

Qualitative Research with Pakistani Communities: The Implications and Emotional Impact of a Shifting Insider–Outsider Position

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Qualitative Research with Pakistani Communities: The Implications and Emotional Impact of a Shifting Insider–Outsider Position

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Abstract

Starting from a Black feminist standpoint, this reflexive article uniquely draws on empirical data and recollections from two research studies to consider experiences of researching Pakistani communities from the assumed position of an *insider*. In doing so the article provides a first-hand account of *insider-outsider* experiences in the field from the perspective of a qualitative researcher (who is a woman of minority ethnic background). Examples from the data reveal how factors such as a deep understanding of social and religious practices constitute types of insider knowledge necessary for gathering culturally relevant and fine-grained information. The methodological and ethical advantages and dilemmas of conducting research positioned as an insider include, knowledge of place and cultural identification as aiding access to and research with communities seldom heard in research, but also how commonalities—gender, race— can fuel participant reluctance and hostility. The article's main contribution, however, is to expose the shifting nature of the insider-outsider position whereby in some instances the assumed insider can become an outsider. This has methodological and ethical implications such as profound emotional impacts on the researcher and potentially destabilising effects on research.

Keywords

insider, outsider position, researcher reflexivity, methodological and ethical issues, emotional impacts

Introduction

In the social sciences, *insider research* can be defined as research with people belonging to the same community, social group, or who share the characteristics (cultural, occupational, etc.) of the researcher (Asselin, 2003; Greene, 2014; Kanuha, 2000). The insider knowledge of researchers is constituted by multiple factors, including, culture, race, language, researching in familiar settings, and so on. Black standpoint feminists use the term *outsider within* to convey how Black women use their marginalisation in academia (the outside) alongside their knowledge and experiences for example, of disadvantage (from within) to further scholarly work on race, class, and gender (Collins, 1986). Whilst the *outsider within* dichotomy reflects my position as an academic of minority ethnic background, I critique and use the term *insider* as the contextual basis of this article as this is the position I was *perceived* as occupying in the research studies I recount.

As a woman of Pakistani heritage, in my mid-forties, born and brought up in the UK in a traditional Pakistani family, my experiences of traditional Pakistani culture, religion, practices, values, and day-to-day life juxtaposed with a western education and a western way of life moulded my social and cultural identity. This western way of life (from early adulthood) represented a total freedom to make my own choices, wear western attire instead of shalwar kameez (long tunic and loose trousers) and no longer feel the pressure to wear a veil

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like other female members of my extended family were expected to—a freedom I celebrated by having my hair cut rather short—much to the disdain of my family. This freedom was in stark contrast to my childhood experiences of being controlled to be subservient. Having experienced cultural conflict (a clash of cultural values and beliefs) for the first half of my life, I reconciled some of the east-west differences, focusing more on the many commonalities (of language/dialects, food, the many religious values, and practices) between myself and the Pakistani community to which I thought *I belonged* unquestionably. As I occupied the world of academia and research, I assumed (as did the senior researchers I worked with) an *insider* position in research with people from Pakistani communities.

The advantages of the insider position in research are well documented by scholars, these include: familiarity, ease of access to, and interaction with, participants (Aguiler, 1981); the lived experience of an issue ensuring that relevant questions are asked and a deeper understanding is derived (Chavez, 2008; Greene, 2014); and commonalities in experiences (e.g. inequality) creating ease and encouraging discussion, resulting in richer contextual data (Hewitt-Taylor, 2002; Ross, 2017). Sharing the same first language is a notable benefit of insider research, potentially leading to participants feeling more comfortable in expressing themselves in interviews (Song & Parker, 1995) and perhaps disclosing more.

Equally, the disadvantages of insider research have received significant attention, including: the inherent bias in researchers working with their own communities (Merriam et al., 2001); a lack of objectivity and increased likelihood of making assumptions based on researchers' own knowledge and experiences (DeLyser, 2001); role confusion whereby the standpoint shifts from that of a researcher (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009); the risk to confidentiality due to over-familiarity (Serrant-Green, 2002); and reaching premature conclusions based on insider preconceptions (Fleming, 2018).

Whilst there is a burgeoning literature on the benefits and challenges of insider research, the emotional impact of the insider status has received little attention (see Ross, 2017). Indeed, Ross (2017) shares her experiences as a *total insider*—as a researcher sharing multiple identities and or experiences with those researched (Chavez, 2008). She reported benefiting from personal emotional growth, and feelings of comfort and reassurance, gained through commonalities in experiences in addition to the difficulties in maintaining boundaries, making choices around self-disclosure and so on. Similarly, Mirza (1995) conveyed the ethical and methodological dilemmas that she encountered as a South Asian researcher conducting research with South Asian girls. Their lack of acceptance of her and *othering* led her to question her own identity and sense of belonging—describing it as a significant *personal cost* of doing the research. Whilst using examples to provide valuable insights into her positioning as a researcher, she only briefly discussed the emotional impact on her. To narrow the gap in knowledge on the emotional impacts of the *contested* insider

status, I offer a reflexive account of *doing* insider research, drawing on autoethnographic principles, underscoring why I thought, acted, and felt as I did in certain research situations (Jones et al., 2016).

Consistent with the principles of Black standpoint feminism, this article is from my standpoint as a woman (although not of African American descent, but South Asian) having researched *mainly* women (for the studies I recount) from a similar ethnic background to my own. I contribute to a new dialogue on minority ethnic women's researcher experiences that is not grounded in the perspective of dominant White middle class knowledge (Reynolds, 2002) and relay the challenging experiences ensuing from the intersection of race and gender—in line with Black feminist Crenshaw's (1989) concept of *intersectionality*—and how this combination of characteristics impacted me and my research.

Reflexivity is a key principle of feminism as a broader theory and particularly relevant to standpoint feminism due to a concern with the power, positionality and situated knowledges of researchers in the research process (Collins, 1990; Harding, 1991; Reynolds, 2002). Reflexivity is important when conducting research as an insider (Greene, 2014) particularly due to potential issues with bias and being too close to the researched, for example, in terms of culture. The researcher reflects on their position: their role in the research process, experiences, assumptions, values, and biases (Adam, 2013; Tuffour, 2018).

Acknowledging my position, and the influence of my identity (race, ethnicity, and gender) I recount the ethical and methodological advantages and dilemmas experienced whilst (and after) researching participants of the same or similar cultural identity. Song and Parker (1995, p. 246) discuss "*the complexity of these identifications and disidentifications; so many dimensions of sameness and difference can be operating at any given moment*" where a researcher and participant share commonality in one aspect but difference in another. Through examples, I illustrate the constant movement between insider-outsider positions and advance discussion on how identifications and disidentifications can have profound emotional consequences for the researcher.

In writing this article, I contribute to a tenet of research ethics concerned with the prevention of harm by placing emphasis on researcher experience and make explicit reference to the complexities of the insider position; one that is shaped by gender and a minority ethnic identity. Whilst much is known about the benefits of utilising minority ethnic researchers for studies requiring specific socio-cultural expertise, little is known about the benefits and more significantly, dilemmas and harm experienced by minority ethnic researchers whilst researching *their own*.

Whereas scholarly work on researcher insider perspectives reflect involvement in a single project, uniquely, I use a comparative approach which draws on data from two research studies that involved researching people from Pakistani communities amongst other ethnic groups. One study was in

the city I was raised in and very familiar with, and the other in a neighbourhood that I had never visited before and had only gained information on its demographics, social issues, and amenities from a desk-based research exercise prior to fieldwork. Outwardly, I was accepted as an insider on my home turf, and I provide examples of how this status facilitated the research process by drawing comparisons with my experience in the neighbourhood that was unfamiliar to me. Here, although there were commonalities of race, ethnicity, culture etc., participant resistance and suspicion at times unexpectedly pushed me into the realm of outsider. The potential reasons behind this are explored in the article.

Methodology

This article draws on empirical data and recollections based on my involvement in two large qualitative research projects. Participants for both studies provided informed consent in writing. Consistent with feminist principles of research, the studies involved semi-structured qualitative interviews as the most suitable method for delving deep into the experiences of those seldom heard in research (Oakley, 1981). Only interviews with South Asian participants (mainly of Pakistani origin) were selected from both projects and re-analysed with insider-outsider issues in sharp focus specifically to write this article. Thematic analysis of the data, involving an iterative process of inductive and deductive coding (Langley, 1999), underpinned the findings that are reported.

The first study involving repeat interviews over three years (2007–2009) researched the experiences of living through change in six lower income neighbourhoods in Britain. However, for the purposes of this article, I specifically focus on my experience researching in one of those neighbourhoods—located in the North-West of England and referred to as neighbourhood NW herein. Of the 30 interviews undertaken in neighbourhood NW, I conducted 12 interviews; all with Pakistani participants apart from one who was Indian. I was assumed to be best placed for these interviews due to my Pakistani ethnicity (Bhopal, 2001), language skills (Urdu, Punjabi, and the Mirpuri dialect), and cultural and religious knowledge. The research team's *careful placing* of me with Pakistani participants conveyed that they perceived me to be an insider.

Several years later, my insider position was utilised in the second study that is the basis for this article. Eighty-six interviews were conducted during 2015–2016 with people from ethnically diverse communities, including 28 Pakistani participants from a large city in the Midlands (called city M herein), in England. I facilitated access to all these participants and conducted nine interviews with Pakistani participants, four with Bangladeshi participants and one with an Indian participant drawing on my language skills and cultural knowledge.

For the sake of methodological rigor, research teams with the requisite language skills were utilised for both research projects to ensure that information was accurately relayed and understood during interviews—which can be difficult to

achieve when using professional interpreters (Ingvarsdotter et al., 2012). Feasibly, bilingual researchers could be accused of introducing bias through their closeness to subjects and or specific ethnic groups. Attempts were made to counter this issue through collaborative team approaches to reviewing the research questions, reading, and analysing transcripts and reporting the findings.

Interviews with participants from minority ethnic groups were undertaken in places that were most easily accessed by, familiar to, and comfortable for, participants to balance power in the knowledge making process (Kameli-Miller et al., 2009). In city M, research participants were accessed via gatekeepers, many of whom I was familiar with due to my insider position having previously lived in the city and worked there with a range of community gatekeepers. Conversely, a survey company was used to identify potential participants for the study in neighbourhood NW. Each resident had taken part in a quantitative survey during an earlier stage of the research and agreed to participation in a qualitative interview.

Fieldwork Context: Locations, Access, and Recruiting Research Participants

Consistent with standpoint feminist theory of knowledge as being situated (Haraway, 1991) socially, historically and geographically, and the importance of acknowledging and explaining how knowledge is constructed from a particular standpoint, I adopt a stance of *conscious subjectivity* (Klein, 1983) to describe the process of accessing and recruiting research participants.

I was born and raised in city M and although I left for university, aged 19, settling outside the city in recent years, my deep-rooted connections with immediate and extended family routinely take me back and forth. The deprived areas of the city are particularly well known to me as the local schools, eastern supermarkets, mosques, and community centres all served and continue to serve my families' needs. Super-diversity characterises these neighbourhoods, that is, a high percentage of populations are migrants and minority ethnic groups of various national origins, with a multitude of migration statuses amongst other variables (Vertovec, 2007).

The neighbourhoods in city M were so well known to me that when attempting to access participants via gatekeepers, rapport was built with them whilst talking about growing up in a particular area, and how much those areas had changed. Shared knowledge facilitated discussion and aided access. Even in organisations where I hadn't been a familiar face, local historical knowledge provided a talking point and eased access to participants. Having previously worked in an Asian women's organisation in the city and maintained contact with the employees I used these contacts to facilitate access to Asian women—a group usually difficult to access and study due to the close-knit groups they form (Bhopal, 1995) based on familiarity and trust.

In neighbourhood NW, no familiarity led to hesitancy in being involved in the research (even though individuals had expressed an interest in being involved to the survey company) and each encounter with the Pakistani women began with extensive questions about the research, my Pakistani background, and potential familial connections. In her research with Asian women, Bhopal (1995, p. 157) highlighted that those deemed as outsiders due to lack of identification with those in close-knit groups “*will be viewed with suspicion and seen as a threat in that they may disturb and affect the pattern of harmony that exists in the community*”. Further, prior to entering the fieldwork setting I had learnt that neighbourhood NW had received considerable media attention for tense race-relations, perhaps, in part, explaining the suspicion that greeted me as an outsider. Recognising that self-disclosure might build rapport and reciprocity—a principle adopted by some feminists (Oakley, 1981), I shared information with potential participants about my heritage, for instance, my Pakistani roots and religion, but doing so in their mother tongue to prove my authenticity. Ostensibly, this helped to alleviate some suspicion and having gained consent, we moved onto the next stage i.e., the interviews.

Research Findings: Critical Reflections From the Interviews

Whilst researching in neighbourhood NW I had begun to question the extent to which race and ethnicity created a high level of *identification* in the research encounter and the salience of other variables. My experience in city M caused me to reflect on whether insider knowledge, for example, of a particular place, was essential to accessing research participants, convincing gatekeepers, and building rapport between gatekeepers and research participants. Was local knowledge a facilitative factor in the interviews in city M? Did the absence of local knowledge contribute to the tension experienced in neighbourhood NW? There, seemingly, religious, and cultural knowledge, similar experiences of poverty, and shared race and ethnicity was not enough to allay suspicion and tension. This section analyses interview data and secondary data to explore these questions further, arriving at potential explanations that are lessons for qualitative researchers who perceive themselves as insiders purely based on factors such as race, ethnicity, and cultural commonalities.

Knowledge of Place

Undoubtedly, during the interviews with Pakistani women in city M, detailed insider knowledge of place allowed the interviews to flow and perhaps consolidated my connection with the city and the participants. Conversely, I felt that a lack of knowledge of place in neighbourhood NW interrupted the flow of several interviews and confirmed my lack of connection with the local people and place irrespective of our shared characteristics of race and ethnicity. When asked place-

based questions, the response from participants was at times one of frustration. Receiving frustrated responses triggered an uneasiness in me, as I began to consider whether I would be up to the job that senior researchers had assigned me due to my specific characteristics and perceived *insiderness*. Unable to build the rapport that I felt was expected of me, a fear of failure began to grow inside me—possibly exacerbated by the deep insecurity I had harboured during my employment as a researcher, stemming from the power differentials I felt as a junior researcher, a woman of colour, working in an entirely white research centre. It was important to me to prove my worth, yet it seemed I was failing.

My lack of local knowledge was evident in several interviews in the neighbourhood and served to augment my *outsider* position. I acutely felt like an outsider and this status was perhaps reinforced by visibly *standing out* as a stranger to the neighbourhood as I nervously navigated the rows of terraced houses fearing for my safety in a high crime area completely unknown to me. The ethnically diverse neighbourhood in city M was equally deprived and a potential risk to my safety, however, my familiarity with this densely populated area—my own turf—allowed me to navigate my way with ease and confidence, knowing which areas to venture into and those to avoid. Maybe this confidence reflected the position of an insider—someone who belonged to the neighbourhood and knew the people and place.

Disidentification

During the interviews in neighbourhood NW, it became apparent that my *difference* stood out more than my *sameness* with the local Pakistani women. In this neighbourhood, women from my ethnic background dressed differently, and occupied traditional roles of wives, mothers, and carers. Only one account evidenced a young Pakistani woman studying. In all other cases, the women were not in paid work or education, and their activities were largely restricted to their homes. Before and after the interviews, the women would ask me questions about which village my parents were from in Pakistan, however, they were more curious about why as a married woman I was travelling alone, staying overnight in hotels, and whether my husband who was left to fend for himself was accepting of my job—their expressions suggesting that they disapproved of my responses about our mutual independence.

Culturally, I understood that the identities of those traditional Pakistani women were embedded in their caring roles, but, I had not thought through the possibility that I might be viewed as a *deviant* within their tight knit *conservative* community—a woman who had transgressed the traditional role of a Pakistani woman by gaining an education and working, perhaps also perceived as a potential negative influence on other women in the community. “*I was disrupting their understanding of what a South Asian woman ought to be and the kind of work that she should do....*” (Mirza, 1995, p. 174)

and this, I believe, contributed to their perception of me as an outsider even though I demonstrated various insights of an insider in the knowledge I drew on during the interviews and my spoken language. Only with deep reflexive practise I began to make sense of my feelings, which were seated in a concern about others' perceptions of me as an outsider, and resulting realisation that I was indeed an outsider. Having pursued *acceptance* my whole life, from my own Pakistani community, and from the native White people I associated with—as neighbours, friends, in education and work—my experiences in neighbourhood NW amplified feelings of non-acceptance by both sides. Even when surrounded by people of my own colour, religious background, ethnic background, using the same dialect, I felt an overwhelming isolation and confusion. It was only with time that I learnt to accept that *outsiderness* would be an inevitable consequence of attempting to occupy two polar cultures.

Through reflexive practise in recent years, and deliberation over my social and cultural position as a researcher, I have learnt that so many commonalities exist between myself and other Pakistani women, yet many differences set us apart. I have occupied a position in academia for many years, yet my Pakistani counterparts, have either been denied an education or rejected education due to their cultural values and norms. Having an education does not necessarily equate with status in traditional communities like mine, in fact, it might be seen as breaking convention and a rejection of values—something strongly disapproved by community members.

Attire and Appearance: Participant Acceptance and Rejection

Both [De Andrade \(2000\)](#) and [Mirza \(1995\)](#) discussed in detail how their self-presentation possibly influenced their research encounters. De Andrade reflected on whether her non-traditional appearance, such as her hairstyle and the types of clothes she wore created a barrier between her and the Cape Verdean Americans she interviewed. Similarly, [Mirza \(1995, p. 172\)](#) realised that her westernised appearance during interviews with the young women was unacceptable to them and this “*affected the level of rapport*” she was able to build with them.

On entering neighbourhood NW, the strong sense of traditional Pakistani culture and corresponding strict Muslim dress code became apparent. Most of the women wore veils and shalwar kameez or jilbabs (a full-length dress), presumably signifying their religious compliance. Individuals who did not conform to the prescribed dress code were noticed and judged as less religious—a point evidenced in the following narrative of a local resident commenting on the change she had observed in her neighbour's attire:

the daughter started wearing the black veil, covering herself up but the son's modern, like hip hop, his fashion's totally different so that is very...it is a bit unusual for the daughter to be so religious

and the son's gone a bit... I'm not saying he's wrong, but he's changed his dress sense, he's not as religious as what his father is, or his sister is (Participant 1).

Undoubtedly, my appearance was at odds with the declaration that I too was a Pakistani Muslim. Exposing my hair cut short and the absence of a veil, wearing western clothes, and being a working woman were all aspects of my identity heavily rebuked by traditional Pakistani Muslim communities. Such differences signalled a perceived rejection of cultural and religious values and conceivably explained the hostility I experienced. The frosty reception I received culminated in an incident that had profound consequences for my sense of safety, but significantly, greater consequences for my emotional wellbeing.

It was after a long day undertaking fieldwork in neighbourhood NW that I began my short walk to meet a colleague at a local shop to make our way back to our hotel. Darkness had fallen and during that journey I noticed a couple of young men playing football on the street. I presumed they were Pakistani due to the occasional word they spoke in the Mirpuri dialect. As I passed them, they began to curse me in this dialect (also my mother tongue) and in English, referring to me as a black b**tch and threatening to spit in my face. My immediate reaction was of shock and fear, shaken by their comments, I ran off to find my colleague. As I relayed the incident to my colleague who was waiting for me in the shop, the Pakistani shopkeeper who had been listening in interjected with his own criticism, which was heavily focused on our (researchers') reasons for being in his community and that, in his view, I was deserving of the verbal abuse that I received. Whilst some of his antagonism was related to scrutiny of the community, and understandably so, his derision was also directed at me for my ethnicity, gender, and the job I was doing. The verbal abuse from the young men coupled with the shopkeeper's angry comments reinforced my position as an outsider in this neighbourhood. Our ethnicity, language and cultural knowledge was the same, but due to the expectations associated with my ethnicity and gender, that I was perceived as defying, I was pushed into the realm of outsider. I was made to feel that I had attracted trouble as a Pakistani woman, dressed in western attire, out on the streets in the evening, when most Pakistani women in that neighbourhood were not visible when daylight disappeared.

The consequences of this incident were manifold, on a personal level. Having felt invisible in my research centre, as a junior researcher with no specific subject expertise, or a developing expertise in a specific field, I viewed the research in neighbourhood NW as providing me the opportunity to demonstrate a specialism (cultural and language) beyond the routine data collection on multiple and diverse projects that I was accustomed to. My feelings of *not belonging* soared in the aftermath causing me confusion and distress emotionally, followed by a loss of confidence resulting in me questioning my suitability to researching communities I perceived as my

own, and this led to a reluctance to nominate myself for research with South Asian people, but worse still, I felt that instead of elevating my position in the research centre I had weakened it further, causing me embarrassment and disappointment in the months that followed.

Years later, my experience of researching minority ethnic people in city M, was easier but not without any challenges. The Pakistani women responded positively and participated in the research with enthusiasm. A sense of insiderness and acceptance could possibly be attributed to the Pakistani Muslim communities in city M being less traditional than those in neighbourhood NW. Indeed, Mirza (1995) reported the conservative nature of South Asian communities in the North-West contrasted with a different English area. Perhaps, my westernised appearance was seen as a sign of education, liberation, and progression in city M that some of the women aspired to for themselves or their children. Even, the older Pakistani women did not seem concerned by my outwardly western appearance. However, the comments of an Indian man who participated in one of the interviews served as a stark reminder of my difference:

first time I see Mirpuri girl in English clothing, I used to work with many, very strict and they're really not supposed to work... (participant 2).

He reminded me that women from my traditional Pakistani background very rarely broke convention; they continued to wear their traditional clothing, adhering to gender-specific roles, which restricted them to the domestic sphere. Noticeably, in both research locations it was the men in the communities who were direct in pointing out my difference to my Pakistani counterparts, indicating they were the custodians of women's conduct (Kaur, 2015). The intersection of gender with race and ethnicity emerged as a pertinent finding when reflexively delving into my experiences of the research.

Insiderness and Its Benefits

Clearly, my insider status was shaped by the breadth of cultural and religious knowledge I brought to the interviews for both projects. This knowledge was used in neighbourhood NW to bring into view, for those outside the cultural fold, practices and a way of life that impacted on Pakistani peoples' experiences of getting by—a primary focus of the research. The following statement, for example, revealed the common practice of sending remittances abroad:

I have to help out back home as well, I have to send something back to family from time to time (participant 3).

Arguably, this subject was less likely to have been broached with a researcher who possessed little or no cultural knowledge on Pakistani peoples' obligations to family "back home"—that is, to immediate and extended

family still residing in participants' country of origin—a term immediately recognised and understood by a culturally informed researcher.

Also, in city M, I had an in-depth awareness of the enormity of commitments discussed by Pakistani research participants which on the face of it might appear minor to a researcher completely on the outside of Pakistani culture:

I: So you've told me something important here, our people have other commitments, whether that's a wedding, a funeral or work, so many different responsibilities.

P: Yes and you have to go, and these are the big problems in our community (Participant 4).

I understood that a funeral for instance usually required obligatory repeat visits to the family of the deceased immediately after their death—a time consuming custom. Extensive kinship ties and community-based connections could feasibly lead to attending funerals multiple times in one month. Without this cultural knowledge, such practices could perhaps be viewed as irrelevant and left underexplored by researchers when they held huge significance for the research.

When participants in neighbourhood NW recounted using *kameti*—a community run savings scheme, to save for mortgages, pay bills, and buy equipment, I immediately identified with the scheme, recalling my mother's contribution to a local *kameti* when I was growing up. I sought clarity for research purposes and for those new to this concept:

I: Cos *kameti*? that's where a lot of people in the neighbourhood put in a small amount [of money] and then you can get a lump sum can't you?

P: Yeah

I: So you did *kameti*, and why did you do that?

P: Because I can't save my money without *kameti* (Participant 5).

In city M, my knowledge of cultural foods facilitated conversations about the challenges participants experienced in relation to their long-term health conditions. References to commonly eaten South Asian foods (ghee, halva, Indian sweets) high in fats, sugar and salt encouraged participants to open up about the correlation between their diets and health.

By knowing what was *halaal* (permitted) or *haraam* (prohibited) to eat, I was able to ask the correct questions in the first place. Having experienced Ramadhan from adolescence, I was equipped with vital information about the potential challenges Pakistani Muslim people with long-term health conditions faced during this holy month. Without the requirement to explain specific cultural foods, participants were able to discuss the significance of them in managing their conditions:

P: I told her [a friend] I've got diabetes and she says to make a brew called kava and to put kalonji oil [nigella seeds] in it and if I drink it, my diabetes [I] will get rid of it.

I: So she's talked about different ways of dealing with it?

P: Yeah, our own remedies.

(Participant 6).

Undoubtedly, our shared awareness helped the interviews to flow, adding valuable context about the insufficient use of western medicine in favour of religious remedies—crucial information that might not have been captured by a researcher positioned as an outsider, culturally and religiously.

Analysis of interviews in city M revealed that in addition to local, cultural, and religious knowledge, language as a shared aspect of my Pakistani identity with interviewees possibly contributed to my feelings of insiderness and being accepted. Words such as *our*, *we*, and *us* seemed to imply a collectiveness, particularly when used by both researcher and participant:

I: What's your first language?

P: This one, our Mirpuri (Participant 4).

Indeed, [Obasi \(2014\)](#) reported that in using the words *we* and *us* her Black research participants had afforded her an insider status, implying her inclusivity in the collective Black identity. When such terms were used by my research participants during interviews, I instinctively responded using the same terms, perhaps to acknowledge my belonging and theirs in a collective identity.

During interviews in city M and neighbourhood NW, I intentionally offered insights to those outside the research encounter (the wider research team), about the relevance of some cultural information to the study—clarification on certain features of the commonly spoken Mirpuri dialect by Pakistani communities was a case in point:

I: What's your first language?

P: Mirpuri

I: With Mirpuri you can usually only speak it but not write it?

P: That's right (Participant 7).

The fact that the Mirpuri dialect can only be spoken but is not written is largely unknown outside the Pakistani communities in the UK, yet, it has major significance for their uptake of services and involvement in consultative and research opportunities. Coupled with my insider information on the high rates of illiteracy (in Pakistan's national language Urdu) in the older generations from Pakistan, I was able to share vital information with the research team on the additional barriers experienced by them. Conceivably, a researcher

on the outside would not have known, hence, not investigated this special feature of Mirpuri and missed its significance to the research questions.

Falsification of age on passports (the reasons behind this are irrelevant to this article and thus not discussed) when securing a visa to the UK was also a fairly common practice that I was aware of and if the gap between the real and false age was too great this had implications for diagnosis of health conditions, access to health services, and so on. Arguably, the acceptance of me as an insider during several research encounters encouraged participants to divulge that their passport ages were incorrect:

I: Can you tell me how old you are?

P: I am actually 60 years old but, on my passport, they've written 58 years old (Participant 8).

I pondered over whether a White researcher would have possessed any information on this subject in the first place, or if they did, would probing around this question have created suspicion amongst participants and a reluctance to share such sensitive information? In [Song and Parker \(1995\)](#), Song emphasised her cultural identity and knowledge was central to influencing what participants disclosed to her and language was perceived as a marker of cultural identity. Indeed, language (fluency in the Mirpuri dialect) confirmed my identity and membership of the Pakistani community even though my western appearance suggested the contrary and in some cases the participants were unforgiving about this.

Fluctuating Position of Researcher

The fluctuating nature of the researcher status (insider-outsider) emerged from reflections on both research projects; with status evolving and changing over the course of a single research project according to the key actors (researchers, participants, and stakeholders such as community leaders) involved. Aspects of my identity moved my status from insider to outsider and vice versa according to the identities of research participants. In neighbourhood NW, for example, I possessed significant knowledge on Sunni Muslims, my own sect, but knew very little about Shia Muslims. Beginning the interview comfortably knowing I had the correct language skills, assuming I had cultural knowledge, I was unexpectedly pushed into an outsider position when the participants informed me of their Shia faith, something I knew very little about.

[Chavez \(2008\)](#) made a distinction between a total insider (sharing multiple identities or experiences with those they research) and a partial insider who might share a sole identity with those researched while maintaining a degree of detachment. Certainly, when interviewing Shia Muslims, I felt like a partial insider due my limited understanding of some of their culture and beliefs.

An interview encounter in city M demonstrated the complexity of placing oneself in a specific position due to its potential to change. The interview began with the Indian male participant exclaiming that it was the first time he had seen a Mirpuri (Pakistani) girl in work. This placed me in an outsider position, however, later in the interview I used my insider knowledge to ask his age and whether it was his real or passport age:

I: That's your real date of birth, not your passport date of birth?

P: It's my passport, my real is one year old[er] (Participant 2).

Despite this interview being mainly conducted in English, half-way through, I posed a question in Urdu to accurately convey important subject matter, which I believe was effective in helping the participant better understand the question than if it was posed in English, and arguably gained a fuller response from him. Like Sullivan (2020, p. 346) "*I found myself working in practical ways within simultaneous boundaries of "insiderness" and "outsiderness," sameness and difference"*", navigating my position from 'insider' to 'outsider' using subject knowledge and language that convincingly reflected my indigenous roots to build trust and encourage openness.

Discussion: The Emotional Impact of a Shifting Insider-Outsider Position

Having begun both research projects assuming, as did others, that I was an insider, I was emotionally unprepared for the shift to outsider in some situations. Serrant-Green's (2002, p. 42) deconstruction of the concept "*who am I, what do you see?*" illustrated the potentially shifting insider-outsider position of the researcher depending on the perception of participants in the research process. Mirza (1995) reported, she had come to terms with being perceived as *other* in wider society but struggled when realising that those from her own culture viewed her as *other*.

An acute awareness of my otherness when encountering verbal abuse and participant reluctance to engage with the research from a community I perceived my own in neighbourhood NW left me feeling embarrassed and confused. As a junior researcher of minority ethnic background working in an entirely White (staffed) research centre struggling to fit into the White monoculture of academia, I suddenly felt inner turmoil realising that I did not unequivocally belong to the Pakistani community either. Commonalities in terms of language, close or distant familial connections, cultural and religious values, seemingly did little to bridge the gap between outsider to insider status. I questioned my identity and how occupying both western and eastern worlds might have diluted my Pakistani identity. An overwhelming sense of worthlessness and isolation followed.

The disturbing and uncomfortable questions occupying Mirza's (1995, p. 176) mind— "*Who was I? What was I? Why didn't I belong?*"—were already running through my mind. She described her strategy of *shifting identities* to deal with different people involved in the research process, but this led her to question who she was. Similarly, I presented different dimensions of myself—some starkly different to what I believed in, such as wearing long loose tops, avoiding direct eye contact with the Pakistani men during interviews, and reining in my confidence—all to show modesty and some compliance with the traditional expectations of Pakistani women. Yet, this went against the very grain of my feminist beliefs on equality and freedom and became tiring and frustrating. The cultural conflict in me was more pronounced than it ever had been, inescapable and difficult to reconcile.

After the incident of verbal abuse in neighbourhood NW to ensure researcher safety, the research manager changed the fieldwork plan so that all remaining interviews would be conducted in community venues in the neighbourhood and not in people's homes and researchers were required to make their way to these venues in pairs. Whilst this approach attempted to provide a safer option, concerned with researchers' physical wellbeing, the consequences of this incident on my emotional wellbeing were missed. Firstly, I felt a deep sense of shame having been rejected by the Pakistani community; secondly, I perceived myself a failure before my colleagues as rather than aiding the research due to my cultural expertise, I had temporarily stalled it, disrupting the research schedule, consequently slowing progress.

Consistent with feminist principles, I used self-disclosure to build rapport, attempt to diminish hierarchical relationships and put participants at ease (Finch, 1993; Oakley, 1981). Ostensibly, I achieved this aim in city M, but in a few cases, self-disclosure on aspects of my identity only served to distance me from my sense of identity, troubling me about how others perceived me. The "*first time I see Mirpuri girl in English clothing*" statement for instance, made me question if I had eroded my identity through my choices. The ensuing confusion was in the fact that the very strength I took into city M i.e., my identity, served the academic purpose of gaining access and yielding a high volume of in-depth interviews, but damaged my sense of identity and feelings of *belonging* in the process. Only with years of experience and reflection have I begun to deal with the multi-dimensional nature of my identity, acceptance, and rejection.

Undeniably, the questioning of one-self after such encounters has a long-term impact due to the centrality of identity in how an individual defines and conducts themselves, their beliefs, affiliations and so on. These long-term consequences are serious ethical dilemmas requiring attention from all those, especially research managers, involved in processes where racial and ethnic identity (and indeed,

other contested aspects of identity) potentially come into sharper focus.

Conclusion

This account, from my standpoint as a female qualitative researcher of Pakistani Muslim background, exposes the tensions, ethical and methodological dilemmas of researching people from communities perceived as my own whilst occupying a role in a predominantly White world of academia. I shed light on an issue for minority ethnic women in research that has received insufficient attention and is underreported perhaps due to the underrepresentation of these women in academia and or lack of visibility/voice in this profession. Auto-ethnographic principles of research are woven through this article-connecting my personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings, in the field, to wider socio-cultural meanings and understandings.

The intricacies of my standpoint: feminist principles concerned with gender, race, ethnicity, with a focus on power dynamics in research encounters; my east-west cultural beliefs, norms and values, religious affiliation; and ongoing education all shape my identity. Indeed, the multiple facets of this identity, in a constant state of flux, influence my perceptions of others and theirs of me, consequently placing me as an insider or outsider, or both, partial or total, even in a single research encounter. Rather than a simplistic insider-outsider dichotomy (Chavez, 2008) I have found the researcher role to be on a continuum (Breen, 2007) where there is movement between the positions due to my personal characteristics, knowledge, and personal dynamics during the interview itself. “[I]nsiderness or outsiderness are not fixed or static positions, rather they are ever-shifting and permeable social locations...” (Naples, 1996, p. 140). I acknowledge that how I position myself in this article, is based purely on my perception, and therefore might be contested by the participants themselves. What is real though, is the emotional impact of some research encounters on me.

I learnt that once in the field, race, culture, religion, even shared gender aided the research, yielding rich and new data, but in some instances, it was not enough to create identification and I became aware of the tensions inherent in conducting research with people from communities I identified with. Arguably, my status as an academic conferred me with power in the research relationship (Obasi, 2014) but in certain cases I felt powerless, particularly in neighbourhood NW. Listening to accounts laced with racist undertones from White participants in other interviews in this neighbourhood enhanced my feelings of vulnerability reinforcing my existing feelings of *not belonging* and not being accepted at a broader, societal level due to my ethnic and racial differences. However, the reluctance of participants to engage with the research, their judgements of me, and the verbal abuse from a member of a community I perceived my own not only exacerbated these feelings but

triggered new feelings of confusion, frustration, and sadness amongst others. The process of deep reflexivity has called to attention the ethical principle of nonmaleficence (doing no harm) in relation to researcher experiences that potentially destabilise sense of identity, creating disillusionment.

This article clearly speaks to the research ethics policies of educational institutions and research centres and suggests that policy guidance should have a stronger focus on the prevention of harm to researchers particularly those who might find themselves grappling with similar insider-outsider dilemmas. Moreover, resources should be committed to enable training, mentoring, and access to relevant support networks.

Through reflexivity I have realised that surface level assumptions about researcher insiderness, for example, because they are of the same ethnicity or speak the same language as research participants, ignore the complexity and dynamics within cultures. Gender and race, for instance, are characteristics that potentially create a gulf between researchers and those that they research.

This article reveals that whilst divided by social class, education, values etc., arguably, research conducted by skilled researchers in participants’ native languages, drawing on culturally informed insights, enhances research practice and research findings – indeed, some of the benefits of insiderness are evidenced in this article. Rather than abandon the idea of using insider researchers, those who assemble research teams, should be better tuned into the complexities and potential *harm* of insider work, with researcher choice and wellbeing being integral to decisions about involvement. Researcher gender, for example, is given thought in project health and safety considerations, but race and ethnicity receive scant attention. Furthermore, the intersection of race and gender; the combined oppressions of these characteristics, is not understood by research managers and is consequently absent in many discussions.

For researchers who find themselves caught up in the complexities of their insider-outsider roles, firstly, their experience should be raised with project managers as a duty of care issue to gain support. Although this article underscores the lack of understanding and knowledge of managers of insider-outsider complexities, it is only with awareness that any progress, even small, can be made. As good practice, project managers should provide formal and regular supervision for researchers whilst active in projects that could present challenges due to their personal characteristics – ensuring the agendas of project meetings and debriefs after fieldwork routinely cover and explore such issues. Through research seminars and networks such ethical and methodological issues may be explored in depth. At a wider level, the potential harms of the insider-outsider research role should be set out in reflexive academic articles in an aim to capture the attention of the research community – opening and encouraging discussion and educating the audience on how characteristics such as gender

and race advance research aims, but in some instances, compound researcher experiences in the field.

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Ethical Statement

Ethical Approval

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