnographic project is all about representation. In this research I often raised the question of how I represented the processual nature of the interactions, and whether or not these representations were true to the social and cultural picture of how people manage their conditions. One focus of the research involved exploring the everyday and lived experience of diabetes and the different structures of relevance (Schutz, 1966) people employed. However a parallel focus what Ryen (2008) called 'methodological self-consciousness' (2008, p. 85), involves reflecting on what I experienced as real connections that were occurring between myself and participants, often resulting in joy and humour, as well as embarrassment and awkwardness. By identifying these processes as cultural validations, I was able to articulate these dynamics. In a sense it was keeping with Merton's (1972) call (taken from Fahim and Helmer, 1980, p. 658) to consider what each identity (researcher or participant) can contribute to the overall project of rendering a cultural and social picture. In this case the research was focused on how people within Hindu Gujarati communities managed and conceptualised diabetes.

The Study

The study at the centre of this research was a qualitative exploration of the experience of adult onset diabetes, also known as non-insulin dependent or type 2 diabetes, among Gujarati Hindus in England. Diabetes is known to have higher rates within specific groups of people, both in the UK and internationally (Abate and Chandalia, 2003). In the UK, diabetes rates amongst South Asians are much higher than in the Caucasian population (Lawton et al., 2005). The aim in this study was to look at how diabetes is thought about and managed among people in this grouping and explore the kinds of knowledge and experience structures that might be employed in the social and cultural embedding of health and illness states. 18 qualitative interviews were carried out (with the spoken language a mixture of Gujarati and English), as well as field visits to cities in the Midlands, North West and South East regions of the UK.

The study showed that people's experiences, histories, biographies and notions of identity were constantly in use in the routine management of diabetes. A number of themes emerged: the social and personal complexities involved in the diagnosis of diabetes – for example, the checking of diagnoses via connections overseas using printed media and social networks; the combined use of allopathic, traditional and herbal remedies; the mediation

role played by historical and familial knowledge of remedies, as well as a current and immediate engagement with the system via local social connections; the mapping of experiences in Africa and India to experiences of migrating to this country. These were mediated within biographical contexts and used to deal with social landscapes. These findings were set against the backdrop of health science discourse, where it is possible to identify a general direction towards constructions of a South Asian risk, based on genetic, cultural and lifestyle explanations (explored in Keval, 2009, in press). The study intended to explore how people utilised their notions of identity in the context of living with a particular condition and how they went about demonstrating the management of their condition in a personal-biographical and social context.

Access

In terms of gaining access, I used a number of gatekeepers known to me who could make the appropriate contacts and inform people about my study, passing on information about my contact details. The gatekeeper position is also mediated by personal and social politics, so that those who hold this position also wield quite considerable power in validating or rejecting identities. This is, of course, off-set against people's agency. As people in this study demonstrated time and again, potential and actual participants were far from passive co-operators, and in a sense this is what the process of cultural validations points to. The researcher's role and the participant's role are constantly under respective scrutiny, earning both rejections and acceptances as the situations unfold. Gatekeepers were also in a position to wield their protective power as their positions of relative authority meant that they held peoples' trust and this was to be taken very seriously. For example, they often played a significant role in assessing and validating an outsider, regardless of language, family connections or religion.

On receiving permission from a gatekeeper I would typically arrange a time to telephone participants in order to arrange a visit or meeting. The access points in this study were mediated by and partially validated by someone who was known to the participant, a process quite common in ethnographic work (for example see Berg 2009, Emerson et al., 1995). Having this partially validated identity then made the rest of the journey less problematic as my presence had been partly agreed to. This often happened over the telephone, on my arrival at community centres and temples, and at special public events.

Dis/Connections

One of the unexpected outcomes of carrying out this research was that I would be thrown into a series of interactions with people who 'knew' me. This knowledge and familiarity was sometimes based on a familiarity in shared language (dialect, accent), sometimes in past experiences of interactions and sometimes on familiarity with family names. Participants would gain a sense of reassurance from conversing in the same language, recalling a past event where we had met (and which I had not linked to the participant), or from recalling an historically shared experience in India and/or Africa. I have used the term dis/connection, to represent forms of identity interaction for practical purposes¹, but also for conceptual, empirical and analytical purposes¹. In the course of the fieldwork visits to community centres and temples, and within interviews there were often moments where access to people, places and experiences ranged from completely unchallenged to variously problematic.

Familiarity

An example of familiarity based on aspects of identity occurred during the initial setting-up phase before a field visit. One of my informants had contacted a potential participant (Kanti, an 80 year old woman) and asked if she might be interested to speak with me. She had agreed and received some details about my study. As I spoke to her in Gujarati on the phone she immediately told me that she knew I was from a certain region in Gujarat – or at least that my parents were from there (and had passed on their linguistic dialect and accent to me). She then went on to tell me where she was from and about her history in East Africa, something we shared. Discerning broad differences in dialect and establishing notions of caste or geographical origin is not particularly difficult for a fluent speaker of Gujarati, just as accents in the UK can convey a number of social and cultural identities. Being able to identify this identity marker facilitated a connection. These mutual understandings were a useful tool for both parties. For Kanti it provided a sense of knowing, perhaps an expert knowledge status which could be useful for relations during our interaction. For me, it provided a way into the interaction and formed a basis on which I could then work. As we talked she asked many times about where my family was from and on briefly learning about our histories and origins, sounded both pleased and reassured, especially because she was very familiar with the area in Gujarat. This event

¹Conceptual because the distinction helps to characterise more insightfully these relations; empirical because the nature of these interactions is located in data and field experience; analytical because these insights or interpretations can point to complex and subtle social and cultural mechanisms operating in people's management of health and identity

preceded my meeting with her at a community centre and then at her house where the interview took place. By the time we actually met there was a level of familiarity already established.

These working relationships raised a question about the kind of interaction and access which might have taken place without these familiarities. Would they have been any more or less significant? The consensual answer (e.g. Young 2004; Twine 2006) is that the access would have been different but of no less a quality or richness. I take this as a point of departure, and argue that the validation process as mediated by familiarity with place of origin and language did result in richer data and better access. It was precisely because of shared stocks of cultural knowledge that Kanti and I could talk at length about things that were important to her in her biography. The connection was not something which was attained at a fixed level, but ebbed and flowed. For example, on my arrival at the community centre where Kanti and many other Gujarati elders met frequently, I was introduced to the entire group as 'the doctor'. Kanti, occupying a leadership role within the community asked everyone with diabetes to line up, so the 'doctor' could check them! Perhaps the familiarity and rapport established here may well have prevented a clear understanding of the kind of research I was doing. As Young (2004) has argued there may have been a lack of distancing. However, as Agar (1980) has explored in much detail, in ethnographic settings the dynamics of disclosure are complex and have implications for all the relationships one is hoping to build. In this study I worked entirely within the appropriate ethical standards and guidelines, having received appropriate ethical approval before any fieldwork began. I did so however with the knowledge that how people understood my presence in their personal and social space was the result of a variety of factors related to aspects of both of our identities.

The example above with Kanti shows how a connection can be established within a relatively short amount of time, without even face-to-face contact. There were other instances, however, where familiarity was completely unexpected. For example, on one occasion during a telephone call to a potential participant, Dhansuk, a 50 year old man, it was revealed that we had met many years previously and that he was familiar with my family. There had not been contact for some years and the nature of this relationship was quite formal. He had played an important role in the national organising committee which represented a particular caste grouping of Gujaratis and therefore was familiar with many families in this collectivity around the country through his position. On remembering our connection I was initially uncertain about the possible consequences of this, fearing that it may have had an impact on the interview. However it instead functioned as an access

point and may have eased access to this participant. Although there was no apparent negative impact on the interview (gauged by length of responses, rapport, tone of voice and general cooperation), it is certainly feasible that I missed the effect of this dynamic.

Unexpected familiarity can also take the form of people having a sense of knowing through historical connections. During a field visit to one of the temples / community centres, I found myself at the centre of a lively discussion during what turned out to be a case of mistaken identity based on my family surname. While I was talking to one of the potential informants the local group leader approached us, and told the informant who I was the son of². The potential informant then proceeded to speak to me in rather harsh tones and demonstrated that there was an obviously contentious relationship between these gentlemen and my father. At this point, I became aware of the downside of familiarity. While endorsements may provide some access to a group, interactions can be contingent on unexpected histories. These can often be framed by fragile historical legacies, reinforced by memories, some accurate and some not. At one point during the interaction I found myself apologising, having admitted my guilt at being complicit in my family's cultural and social crime of not remaining in regular contact with the group! I enquired further, however, and it was revealed that I had been mistaken for someone else. On further elaboration of geographical and familial roots (and many apologies later) the group leader then enthusiastically and fondly spoke of his close relationship to my grandparents, having lived in the same street in the Gujarati village in India. I was then put through another series of questions about the research, my affiliations and intentions. The status of this relationship or connection was quite fragile and contingent on the dialectical tensions of acceptance and rejection, but repaired through identity connection. The access gained appeared greater than had the disturbance not occurred at all. Through the connections between my family's biographical and historical location and the people I was talking with there was an opportunity to demonstrate some sense of legitimacy in being there. This echoes Rabinow's 'interruptions and eruptions' (1977, p. 154), which posits breakdowns in field interactions as part of an on-going cycle of relationship renewal. As Ryen (2008) observes, this is very different from seeking a constant order in the field and acknowledges the dynamic, social and contingent nature of field relations.

The gatekeeping role mentioned above can be crucial to gaining access to people, places and spaces. Within the community centre settings which were part of the fieldwork, there is usually a physical gender divide with men

²In English this would be more appropriately translated as 'informed him of my father's name' – however in translation it loses its culturally specific semantic and symbolic weight.

gathering on one side of the room and women on the other. There is interaction between them but generally only if necessary. These gatherings within community centres facilitate a forum for South Asian elders to socialise, dine, take part in gentle exercise and sometimes listen to a visitor give a health and well-being related talk. During my visit I had the opportunity to speak with a woman who was quite active in the community and therefore keen to facilitate my role and research. She was interested and keen to help in any way she could. I thanked her, and over the course of the day I moved towards the group I was interested in speaking with. Having already gained permission from the group leader, I approached the elder women to talk to them. They appeared slightly hesitant to cooperate with me. At this point there had been no explicit statement or explanation of my being there, so they may well have been uncertain of my presence. As I made several attempts to talk to this group, the woman whom I had met earlier came to my side and said loudly and publicly:

It's ok. He's one of our children. He just wants to talk with you as he's doing some work on diabetes, so please cooperate.

On hearing this, the group immediately warmed to the possibility of being asked questions about their health. They appeared much more at ease and I was able to speak with most of them, gaining direct information and speak to potential participants. Again, this points towards the building of identities as a negotiated order, which remain fragile but at the same time flexible. This interaction was also mediated by gender and age. It is likely that the older South Asian women were more likely to categorise me as a son or nephew figure because of my relative youth. This may have eased the access and increased cooperation. The relationships that had already been established and the role I had played however peripherally and tentatively such as talking with the other men, helping to set up tables and chairs and dining with them, contributed to this result. The shared language coupled with an endorsement eased the way and helped to construct a more complete and safe picture of the situation.

These interactions between individuals, groups and me reveal ideas about the fluidity of inclusion or exclusion. This is exemplified in an interesting phrase employed within this study to articulate a shared experience in diabetes: 'Apra man bo che' which translates to 'There's a lot of it in ours'. Participants in this sample were also part of wider collectivities, membership of which was constituted by religion, caste, language and age. As well as often being a part of the immediate community, these wider group memberships within temples and community centres (often the same) formed

a source of identity and support for people. For example to have diabetes, or 'Sugar noh problem' (translation: 'the problem of sugar'), was an indicator of a common experience in particular groups. The Gujarati phrase 'apra man bo che' indicates an 'us' which may provide a symbolic group containment. The notion that one belongs to, has membership of, and therefore can to some extent utilise services therein, points to a group which is defined by amongst many other things, the condition of diabetes. The phrase 'apra man bo che' is something I have heard many times during the research, but was also a consistent feature of conversations I had been involved in before and outside of the research. It was therefore subject to an immediate local understanding on my part. This common understanding shared by us was subject to, and defined by, a connectivity that transcended mere language, religion, or expertise in either ethnography or sociology. It was fluid and changeable, but simultaneously dependent on the enduring fixed-ness of social and cultural experience.

Reflecting on the idea of cultural validations and the various connections discussed earlier, I was able to place myself within this grouping for I too have been counted as high risk by scientific discourse. By virtue of my racial categorisation I have a higher likelihood of diabetes, cardiovascular problems, truncal adiposity, lower levels of exercise, developing the problems associated with the metabolic syndrome – all of course impacted and somewhat confounded by other factors such as socio-economic class. Nevertheless I am not only in the group; I am in the risk grouping. My contemplations about the in / out process are mediated and informed by the very real sense of connections I have with this group. In other words, I was identifying with mirror images of experiences that I (according to epidemiological projections) myself might endure later in life. In fact at various points in the research I found myself re-stating the phrase 'apra man bo che', as a way of beginning discussion, breaking the ice and establishing both discussion subject and membership categorisation. Throughout the fieldwork, talking and interacting with people and the process of writing about this area, the notion of cultural validations as an ongoing process is also a way of writing one's self into the research, and making these dis/connections as explicit as possible. This form of shared belonging reveals echoes of Abu-Lughod's (1999) ethnography in a Bedouin society, where the complexities of sharing elements of identity with participants are compounded by the fragmented nature of this sharing. Again the richness of access and interactions one has in the field is wholly mediated by the dialectical notion of these dis/connections.

Community, Identity and Authenticity

The study also examined notions of community and how people participate in various collectivities. This is linked to one of the central aims of the study which was to explore how participants utilise senses of belonging both within and outside pre-ordered groups (for example caste groupings). Within this utilisation there may have been many different ways in which forms of identity would be used to manage their health and illness states. The data indicated that people were part of many different groups and communities, many of which they used as support mechanisms, for information provision and general socialisation. The question however of whether I had accessed some form of authentic version of a cultural picture did not arise because the idea of a single, clear authenticity to interpretations of representations is a fallacy. The term community here indicates a specific collectivity which is engaged with physically, practically and routinely, such as the local community centre. However, a more generalised group notion related to shared religion, language and caste is also involved. This engenders perhaps a combination of Anderson's (1991) imagined communities and what Clarke et al., (2007) identified as 'the reality of that community...through concrete manifestations...' (2007, p. 91). Community therefore is not to be mistaken for some contrived notion of a Hindu Gujarati collectivity, implying a static uniformity and exclusive unity within itself. Certainly there are aspects of this that apply, but the term community is used as a much more flexible manifestation of people's social and cultural location. Though it is possible to argue that emphasis in a specific place can reveal the relationship between people, community and place relations, there is also the risk that this sets up experiences in physical spaces as somehow homogenous and authentic, and defends the assumption that by doing so we are accessing this entity called community. The approach here sought to break free of contrived notions of authentic community and explore just how wide and elaborate people's demonstrable ideas of community can be. Malik's (2005) discussion of culture and authenticity is brought to bear here, his critique being that authenticity is a production of Western anthropological quests, whereas for people living within their cultures preservation of culture is a lived and required necessity.

In terms of authenticity as an external and static reality that can be accessed in research, further complexity within cross cultural research has been identified by Gunaratnam in her 'insecurities of meaning' (2003, p. 137), referring to the need to establish comparable meaning. This is often underwritten by the assumption that there is a pre-established reality which can be reflected in language. The acquisition of that reality as Shields (1996

taken from Gunaratnam 2003, p. 137) has argued, becomes the overriding goal and can ignore and obscure forms of power relations in the research settings.

The general importance of a critical stance on authenticity is also emphasised here through the methodology used in the study. The process of cultural validations emphasises the variable and contingent nature of the researcher / researched relationship, as one which can be connected by aspects of ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and national and faith identity. This however does not mean that, through these connections, there is an authentic relationship that can be guaranteed. Rather, it posits the relationship as precisely that – a relationship, subject to rejections, acceptances, and broken continuities that go towards facilitating the generation of rich data. It is not argued here that without these linkages the research would be invalid. Rather, it is an acknowledgement that the cultural constitution which results from the negotiating of symbolic markers of difference is contingent and fragile, but also flexible and enduring.

Cultural Invalidations

Throughout the study, including the interviews, processing of data, analysis and write-up, I was aware that the very connections that I had made visible could also be connections which could result in my expectations and perceptions being fulfilled by a participant eager to conform. Having these varied connections to people in this sample could potentially be a screen, masking processes that were occurring in the fieldwork work and interviews. They could also have been shifting and diverting focus and attention away from categories that might be generated in the data, but were hidden precisely due to these connections. There is, however as Coffey (1999) argues, more to the process than the either-or status. Rather than locating these analytical representations as either right or wrong, I regarded these interactions as possibilities for involvement in the setting, and a chance to critically engage with what Coffey (1999) calls 'personal, emotional and identity work' (1999, p. 1) constituted by position, place and identity. The processes of cultural validations include tensions and tussles between forms of identity, and it is the critical identification and analysis of these processes that allows the dialectical relationship to exist.

My role within the research setting and the ways in which connections and disconnections occurred resulted in rapport and ease in the interactions. However, this position has been critiqued for its possible tendency to inhibit conversations (Young 2004). In what he states is an ironic case, Young argues for the advantages an outsider status can bring to social research,

since it allows for a more critical view of the social phenomena being observed. It can therefore facilitate the kind of critical and intellectual endeavour which led to the fieldwork in the first place. In Young's view, having a close connection to the research population can inhibit conversation (therefore stunt the research), because of the comfort and rapport that has been created. Since being an insider the researcher is in a position of 'knowing' certain things – social and cultural knowledge stocks – then these things are not worth spelling out or even talking about, because they are to be taken for granted. As Fielding (2008) recommends, it can be useful to come across as somewhat naïve so that people explain things to the researcher that are obvious to them. Indeed there were instances during two of the interviews when on probing for a response, the participant reacted with mild bewilderment that I, someone who shared certain ideas, knowledge and ways of being (be they language or other) needed something spelled out. This was usually when I asked a question or probed for information about an aspect of life which I would locate analytically in an experiential framework. The participant's bewilderment may well have stemmed from the view that having diabetes is not experienced, but rather managed and lived with. In a sense people simply got on with the task of living their lives which researchers articulate as the arena of experience. Thus, asking a question about some aspect of diabetes was at times met with limited responses. Within these interviews, echoing Young's (2004) experiences a sense of closure did occur where the participants simply felt no need to explain further. Again this demonstrates the dynamic nature of cultural validations and the relevance for the kind of reflexive fieldwork activity carried out here.

In terms of the role of the reflexive researcher, Young (2004) argues it is essential that the goal of insider status – however that may be manifested in the research – is not sought at the expense of what the outsider status can bring to the research. Within this study, the processes of cultural validations facilitated the fluctuating connections between the researcher and researched, so that no unitary in or out status could be simplistically adhered to. A static and restrictive construction of the 'knower' status compared to 'stranger' status is not useful analytically. There were public displays of recognition, familiarity and endorsement, as well as private validations which took place in homes and public spaces. All of these were subject to the usual fragility of social interactions.

Dialectical Tensions in the Process of Cultural Validation

The processes which I have discussed above and shown examples of are demonstrations of how the relationship between researcher and researched is

both complex and subtle. The literature within sociology and anthropology has gained much theoretical purchase over the issues of race / colour matching, the myth of authenticity (Nayak 2006; Twine 2000), the fluidity of culture (Ahmad 1996, 2006; Gunaratnam 2003) and insider / outsider status (Young 2004; White 2001). There is also room here to develop the idea of dialectical tensions in the process of fieldwork. This is the notion that within the fluidity, and the sometimes intangibility of identity dis/connections there is also a perceived reality of substance in the connections that are established. By this I mean that whilst we ensure vigilance in acknowledging that any notion of being in or out is transient, fluid and co-constructed, these assemblages of connections, can form a body of intimacy and cultural validation which are more than insubstantial or fleeting. Certainly pleasantries and rapport making skills are crucial to maintaining interactions, and is part of what Lamont (2004) has called 'the craft of interviewing' (2004, p.165). But Lamont's notion of this craft also involves the ability to parenthesise oneself to some extent, so that there is a distancing between interviewer and interviewee, such that the first and foremost priority of the interaction is the intimate engagement with a stranger. This engagement for Lamont is not and should not be about the interviewer, but about the interviewee and therefore requires a parenthesising. This perspective differs in some ways to my arguments in this paper for two reasons. Firstly, to argue for bracketing the interviewer's identity in the hope that a particular type of interaction will follow is to make assumptions about authenticity. It assumes that one way of presenting one's self is more likely to lead to some notion of authentic interviewee account than another. The literature is populated with examples of theory and data that reveal the constructed nature of authenticity.

The second point of contention is related to the notion of the stranger's identity. Lamont argues that it is the engagement with the stranger that is the main point of the interview, and should not therefore be sullied by nonbracketing interviewers. In this study this stranger-ness is precisely what is being worked out in the context of cultural validations. It is precisely through the connections and links that intimacy develops, however fleeting or fluid. The engagement may not be solely about any one aspect of our identities, but about our shifting multiple selves and identities as represented in that interaction. In a sense, within the fluidity of the dialectical tensions it is biographies that are interacting and generating the data, even though as Nayak (2006) states these '...representation(s) are always historically situated, dialogic and incomplete scripts (2006, p. 413).

There is agreement about the fallacy of assuming unitary and fixed status of categories of difference and as Nayak (2006) emphasises, relations of similarity and difference are vulnerable to ontological insecurity.

Consideration of these arguments within my research context produced many questions. Do my arguments regarding the enduring connections in the dialectical tensions now return us to the very idea of race or identity matching? Is this a misplaced trust in a concept or idea which is uncontainable? My language or the particular nuances in accent which reflect status, caste, locality, family history, migration experiences and knowledge of traditional remedies, were all pivotal in co-generating interactions and the resultant data. However they are not the same as matching for aspects of identity. The process of cultural validations is not simply matching but rather engaging and connecting via familiarity and the contingencies of social and cultural frame-making contexts.

The process I describe here is an interactional process which explicitly demarcates the symbolic borders of sameness and difference that operate in human interaction and are manifest in field relations. To observe cultural validations is not simply to sail through access points and begin interviewing people without a problem. Rather, it is analysing the vicissitudes of entering into the research relationship with all of what can be termed 'the baggage of personal biography'. By exploring how this can mediate who one talks to, how this talk is engaged with, the role one's own history, experience and knowledge can play, and what effect it has on both the research and the people involved, useful insights can be gained about the research process.

Conclusion

Overall, the paper has contributed to the debate concerning the insider / outsider status of researchers. It has developed the notion that although the fluidity of these statuses is no longer in question, there are points within the moments of dialectical relationships in which enduring connections are created and maintained. These interconnecting moments demonstrably generate deeper access, richer data and more intimacy in the interactions - however short the time span or fleeting the moments. It is these cultural validations that form the core of what in this study can be seen as an on-going process of reflexivity and analysis of the changing constellations of identities. The examples of dis/connections shown here demonstrate the dialectical tensions in these identity relationships, as linkages form, break and then often renew in different ways. The fluidity is mediated by the personal-biographical, social and cultural context. I have attempted to problematise the notion of researcher identity and how aspects of identities can often relate to one another across a number of dimensions. In many ways this draws upon Naples's ideas of 'ever-shifting permeable social locations' (1996, p. 83). The on going and constant renewal work of identity is

a reminder that this also applies within social and cultural research settings. This is reflected in Brah's (2007) theorisation of identity as a 'work in progress...at any given time we are positioned across multiple processes of identification which shift and configure into a specific pattern in a designated set of circumstances' (2007, p. 144). It is the methodological reflection of this positioning which this paper hopes to contribute to. By discussing the negotiation of identities in research through cultural validations, it is possible to critically reflect on what we mean by notions of 'sameness' and 'difference' both within, and outside, our research. Ultimately these are the ideas, assumptions and questions we carry with us into the research setting to form our analytical insights and should therefore be the basis of continued discussion.

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