

Researcher positionality – a consideration of its influence and place in research

“It is critical to pay attention to positionality, reflexivity, the production of knowledge and the power relations that are inherent in research processes in order to undertake ethical research...”(Sultana 2007 p. 380).

“Interpretive research begins and ends with the biography and self of the researcher”

(Denzin 1986 p. 12).

Introduction

This paper considers researcher positionality and its influence on the research process, making a case for all researchers to consider the importance of positionality within research. Reflexivity will be discussed, as this is an essential part of the process of a researcher identifying their positionality. This will be followed by a reflection on my own ‘learning journey’ since commencing the EdD and concerns about my lack of a clear position. Ethnographic research and the role of researcher positionality within ethnographic approaches will then be discussed as an example of the influence of positionality in the research process because

“In ethnography...a major goal of the research process is self-reflexivity – what we learn about the self as a result of the study of the “other”” (Chiseri-Strater 1996 p. 119)

and within ethnographic approaches one of the key debates has been that of the researcher’s position as an insider or outsider to the ‘culture’ being studied and both whether one position provides the researcher with an advantageous position compared with the other and its affect on the research process (Hammersley 1993). Reference will be made to a paper by Herod (1999) as a focus for considering the insider-outsider

debate and the effect of positionality. This paper has been selected because it discusses the insider-outsider debate from the perspective of an experienced researcher who questions some of the assumptions about insider and outsidership. There will be no detailed consideration of the qualitative-quantitative 'divide' - positivistic criticism of ethnography because it does not meet 'scientific' criteria of objectivity and opposing criticism that it has not moved far enough away from rules and benchmarks of the quantitative approach of the natural sciences, due to the constraint of space within this assignment although some aspects will necessarily be briefly mentioned. Finally the assignment will end with a reconsideration of my own positionality.

Positionality

The term positionality both describes an individual's world-view and the position they have chosen to adopt in relation to a specific research task (Foote and Bartell 2011) & (Savin-Baden and Howell Major 2013). The individual's world-view or 'where the researcher is coming from' concerns ontological assumptions (the nature of social reality), epistemological assumptions (the nature of knowledge) and assumptions about human nature and agency (Sikes 2004). These are 'coloured' by values and beliefs such as: political allegiance, religious faith, gender, sexuality, historical and geographical location, race, social class and status, (dis)abilities and so on (Wellington, Bathmaker et al. 2005) and (Sikes 2004). Positionality "...reflects the position that the researcher has chosen to adopt *within* a given research study" (Savin-Baden and Howell Major 2013 p. 71) and is normally identified by locating the researcher in relation to three areas: the subject, the participants and the research context and process (Ibid p. 71). Some aspects of positionality are culturally ascribed or fixed, for example,

gender, race, nationality; whilst others such as personal life history and experiences are subjective and contextual (Chiseri-Strater 1996). The fixed aspects may predispose someone towards (a) particular point(s) of view, however that does not mean that these aspects necessarily automatically lead to particular views or perspectives. For example one may think it would be antithetical for a black African-American to be a member of a white, conservative, right wing, racist, supremacy group, and that such a group would not want African-American members; yet Jansson in his research on 'The League of the South' found that not only did a group of this kind have an African-American member, but that he was "...warmly welcomed..." (Jansson 2010 p. 21).

Positionality and its relationship with Reflexivity

I know from reading carried out for assignment one that very little research in the social or educational field is or can be value free (Carr 2000 p. 347) and understand that the subjective-contextual aspects of a researcher's positionality, or 'situatedness', change over time (e.g. see Oakley 1999 for an account of a researcher's changing personal trajectory and ontological stance). Positionality requires that both acknowledgement and allowance is made by the researcher to locate their views, values and beliefs in relation to the research process and the research output(s). Self-reflection and a reflexive approach is both a necessary prerequisite and an ongoing process for the researcher to be able to clearly identify, construct, critique and articulate their positionality. Reflexivity – the concept that researchers should acknowledge and disclose their own selves in the research, seeking to understand their part in it, or influence on the research (Cohen, Manion et al. 2011 p. 225) informs positionality. Reflexivity requires an explicit self-consciousness and self-assessment by the

researcher about their own views and positions and how these might have influenced the design, execution and interpretation of the research data findings (Greenbank 2003). Reflexivity entails sensitivity to the researcher's cultural, political, and social context (Bryman 2012 p. 393) because a researcher's ethics, personal integrity and social values as well as their competency influence the research process (Greenbank 2003 p.278). Through the process of reflexivity researchers should continually be aware that their positionality is never fixed and is always situation and context-dependent. I regard reflexivity as an essential process for shaping what I identify as being 'considered positionality' or 'informed positionality' i.e. by that I mean carefully thought through reflection and analysis of one's positionality which is then clearly articulated; it being perfectly possible for research from within a positivistic position to be conducted without reflexivity or clear articulation of positionality. Indeed, positivism would deny the relevance of positionality.

Positionality and its affect on the research process

Researcher positionality can impact on all aspects and stages of the research process; as Foote and Bartell identify

"The positionality that researchers bring to their work, and the personal experiences through which positionality is shaped, may influence what researchers may bring to research encounters, their choice of processes, and their interpretation of outcomes" (Foote and Bartell 2011 p. 46).

Sikes identifies that

"...it is important for all researchers to spend some time thinking about how they are paradigmatically and philosophically positioned and for them to be aware of how their positioning - and the fundamental

assumptions they hold - might influence their research related thinking and practice. This is about being a reflexive and reflective and, therefore, a rigorous researcher who is able to present their findings and interpretations in the confidence that they have thought about, acknowledged and been honest and explicit about their stance and the influence it has had upon their work. This is important given that a major criticism of much educational research is that it is biased and partisan" (Sikes 2004 p. 15).

Sikes comment about bias and partisanship refers to positivistic criticisms of qualitative educational research.

Positionality recognises that researchers are part of the social world that they are researching and that this world is "...an already interpreted world by the actors, undermining the notion of objective reality" (Cohen, Manion et al. 2011 p. 225). It implies that the social-historical location of a researcher influences their orientations i.e. that the researcher is not separate from the social processes they study; essentially "...there is no way we can escape the social world to study it" (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995 p. 17). The use of a reflexive approach to inform positionality is a rejection of the idea that social research is separate from wider society and the individual researcher's biography (Ibid p. 18). A reflexive approach suggests that researchers should acknowledge and disclose their selves in the research, aiming to understand their own influence on and in the process; rather than trying to eliminate their affect. It is important to note here that a researcher's positionality not only shapes their own research, but influences their interpretation, understanding and ultimately their belief in the 'truthfulness' of other's research that they read or are exposed to. Open and honest disclosure and exposition of positionality should show where and how the researcher believes that they have influenced their research, the reader should then be able to make an informed judgement as to the researcher's influence on the research process and how 'truthful' they feel the research is.

Savin-Baden and Howell Major identify three primary ways of researchers accomplishing positionality. Firstly, locating themselves in relation to the subject i.e. acknowledging personal positions that have the potential to influence the research. Secondly, locating themselves in relation to the participants i.e. each researcher considering how they view themselves, as well as how others view them, whilst acknowledging that individuals may be unaware of how they and others have constructed their identities. Thirdly, locating themselves in relation to the research context and process i.e. acknowledging that research will necessarily be influenced and will be influenced by the research context (Savin-Baden and Howell Major 2013 p. 71-73).

Hammersley and Atkinson point out that a considered reflexive approach should allow the researcher to

“...make the reasonable assumption that we are trying to describe phenomena as they are, not merely how we perceive them or would like them to be” (Ibid p. 17-18).

and that this should allow a reduction of bias and partisanship. However it must be acknowledged that we can never describe something as it is, no matter how much reflexivity we bring to the process we can never ‘objectively’ describe reality as it exists. It must also be borne in mind that language is a human-social construct. As discussed in a previous assignment, for example, radical constructivists would argue that someone’s experiences and interpretations of language are individually constructed and that the meaning of words is individually and subjectively constructed (Glaserfield E 1988).

Positionality statements

Positionality is often formally expressed in research papers via a ‘positionality statement’. A ‘good’ or strong positionality statement will typically include description of: the researcher’s

lenses (i.e. their philosophical, personal, theoretical beliefs and perspective through which they view the research process), their potential influences on the research (e.g. political beliefs, social-class), the researcher's chosen or pre-determined position in relation to the participants (e.g. as an insider or an outsider – see later discussion) their context and an understanding/explanation as to how, where and when and in what way the researcher may have influenced the research process (Savin-Baden and Howell Major 2013 p. 75).

Even as a novice researcher I feel that a reflexive approach is essential and that

“The inclusion of reflective accounts and the acknowledgement that educational research cannot be value-free should be included in all forms of research”
(Greenbank 2003 p. 798-799).

This may be due in part to my previous adoption of reflective practice espoused by authors such as (Brookfield 1995).

I realise however that I should not regard reflexivity as being a panacea that eradicates the need for awareness of the limits of self-reflexivity. Reflexivity can help to clarify and contextualize my position in relation to the research process for both myself, and the readers of my research; but it is not a guarantee of more honest or 'truthful' research. And I do feel that no matter how critically reflective and reflexive one is that aspects of the self can be missed, not known, or self-dismissed as being irrelevant; I am reminded of Luft and Ingham's Johari Window diagram (Luft and Ingham 1955) - there are always areas of ourselves that we are not aware of and areas that only other people are aware of.

Concerning my own positionality; doubts, concerns and progress towards acceptance and an understanding

I know that my positionality will affect my research and that it must also impact upon my understanding, interpretation, acceptance and belief, or non-acceptance of a piece of writing, research finding or theory that I am reading. I understand that each researcher's positionality affects the research process, and their outputs and interpretation, for example see Smith, who identifies that the

“...objectivity, authority and validity of knowledge is challenged as the researcher's positionality...is inseparable from the research findings” (Smith 1999 p. 436).

Assignment one allowed me to clarify that the positivist paradigm of the value-free independent objective neutral researcher, which I had up until that point believed to be ‘true’, is neither appropriate nor achievable for research in the social world. Further reading has allowed me to understand that, even within the natural sciences no research finding can ever be ‘proven’, a post-positivist perspective for example would argue that knowledge is only provisional in that no one has (at that point in time) yet been able to refute it (Popper 1972).

Research methods cannot be value-free in their application because one's own values will always impact upon research processes. We should therefore reject claims that research is able to uncover ‘the truth’ (Greenbank 2003 p. 798). And yet I feel considerable insecurity and uncertainty because of this; almost a feeling of “*What is the point?*” for if we can never ‘prove’ anything at all; only set it up to be disproven then why bother; if we can never know the truth; because there is no objective truth? I have a gut feeling that there ‘must’ be some truths and facts; I sit here, in a chair, knowing that gravity exists (to me a ‘fact’) but I also know that the ‘gravity’ is a label; it could equally have been given another name. Was the existence of something we have called gravity a ‘fact’ that existed waiting to be

discovered – I feel it must have been. But it is part of the physical world, not the social world.

What was reassuring was reading the following quote

“If academic researchers were to be continually questioning *all* their assumptions about what is currently known – and especially if they were to seek to avoid relying upon *any* taken-for-granted assumptions – then they could never hope to develop a body of knowledge. This is because there is *always* scope for raising doubts...” (Hammersley 2011 p. 170).

I have started to realise that I must just accept that there is a body of established knowledge, that there are many long-standing assumptions which, whilst not being ‘facts’, can be safely ‘taken-for-granted’, whilst being aware that established knowledge should still be open to being questioned and can change.

“What we refer to as ‘facts’ are...the writer’s and reader’s *jointly agreed* best approximations to the truth, these are always open to refutation and replacement by new ‘facts’” (Rolfe 2007 p. 79).

There are opposing researcher poles between truth-and-objectivity, and constructivism-and-subjectivity; the former believing in an external, objective human-independent world, the latter in a socially-constructed, subjective world. I feel that both views can be correct; am I supposed to? Or am I ‘supposed’ to align my position with one rather than the other? The more I reflect on this the more I feel that the natural-science positivist research approach must be appropriate for the natural sciences; but not for the social sciences. Thus whilst I am somewhat insecure with the knowledge that there is, no externally-validated objective truth in the social sciences I am also provided with a driver – to ensure that my own research is rigorous, accurate and ethically sound; that my research outputs are not presented as being ‘cast iron’ fact or ‘the truth’ but are ‘trustworthy’, honest and truthful from my epistemological beliefs and ontological stance and that my own positionality is

clearly articulated. I am also aware that I will not be conducting research in the natural/physical sciences, but in Education.

Assignment one allowed me to start to think about researcher positionality, my own ontological stance, epistemological beliefs and personal philosophy. After completing it I believed I felt a empathy towards critical realism, but through further reading (and re-reading) I now feel that pragmatism and a mixed-methods approach appeals to me more as it allows for a choice of methods that are 'most' appropriate for the research in hand and downplays the influence of philosophy, there being "...no concepts or beliefs that anchor mixed methods" (Newby 2010 p. 46). I was particularly drawn to the following quote

"Pragmatism does not require adherence to a particular philosophical position about the nature and reality of knowledge, but instead implies that a researcher will take a practical view when attempting to problem solve and link theory and practice through the research process"

(Savin-Baden & Howell Major 2013 p. 22).

Pragmatism; truth and value

A pragmatist philosophy asserts that truth can be interpreted in terms of the practical effects of what is believed and their usefulness; in essence whether something is 'workable' in practice. An central tenet is the idea that

"...the subject of the human world is a completely different enterprise from the natural world and thus must be known differently"

(Savin-Baden and Howell Major 2013 p. 60).

The word 'completely' in that quote provides me with considerable reassurance given my insecurities discussed previously and helped me move towards an understanding that

the social world must necessarily be studied and understood differently to the natural-science world.

A key belief of pragmatism is that the research approaches are wide-ranging and eclectic, that they are designed based on the individual research project's circumstances (Savin-Baden and Howell Major 2013 p. 22). Grix identifies that pragmatism is the adoption by a researcher of any, or several methods of research which seem best fitted to the circumstances at hand and that there is "...no commitment to any particular epistemological or ontological assumptions" (Grix 2010 p. 257). To be able to identify the most suitable approach would necessarily require that the researcher is widely read and is aware of (all) possible methods available and able to identify the 'most appropriate' one(s) for the research project. However pragmatism must necessarily still require that the researcher articulate their positionality, as this influences what the researcher feels and decides 'fits best' or is 'most appropriate'. Once the 'most appropriate' method has been chosen positionality will influence, for example, what questions are asked, how they are asked, and to whom they are asked. A clear espousal of positionality in the research output is also required so that readers can come to their own judgement as to whether the chosen method was (from their perspective) the 'most appropriate'.

A core proposal of pragmatism is that 'truth' is regarded as the usefulness of an idea in helping the researcher understand something. Grix identifies that this

"...draws attention to the way in which a valid answer depends on what question was asked, and suggests that truth has not a monolithic out-there quality, but is constituted by a researcher according to how s/he asks questions and verifies answers" (Grix, 2010 p. 258).

The concept of truth as being 'usefulness' seems valuable, but it also raises for me the question of "valuable to whom?". The

researcher, the researched, the research-consumer, or some other person or body for example? What is valuable and useful to one person, government, organisation, funding body, company, culture is not to another. Who decides the value or worth? Should the Research Excellence Framework (REF) for example be the main determinant of the 'value' of HEI research outputs in the UK?

The appeal of pragmatism

I can identify and am increasingly able to accept that there are different interpretations of 'truth' in the social world and that these interpretations are intrinsically linked to a researcher's positionality. But therein lies a problem for me. I do not yet have a clearly defined and articulated understanding of what my own positionality is in terms of world-view and ontological stance. . Because of this I feel somewhat drawn to pragmatism; this is possibly, or probably, because pragmatism seems to offer or open up to me many possibilities without requiring from me a commitment to any one particular philosophical stance. Is that therefore a 'cop out' or excuse? I have to be honest; I do not yet know. I am not sure where that leaves me. Since commencing the EdD I have spent many hours trying to understand different ontological stances, research paradigms, approaches, methodologies and methods. The challenge for me is that everything that I have so far engaged with seems not only valid and appropriate within its context - but equally so to me at this point in time. Perhaps pragmatism appeals because it "...can be a good philosophical option as it allows more leeway in views of how to carry out research" (Savin-Baden and Howell Major 2013 p. 66) and through engaging in different approaches I will, I anticipate over time, develop a clearer ontological position.

My concerns

Savin-Bowden and Howell Major note that qualitative researchers have become increasingly more conscious about their world-view and about their position in the research process, identifying that

“...the vast majority of qualitative researchers today identify with a given philosophical stance and that they tailor their studies making them specific through adopting personal stances, positionality and reflexivity that are complementary to the essential choice of philosophical stance” (Savin-Baden & Howell Major 2013 p. 22).

I ask why does one's research almost always 'have' to be located within or from a particular philosophical perspective? I have a plurality of views. Unlike the “vast majority” I am as yet unable to view a particular piece of research through a lens of my own that I can locate within or relate to any specific philosophical position. Moreover I am not sure at this point in time that I even want to; even if I could. That does worry me; I feel 'concerned'. It may be a positive thing, allowing me to encounter new knowledge without 'judging' it from any specific position. My knowledge of the world like everyone's is “...always mediated by our perspectives and the interpretative framework through which we organise our perspectives” (Balarin 2009 p. 295). But as yet I do not know specifically how or in what way mine is. I feel that I should know, and am uneasy that I do not. I am aware that for my research to be deemed to be credible that it needs to be clearly located within parameters that are acceptable to other members of the research community.

Sikes identifies that

“Regardless of how they are positioned in terms of their epistemological assumptions it is crucial that researchers are clear in their own minds as to the implications of their stance, that they state their position explicitly...” (Sikes 2004 p. 22).

I am therefore concerned; at present I am not clear in my own mind where to locate myself as a researcher; other than to say that I 'think' I am a pragmatist. I can identify elements of my

positionality but do not know how way they will specifically affect the research process – only that they will. I am slightly reassured by the knowledge that positionality is specific to a given research project. But that does not mean that one's epistemological beliefs and ontological stance should, or indeed could, fundamentally change for each new research project undertaken. Fixed aspects of positionality cannot change, but other aspects will, for example my position as an insider or outsider (which will be discussed below). As Kerstetter (referring to Mercer's work) identifies

“...researchers' identities are often relative, and can change, based on where and when the research is conducted, the personalities of the researcher and individual research participants and the topic of the research” (Kerstetter 2012 p. 99).

Ethnographic approaches and researcher positionality

This section will consider the role of positionality in ethnographic research, specifically the position of the researcher as being an insider or an outsider to the culture being studied. It is first necessary to provide some context about ethnography.

“The term ‘ethnography’ is not clearly defined in common usage...” (Hammersley 1990 p. 1), there being no single ethnographic paradigm but “...a diversity of approaches claiming to be ethnographic (and often disagreeing with one another” (Hammersley 1990 p. 15). “There are many different views about what counts as ethnography...” (Savin-Baden and Howell Major 2013 p. 196). It is a qualitative research approach characteristically involving the researcher (‘the ethnographer’)

“...participating, covertly or overtly, in people's lives for an extended period of time...collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research”.

(Hammersley and Atkinson 1995 p.1).

The central aim is the development of an analytic, theoretical or 'thick' description (Hammersley 1990), (Geertz 1973). Bryman identifies that ethnography frequently refers to both the method of research and the written product of that research – process and outcome together (Bryman 2012 p. 342) whilst Crotty identifies that ethnography is a methodology rather than a method (Crotty 2012 p. 3); by this he means that ethnography is an epistemologically informed justification for selecting and using a particular research tool(s) rather than a specific tool itself. Historically ethnography has its roots in cultural anthropology in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when anthropologists started to engage in more work in the field collecting data firsthand (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994 p. 248). I believe (but have not found any evidence to substantiate this belief) that a residue of this is that papers usually refer to ethnographic accounts of a 'culture' rather than using a word such as community or group or even organization (although Merton did refer to Insider* research as that which looked into the person's own work organization (Merton 1972)). Cohen et al identify that whilst ethnography and qualitative research per se are different there are enough similarities between the two to consider them together (Cohen, Manion et al. 2011 p. 219). Similarly Hammersley and Atkinson identify that they do not make any hard-and-fast distinction between ethnography and other sorts of qualitative research (and by inference we should not do so either). There are however differences; I would argue that all ethnographic research is qualitative; but that not all qualitative research is ethnographic, ethnographic research being one aspect, albeit a major one, of qualitative research. The key difference being that ethnographic approaches will always use participant observation. The key characteristic of an ethnographic approach is the use of participant observation as the primary method of data collection: where the researcher takes on a role in the setting, immersing themselves in and

engaging with the setting for an extended period of time (often weeks, or months, in some cases years) aiming to understand something from the subject's point of view. This contrasts with other qualitative approaches such as, for example, the use of focus groups, interviews or discourse analysis where an extended immersion in the setting would not be used.

Within ethnographic approaches, as with all qualitative approaches, the perspective that the researcher takes impacts the knowledge produced about the group being researched, thus whilst ethnographers may be fully committed to avoiding bias all "ethnographic truths are partial" (Naaek, Kurlylo et al. 2010 p. 1).

The insider-outsider positionality debate

One of the common distinctions made in ethnographic research is the perspective and position of the researcher as being either an insider or outsider relative to the culture being studied e.g. (Weiner-Levy and Queder 2012) and (Merton 1972).

Ontologically the insider perspective is referred to as an emic account whilst the outsider perspective is identified as an etic one. The terms refer to different ontological positions. An emic description is situated within a cultural relativist perspective, recognising behaviour and actions as being relative to the person's culture and the context in which that behaviour or action is both rational and meaningful within the culture. It uses terminology that is meaningful to and from the perspective of a person from within the culture whose beliefs and behaviours are being studied. Prior theories and assumptions are discarded or disregarded so that the true 'voice' of the research participants may be heard. An etic account is situated within a realist perspective, attempting to describe differences across cultures in terms of a general external standard and from an ontological

position which assumes a pre-defined reality in respect of the researcher-subject relationship (Nagar and Geiger 2007). Etic accounts aim to be culturally neutral (i.e. independent of culturally-specific terminology or references), using and testing pre-existing theory and is written in terminology that is appropriate to a community of external 'scientific' observers or scholars rather than those who are within the culture. Ontologically an etic position operates from the assumption that 'objective' knowledge relies on the degree to which researchers can detach themselves from the prejudices of the social groups they study (Kusow 2003). Emic and etic perspectives are "Often seen as being at odds - as incommensurable paradigms" (Morris, Leung et al. 1999 p. 781). The emic-etic divide though is not limited to the research output but also to the process of conducting research.

"Emic and etic perspectives...impact the research process, the findings of a study, and the argument made by the researcher about the implications of these findings. The nature of ethnographic work involves the interpretation of cultures (Geertz, 1973). Therefore, there is a responsibility on the part of the researcher to the culture being studied because the perspective the researcher takes impacts the knowledge produced about that cultural group"

(Naaek, Kurlylo et al. 2010 p.1).

Whilst the terms emic and etic refer to ontological positions, the terms insider and outsider within ethnographic studies also refer to whether a person is an actual insider or outsider to the culture, but not necessarily that they are operating from an emic or etic position. By that I mean that one can adopt an etic ontological position but be an insider to the culture being studied, and vice-versa. I will use the terms insider and outsider here to refer to a researcher's position as being an insider or outsider rather than emic or etic ontological positions.

The insider-outsider debate

One area of debate regarding the insider-outsider position is that of whether or not being an insider to the culture positions the researcher more, or less, advantageously than an outsider. This is concerned with the epistemological concern of whether and how it is possible to present information 'accurately'. Merton's 'definition' of Insiders* and Outsiders* is that

"Insiders are the members of specified groups and collectivities or occupants of specified social statuses: Outsiders are non members" (Merton 1972 p. 21).

Others identify the insider as someone whose biography (gender, race, class, sexual orientation and so on) gives them a 'lived familiarity' with and a priori knowledge of the group being researched while the outsider is a person/researcher who does not have any prior intimate knowledge of the group being researched (Griffith, 1998 cited in (Mercer 2007)).

There are various lines of argument put forward to emphasise the advantages and/or disadvantages of each position (e.g. see (Merton 1972). In its simplest articulation the insider-perspective essentially questions the ability of outsider scholars to competently understand the experiences of those inside the culture whilst the outsider-perspective questions the ability of the insider scholar to sufficiently detach themselves from the culture to be able to study it without bias (Kusow 2003).

Space precludes a detailed consideration of every one of the aspects associated of the advantages and disadvantages of the insider-outsider duality, and with specific concerns of feminist and post-colonial lenses. However, the main arguments are briefly listed below.

'Advantages' of an insider position include:

- 1 easier access to the culture being studied, regarded as being “one of us” (Sanghera and Thapar-Bjokert 2008 p. 556)
- 2 the ability to ask more meaningful or insightful questions (due to possession of a priori knowledge)
- 3 the ability understand the language, including colloquial language, and non-verbal cues,
- 4 the ability to produce a more truthful ‘authentic’ thick description and understanding of the culture,
- 5 may be more trusted so secures more honest answers,
- 6 disorientation due to ‘culture shock’ is removed.

‘Disadvantages’ of an insider position include:

- 1 may be inherently and unknowingly biased, or overly sympathetic to the culture,
- 2 may be too close to and familiar with the culture (‘myopic view’), or bound by custom and code, so that they are unable to raise provocative or taboo questions,
- 3 may be unable to bring an external perspective to the process,
- 4 research participants may assume that because the insider is ‘one of us’ that they possess more or better insider knowledge than they actually do, (which they may not) and that their understandings are the same (which they may not be). Thus information which should be ‘obvious’ to the insider, may not be articulated or explained,
- 5 ‘dumb’ questions which an outsider may legitimately ask, may not be able to be asked (Naaek, Kurlylo et al. 2010),

6 respondents may be less willing to reveal sensitive information than they would be to an outsider who they will have no future contact with.

Unfortunately it is the case that each of the above can be equally viewed, depending upon one's perspective, as being advantageous or disadvantageous, or weaknesses rather than a strengths so that, much the business tool technique of SWOT analysis, "The insider's strengths become the outsider's weaknesses and vice-versa" (Merriam, Johnson-Bailey et al. 2001 p. 411).

Whether either position offers advantage over the other is questionable, Hammersley for example argues that there are "...no overwhelming advantages to being an insider or outsider" (Hammersley 1993 p. 219) but that each position has both advantages and disadvantages which take on slightly different weight depending on the specific circumstances and the purpose of the research, whilst Mercer argues that it is a 'double edged sword' – in that what is gained in one area may be lost in another, for example, detailed insider knowledge may mean that the 'bigger picture' is not seen (Mercer 2007).

Insider or outsider as opposites may actually be an artificial construct. There may be no clear dichotomy between the two positions, the researcher may not be *either* an insider *or* an outsider (Herod 1999) but the positions can be seen as a continuum with conceptual rather than actual endpoints (Christenson and Dahl 1997 cited in (Mercer 2007). Mercer argues that

"...the insider/outsider dichotomy is in reality a continuum with multiple dimensions, and that all researchers constantly move back and forth along a number of axes, depending upon time, location, participants and topic" (Ibid p. 1).

As Merton identifies

“...sociologically speaking there is nothing fixed about the boundaries separating Insiders from Outsiders. As situations involving different values arise, different statuses are activated and the lines of separation shift” (Merton 1972 p. 28).

Similarly Kusow argues that the insider and outsider roles are products of the particular situation in which research takes place (Kusow 2003).

It has been suggested by some authors (e.g. Ritchie et al) and (Kirstetter 2012) that recent qualitative research has seen a blurring of the separation between insiderness and outsidersness and that it may be more appropriate to define a researcher's stance by their physical and psychological distance from the phenomenon research study rather than their paradigmatic position (Ritchie J, Zwi AB et al. 2009). Though ethnographic research would necessarily require physical immersion in the environment and, personally I feel that 'perceived psychological distance' may be considerably difficult to clarify with any precision.

If 'insiderness' is interpreted as implying a single fixed status (e.g. gender, race, religion, etc) then the terms insider and outsider are likely to be seen as dichotomous, (because for example a person cannot be simultaneously both male and female, black and white, Christian and Muslim). If, on the other hand a more pluralistic lens is used (accepting that human beings cannot be classified according to a single ascribed status), then the two terms are likely to be considered as being poles of a continuum (Mercer 2007).

Researcher positionality and the insider-outsider; one researcher's views

To consider this debate reference will be made to a paper by Herod 'Reflections on interviewing foreign elites, praxis, positionality, validity and the cult of the leader' (Herod 1999).

Herod's paper questions the epistemological assumption that an insider will necessarily produce 'truer' knowledge, arguing that research is a social process in which the interviewer and interviewee participate jointly in knowledge creation. He posits three issues from first hand experience which all deny the duality of simple insider-outsider positionality. Firstly, the researcher's ability to consciously manipulate their positionality, secondly that how others view the researcher may be very different from the researcher's own view, and thirdly, that positionality changes over time.

In respect of the researcher's ability to consciously manipulate their positionality he identifies that he deliberately presents himself in different ways in different situations - for example, presenting himself as "Dr." when corresponding with Eastern European trade unions as the title conveys status, but in America presenting himself as a teacher without title so as to avoid being viewed as a "...disconnected academic in my ivory tower..." (Ibid p. 321). Similarly he often 'plays up' his Britishness - emphasizing outsidership because a foreign academic may, he feels, be perceived as being 'harmless' when compared to a domestic academic - thus interviewees may be more open and candid about certain issues.

As regards how others view the researcher's positionality differently from the researcher's own view of themselves Herod identifies that his research has involved situations where objectively he is an 'outsider; and perceives of himself as such (i.e. is not a member of the cultural elite he is studying) but that others have not seen him as being an outsider. Citing an example of research in Guyana where his permission to interview had been pre-cleared by a high ranking government official, leading to the Guyanese trade union official who collected him from the airport to regard him as a 'pseudo insider', inviting him to his house and treating him as though he were a member of the

family. This, Herod indicates, made it more difficult for him to conduct research than if he had been treated as an outsider.

In discussing how positionality may change over time Herod argues that a researcher who is initially viewed as being an outsider will, as time progresses and more contact and discussion takes place, increasingly be viewed as an insider due to familiarity. He identifies that this particularly happens with follow-up interviews, in his case when conducting follow up interviews over three years, each a year apart in the Czech Republic - each time he went the relationship was “more friendly and less distant” (Ibid p. 324).

Herod identifies that if we believe that the researcher and interviewee are co-partners in the creation of knowledge then there

“...remains the question as to whether it even really makes sense or is useful to talk about a dichotomy of “insiders” and “outsiders”, particularly given that the positionality of both may change through and across such categories over time or depending upon what attributes of each one’s identities are stressed” (Ibid p. 325).

Conclusion

Researcher positionality within ethnographic studies, specifically the position of being an insider or outsider to the culture being studied, is never clearly demarcated and fixed. Neither perspective offers a better or more ‘truthful’ view than the other. “What an insider ‘sees’ and ‘understands’ will be different from, but as valid as what an outsider sees” (Merriam, Johnson-Bailey et al. 2001 p. 415). Both perspectives are equally valid and there is a strong argument that it is a fallacy to clearly demarcate a researcher as being ‘either’ an insider or an outsider to the culture/community being studied. A relativist perspective would, for example, argue that both positions have value but only in comparison with each other - that validity or

truth only ever has subjective value, thus the insider perspective is only of value when it can be compared with the outsider perspective, and vice-versa. No one perspective has value without the other perspective to compare it with.

Concluding Personal statement

I already know though that my future research and research questions will be shaped by my positionality. I had thought that there are some topics I would not be able to engage with research in as my own beliefs and values would be too 'strong' to be able to bring anything like an open mind to the process, for example, I would not want to carry research out with far right wing extremist groups or ultra Conservatives as I perceive that their world view is 'wrong' and this would shape the research process; it would be biased; non truthful. But through the thought process associated with producing this assignment I have come to realise that that is 'ok' and that my alternative outsider perspective could bring something to the research process. Because in the social world there is not any one truth; but a range of truths; and as long as I clearly state my positionality, even if I do not precisely know how it has influenced my research, it will as a minimum allow others to identify 'where I am coming from' and the lens(es) through which my research has been conducted.

At the outset of commencing this assignment I had hoped be able to clarify my own positionality. I did not feel optimistic that I would be able to do so, and was wary of becoming overly solipsistic. But as time progressed I started to realise that I have deconstructed and reconstructed one key aspect of my positionality. I can now accept there is 'probably', for I cannot say with certainty, (as there is no absolute certainty), no value-free knowledge within the social world, and yet also accept that

there are some facts (still provisional knowledge but knowledge that can be taken for granted and is to all intent and purpose currently uncontestable) within the natural sciences. That has been a considerable shift for me. I have come to realise that I have to adjust from my previous position and 'allow' myself to accept as 'fact' that there is no value-free, position-free, objective cold, hard, neutral 'prove-able' factual knowledge in the social world; whilst being aware that this is not a 'comfortable' adjustment. The broad concept of relativism; that there is no absolute truth - truth is always relative to a particular frame of reference is a necessary lens for me to view the social world. That research outputs in the social sciences are not independent of the social-world from which they are constructed. That judgements and criteria about the worth or value of research in the social world are necessarily different from those of the physical sciences, for example, we may look for 'truthfulness' instead of 'validity' and may use 'triangulation' for consistency and congruency rather than look for replicability, and that positivistic scientific principles such as overarching laws and rules of the natural sciences are rarely relevant to the social world. And, as previously mentioned, the social world is 'completely different' from the natural world and requires different approaches to understand it.

I am still wedded to long-held beliefs about 'objectivity' being important, even though I know that there can be no objectivity in the social world. I am experiencing cognitive dissonance; I hope this can be resolved over time. I am also aware that whilst some aspects of my positionality such as ethnic origin and gender remain fixed, other aspects are more fluid, open to change over time and specific to each situation; that whether I am an insider or outsider to a research task does not matter in terms of its truthfulness. Moreover my position as an insider or outsider is a social construct; everyone has multiple insider and outsider positions at the same time. For example I may be a

white, male, English, middle class, academic, researching white, female middle class, academics – am I an insider or an outsider? I am neither; and both.

Researcher positionality has an integral place within the research process as does the researcher's awareness of the lack of stasis of our own and other's positionality. There is no one truth; there are many truths.

* Merton capitalizes Insider and Outsider whilst other authors do not.

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