

White Researcher- Black Subjects: Exploring the Challenges of Researching the Marginalised and 'Invisible'

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Abstract: How to access the *life world* of the *Other* without mis-representing it, has long been a concern in a number of research traditions, including disability, feminist and black research traditions. Feminist debates have addressed issues such as whether researchers can only speak on behalf of their own social groups or whether there is legitimacy in speaking on behalf of the *Other*. Justification for this often arises from the fact that dis-empowered groups may not have access to a public forum where they can be heard, so that social researchers see their role as 'giving a voice' to those who would otherwise not be heard. By contrast, other researchers see commonalities with their respondents as a particular strength.

The paper focuses on theoretical perspectives which provided the framework in a study of the lived experiences and expressed views of second-generation female young people of African and Caribbean heritage in predominantly white community and school settings. It examines some of the theoretical as well as personal considerations of a white female researcher and educational practitioner whose personal position and interests had to be negotiated within the research process. The paper highlights some of the difficulties, dilemmas and challenges of a white researcher attempting to access the lived realities of ethnic minority children whose lives are 'invisible' in dominant discourses. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from the feminist, black and disability literature, the paper explores the implications for researching 'sensitive' topics in organisational contexts from the perspective of an outsider 'looking in' and argues for a conscious 'positioning' of the researcher who may or may not be part of the lifeworld of individuals or groups being researched.

Keywords: Lifeworld, marginalised individuals, 'invisible', dominant discourses, black/ white perspectives

1. Introduction

Only little attention has been paid to the experiences of minority ethnic pupils in geographical areas in which there may be no peer reference group or access to community cultural experiences, other than the dominant white culture. The almost exclusive research focus in the literature on minority ethnic pupils in multiethnic urban areas (Mac an Ghaill, 1988, 1991; Verma and Pumfrey, 1988;) has tended to highlight issues around racism, teacher expectations, academic underachievement and identity at the expense of examining the experiences of ethnic minority children at the margins, whose lives and experiences remain 'invisible'. The paucity of research in this area relates to the fact that such pupils' experiences do not lend themselves easily to be quantified. Within the context of their particular school, their exam results are not reflected statistically and their educational performance cannot be measured reliably in terms of their group. (Cline, de Abreu, Fihosy, Gray, Lambert and Neale, 2002). The experience of being on the margins and not 'worthy of study', represents a strange paradox for ethnic minority children in this context. On the one hand, their physical characteristics such as skin colour, hair and features make them highly visible within their predominantly white social settings, yet in terms of representation and importance they are often 'invisible'.

The present paper explores issues in relation to researching second-generation teenage girls of African and Caribbean descent, several of whom shared the commonality of mixed parentage (having a white and a black parent). Whilst a wealth of literature in the field has focused on the experiences and underachievements of 'African-Caribbean' boys in the British education system (e.g. Coard, 1971; Mac an Ghaill, 1988; Sewell, 1998;) or on the experiences of South Asian children (e.g. Ahmed, 2000; Bhatti, 1999), and some studies have focused on the experiences of black girls (Mirza, 1992); there are few studies of girls of mixed African/white heritage and who live in predominantly white communities.

Furthermore, much of the literature has focused on ethnic minority children as falling short of the norms for their white counterparts, e.g. in relation to schooling. This perspective has 'pathologised' the experience of 'black' childhood through Western models and practices of psychology and child development, social work and education (Owusu-Bempah and Howitt, 2000; 2002).

Only a small number of studies have focused on the positive aspects of being different and how positive role models can be a source of inspiration (e.g. Hoyles and Hoyles, 1999).

This paper explores the writer's theoretical considerations and personal reflections in a study of the 'Voices' of young black females (aged between 15 and 21 years) who were in full time education at the time of interviews, with regards to their experiences of education and life within predominantly white communities. Themes which initially emerged from a taped group discussion, were followed up by individual conversations with young ethnic minority females and discussions with first generation, black African parents whose children attend schools and further education in predominantly white area.

Accessing the *Life Worlds* of under-represented and marginalised groups presents a significant challenge for researchers who are not part of these life worlds and who want to be credible in their representation of the *Other*. As a white female researcher of European descent with a strong interest in the lived experiences of young ethnic minority females in predominantly white communities, this has meant addressing my own role in the research process. It has involved a search to find a research framework within which it is credible to re-present individuals and groups who are on the margins or *invisible*.

The first section of this paper examines wider contextual challenges to dominant discourses which have contributed to the marginalisation of under-represented groups. The second section examines the scope of research and the role of the researcher as an outsider. Finally, the implications of researching sensitive topics in the context of organisations will be addressed.

2. Challenging dominant discourses

A number of black academic writers and researchers have expressed dissatisfaction with white dominant discourses of black pupils, e.g. in relation to educational underachievement (e.g. Callender, 1997; Channer, 1995; Mirza, 1992).

The 'deficit model' of Western thinking in relation to black and other ethnic minority groups and their children is also highlighted by Owusu-Bempah and Howitt (2000) who argue that this has found legitimisation in disciplines such as Psychology, Psychiatry and Social Work. The authors argue that simplistic and Eurocentric paradigms have been applied to other ethnic groups without taking into account social and cultural factors.

Owusu-Bempah and Howitt (2002) distinguish between levels of understanding at the user level, service level, organization level, culture level and value level. Their criticism of Psychology as a discipline which encourages agents of society to change individuals to fit the dominant culture needs to be taken seriously. The issue of professionals pathologising culturally different behaviours or declaring it as deviant affects teachers, psychologists, social workers, psychiatrists and many more. The outcomes are experienced at many levels by those affected by institutionally racist thinking, practices and policies.

Ahmed (2000) also points to the failings of mainstream Psychology in engaging with issues of race and racism, often falling into the trap of dualistic concepts (e.g. individual vs. society) and or ignoring wider socio-economic and cultural factors, thus reducing the racism to the level of social exchanges and interactions at the micro-level.

Hoyles and Hoyles (1999) stress the achievements of black/mixed race people throughout history which are not usually known and seldom find their way into the written history books or school lessons (e.g. the Jamaican born Mary Seacole who never made it into the history lessons whilst Florence Nightingale is known to everyone in Britain). Not bringing black and other ethnic histories into the school curriculum, is not simply an omission but, I would argue, another way of making 'invisible' the culture and contributions of black people. At the same time dominant discourses highlight the 'problematic' (and often implied 'inherent nature') of black people.

For Asante (1998) all discourse is culturally centred, including dominant theories, such as phenomenology. He argues, writing from an African American perspective, that discourses of blacks to a large extent remain "*essentially white or Eurocentric discourse by black people.*" (p.185).

My argument is that by making people, cultures and other traditions 'invisible', we are trivialising, marginalising their experiences and contributions. At the individual level this means that lived experience is negated, whilst for communities this means being at the margins of society. My intended research led me to examine the work of Ahmed (2000) who looked at a variety of discourses based on research interviews with second generation Bangladeshis living in Britain, arguing that discourses perpetuate oppressive social

relations of the dominant culture. For me, this further highlights the need to make the voice of the minority group central to the research.

Livia (1996) shows how the absence in literature and thought of certain groups of women (e.g. black lesbians or Jewish lesbians) has led to a position that makes even the start of any conversation or discussion difficult. She states:

When I started writing I was aware of the feminist tenet that the writer is accountable for what she creates, but it did not occur to me that I might also be accountable for what I left out. (ibid, p.35)

In this context, challenging oppression therefore has to include challenging omissions, which refers to my argument of having to challenge the dominant discourse which makes 'invisible' individuals, communities or ideas.

Reinharz (1992) states that contemporary feminist ethnography has three goals which influence the feminist researcher:

- Documenting the lives and activities of women
- Understanding the experiences of women from their point of view
- Conceptualising women's behaviour as an expression of social contexts.

In this context, listening to the 'Voice' of the *Other* plays an important role, as demonstrated in the work of Gilligan (1982) who shares the concern with other feminist researchers that psychology and dominant discourses have frequently used male behaviour as a yardstick against which to measure female behaviour. This has in the past led to female behaviour being seen as 'deviant' from standards of psychological expectations based on male 'norms'. The critiques of dominant ideologies and discourses voiced by feminist researchers and writers share similarities with views expressed by black researchers and academics discussed earlier (e.g. Owusu-Bempah and Howitt, 2000) regarding the 'pathologising' of black experience in a white-dominated society. Feminist debates have frequently addressed issues such as whether researchers can only speak on behalf of their own social group or whether there is legitimacy in speaking on behalf of the *Other*. Justification for this often arises from the fact that disempowered groups often do not have access to a public forum where they can be heard, so that social researchers see their role in 'giving a voice' to those who would otherwise not be heard (e.g. Bell, 1996; Russell, 1996), a view which I share and drew on in my own research. There are, however, difficult issues involved when researchers take it upon themselves to represent *Others*, not least around potential dangers of mis-representation, mis-use of power and abuse. A useful distinction here is pointed out by Wilkinson and Kitzinger (1996) which concerns the notions of '*re-presenting*' and '*representing*', a distinction originally made by Marx (*Darstellung/Vertretung*). The notion of '*re-presenting*' is about giving a voice to marginalised individuals and groups who are often under-represented, whilst '*representing*' has a patronising quality of standing in the place of and speaking on behalf of the *Other*.

Some writers (e.g. Aziz, 1997) have cautioned against *white feminism*, meaning *from a white perspective* (not based on colour or ethnicity) which upholds existing power structures. For Aziz (1997) racism often obscures the fact that whiteness and blackness are intertwined in the experience of oppression. However, whilst white women experience oppression as patriarchal, black women experience it as racist and patriarchal.

Mama (1995) stresses the importance of understanding discourses on the *Other* (black women) as being embedded in historical conditions of slavery, colonialism and racism as well as the discourses and practices which these bring about. She argues that individual consciousness arises "*out of the resonances between collective history and personal experience*" (p.163).

Contextualising individual experience therefore means, going beyond current day economic, social and cultural contexts and extending this into political and historical contexts. Psychology has in the past provided insufficient theoretical grounding for looking at individuals beyond their current contexts and taking into account collective historical positions. Even interest in the relatively 'new' areas of cultural and cross-cultural perspectives in Psychology (e.g. Gardiner and Kosmitzki, 2002; Squire, 2000) do not offer a framework of analysis that takes political and collective historical positions into account. Whilst theories Psychology have concerned the behaviour and development of the individual, these studies have traditionally been based on relative small numbers of individuals, often not representative of non-white or Western populations. Dissatisfaction with the discipline from marginalised groups is therefore understandable.

Another theoretical perspective which influenced the conceptualisation of my research came from the disability literature which emphasises that individuals with disabilities belong to a group of disempowered people within society (Oliver, 1990, 1996; Gleeson, 1997). With this they share a common perspective with other marginalised groups, such as women, blacks and other ethnic minorities. The question arises whether a 'non-disabled' person can ever research issues relating to disability without being patronising and whether they have the right to speak on behalf of a group that has been silenced by the dominant political paradigm (Drake, 1997). In arguing that the political dimension is about challenging oppression and exclusion (Goodley, 1997; Oliver, 1990) and by accepting the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990, 1996), 'non-disabled' writers can join in highlighting oppression. If the experience of the *Other* cannot be ever experienced, this poses a difficulty in representing any such experience without distorting it. In the disability research literature this has found expression in studying the *Voices* (which express experiences) of those concerned (e.g. Leicester and Lovell, 1997).

3. Exploring and positioning my own role in the research process

My interest in researching the Life worlds of young ethnic minority females in predominantly white areas was a personal as well as professional one. On the one hand, I am a white female who is married to a black West African and we have lived in a predominantly white community in North East Lincolnshire. Our three children have attended local primary schools where they have, in some years, been the only non-white child in their year group, if not the entire school. They have experienced, at times, open hostility and racism such as name calling or being excluded from games because 'your skin is brown'. However, as long as racism and hostility are out in the open, they can be addressed. As parents we have been able to talk about how prejudice works, about strategies of dealing with difficulties on an individual level and about talking to teachers and schools. At the institutional level, schools are required to log racist incidents and although many under-represent incidents because 'minor' incidents such as name-calling are not reported or recorded, there is a system through which data can be collected and compiled. In contrast to this, most of the life experiences our children have had cannot be quantified in terms of numbers and statistics and to do so, I would argue, would be to diminish the reality of their lived experiences. One of the realities I have touched on earlier, is that of being 'invisible' in terms of representation and impact.

On a professional level, my work as an Educational Psychologist in the City of Hull in the North of England, brings me into contact with many vulnerable pupils such as those with special educational needs and disabilities. Over centuries, Kingston upon Hull has been made up of a mainly white population with only few black or ethnic minority people living in the area who were not part of clearly defined 'communities' such as those in other cities.

Although the City has seen a strong influx of a range of minority *groups* in recent years, such as Congolese refugee families and Eastern European economic migrant families, the pupils from these groups remain concentrated in some schools, whilst other schools still remain predominantly white. Several schools I work with have very few ethnic minority pupils on their roll. Even in schools with relatively high representations of minority ethnic pupils, the teaching and support staff teams remain almost exclusively white. Furthermore, outside agencies working with schools, are almost entirely white in staffing. On a professional level I am aware that many of the issues affecting young ethnic minority people in predominantly white settings, such as the lack of a peer reference group, sense of isolation and not being reflected in dominant discourses, are similar to those affecting my own children. As my eldest daughter grew into a young adult, I was increasingly able to have open and critical discussions about what her experiences of growing up as a young black female (my daughter refers to herself as 'black' in a political sense) in a predominantly white area have been. Many of the discussions were initiated by my daughter and I often wished I could have taped or recorded her views to share with other young people in a similar position and also professionals working in schools and educational establishments.

The decision to research the topic area further did not come easy as I had to grapple with many issues, such as my own emotions and involvement as well as whether I could ever do justice to the topic since I am not black myself or am part of an under-represented group. Being white represents being part of the dominant discourse and in the words of my own daughter on a day she experienced a racist physical attack: "*Mum, you have no idea and you can never know what it is like to be black or different!*" Furthermore, being a psychologist is being part of a profession that has historically contributed to prejudice and oppression by applying a white Western (supposedly objective) yardstick to measure all human ability and performance. This is a reductionist approach, at best neglectful at worst a shameful example of how professions have abused power and 'abnormalised' the experiences of others. There were many questions I asked myself:

How could I possibly be 'objective' when I was emotionally involved? How could I possibly hope to represent a group of young people with whom I only shared in common our gender? How could I be credible if I had never experienced or even come close to experiencing their life worlds?

Blair (1998) queries whether 'neutrality' in educational research is ever possible, as all research is based on prior positions which in turn influence knowledge construction. Pretending otherwise, would in fact be misleading. Blair (ibid) states that whilst feminist research has to some extent succeeded in representing the marginalised through theoretical perspectives and more inclusive research methodologies, research on 'race' and education has been more of an *uphill struggle*.

Feminists have for a long time argued that *the personal is political* and that the purpose of 'giving voice' is essentially about effecting social change (e.g. Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1996).

Bell (1996) writes about her own research experience as a white, female researcher which highlighted incidences of rape in Aboriginal communities. Russell (1996) examines her personal research within a white feminist paradigm, whilst conducting research on black women in South Africa; whilst Jeffreys (1996) examines whether and how feminists can theorise prostitution if they have never worked as prostitutes. Other researchers see commonalities with their respondents as a particular strength. Mirza (1992) points out that like her interviewees, she had originated from the West Indies, was young and therefore enjoyed a "*unique insight into the experiences of the young black women in the study.*" Mirza points out, that any subjective bias should be acknowledged, so that interest positions are openly known.

Callender (1997) also states her conviction that being a black female teacher and researcher gave her greater insight into the topic area of black pupils within the education system. However, Callender also acknowledges that having a similar ethnic background can have disadvantages. Whilst it can "*open doors to meanings normally reserved for ingroup members*" (p.11), it can also close doors as "*the researcher becomes too immersed in the situation to see clearly what is happening.*" (p.11). Mac an Ghaill (1991), reflecting on his own ethnographic research in a school which contributed to *Young Gifted and Black*, states that as a white male researcher investigating black female and male students, methodological and political considerations were of central importance in conceptualising his research. The importance of knowing the life world of participants as well as understanding the wider social and political contexts within which they are located is also stressed by Channer (1995). My reflections also drew on Barn (1994) who stresses the need for an anti-discriminatory research model in which issues of gender, race, ethnicity are acknowledged and *consciously confronted*. Research also builds on those who have 'gone before' and entered new territories in a sensitive way. In this context Edwards (1993) was useful as she showed that writing from a feminist perspective as a white academic who interviewed black women was possible. She states that factors such as race, class sex differences and similarities of researcher have implications for the research process. They enable both researcher and researched to '*place*' each other within the social structure and can increase or lessen the sensitivity of research topics.

In the context of my own research, I had intended to use a methodology which enabled me to explore the '*lived experience*' of individuals in a way which accepted as valid their experiences, thoughts and interpretations and meaning making. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) initially seemed to fulfil my requirements as it is set within an inductive research paradigm which builds on the accounts given by participants (e.g. Reid et al 2005; Smith 1996, 1999; Smith et al 1999; Willig, 2001). However, the approach also requires researchers to reduce the complexity of experiential data through processes of rigorous and systematic analysis. This means that greater levels of abstraction are achieved through increasing levels of analysis but it also means that each level of analysis is further removed from the original data (the accounts and words given by the participants themselves). My methodological concern here is that, with each level of analysis there is increasing scope for omissions, distortions and mis-representations of the kind critiqued by researchers concerned with re-presenting marginalised groups, as discussed above. Taking a methodologically 'purist' stance has the potential of being distorting of the depth of experiences of the participants and the complexities of their social realities. IPA opens up the potential to access lived realities but it is also an attempt to reduce and quantify 'data'. It could be argued that it represents an attempt to justify an ideographic approach in the light of potential criticism from the positivist quarters. Given these considerations, I eventually adopted an approach to analysis used by Channer (1995) in her research of black people's life histories. It is based on themes which emerge from the descriptions and recounted experiences of the participants. They are not imposed themes but reflect the emphasis given by participants to areas of their lives.

Channer (1995) describes her rationale for the less formal and structured type of data collection through conversations below:

In conversations, ideas flow from one notion to another. This fluid nature of gathering data inevitably results in the overlapping of the themes. The need for rigorous analysis of the data is not disputed; however, restricting the evaluation of the material by using an unsuitable mechanistic approach would fail to identify significant issues fully. (Channer, 1995; p. 66)

This also reflects a methodological approach taken by Mama (1995) in her research on black women's identities. Her discussions often took the form of conversations which were initiated by Mama by explaining her interest in the topic area in general terms. Often a small tape recorder was left running, which discussants rapidly became less conscious of as in the case of my group discussion.

4. Conclusion

Sensitive research should be a journey of discovery in which the researcher becomes 'sensitised' to the potential challenges and dilemmas that their chosen topic may hold. When researching the *Other* in the role of an outsider, this also means addressing the role of self in research and engaging in critical questioning of one's own role and scope. Using ethnographic methods to access the life worlds of others and enabling their voices to be heard, is one way of trying to address the issue of power imbalance in the research process. The issue therefore is not whether the researcher or writer is disabled, black or female themselves but rather whether they are writing from that *perspective*. This dimension also takes into account the *intentions* and purpose of research and acknowledges that all research of *Others* is essentially a political process which the researcher needs to be critically aware of. From this perspective it is a requirement that the researcher consciously positions herself/himself before the practical research commences and makes this position clear to those they wish to research.

Furthermore researchers in organisations need to be sensitive not to exclude those already on the margins by 'omission' because of a perceived need to use purist research methodologies which may not always be appropriate to the subject matter.

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