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Researching Ethnic ‘Others’: Conducting Critical Ethnographic Research in Australia and Scotland.

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Abstract

In many parts of the world, classrooms are characterised by cultural and ethnic diversity. Increasingly, researchers are interested in exploring these rich and socially complex contexts. However, research into ‘the ethnic other’ can present complex ethical and methodological challenges. In this paper, the authors discuss, with reference to their respective studies in Australia and Scotland, their mission to give voice and agency to research participants and develop research relationships that reduce the power imbalance between researcher and researched. They conclude by suggesting that critical ethnographic research methods can assist in alleviating some of the difficulties inherent in research conducted in contexts where researchers are cultural outsiders. The authors also argue the need for protocols to be developed for research into ethnic minority communities.

Introduction

We are educational researchers with a long standing interest in multicultural education and qualitative ethnographic research. The significant cultural and linguistic diversity that constitutes our respective societies, Australia and Scotland, has been the catalyst for much of our research. Australia, since European settlement in 1788, has been commonly regarded as a ‘society of immigrants’. Data from the last census indicates that there are two hundred different languages, including Indigenous languages, spoken by approximately 17% of the population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006, 146). Although Scotland is sometimes regarded as a relatively homogenous society, it has long been characterised by immigration (and emigration) with considerable demographic change over the last twenty years (Carrington and Menter 2008). A recent survey reported that 137 languages other than English are spoken by children at schools in Scotland (Glasgow Herald 2008).

Such contexts are typical of the ethnic and cultural diversity experienced in many other communities in the world, including England, most other parts of Europe, Canada, the United States and New Zealand. Classrooms that were once relatively homogenous in terms of student ethnicity, have become increasingly multiethinic in the last 25 years (for example, Leavy 2005; Leeman 2006; Liddicoat and Diaz 2008; Osler et al. 2006). Even in societies long characterised by significant ethnic diversity, such as Australia, the United States, and Canada, school populations are changing. Such changes are brought about by unprecedented movements of people across national borders due to sustained periods of political upheaval and war in many
regions of the world, as well as the development of global labour and education markets (International Organisation for Migration 2005; Matthews and Sidhu 2005; UNHCR 2004; ).

These rich and socially complex contexts have important implications for schooling systems, teaching and learning that we, like many other researchers, are increasingly interested in exploring. However, while we recognise the opportunities these contexts provide for us as researchers, we are also concerned about the complexities and the ethics of researching within these multiethnic contexts. Researchers’ rights to conduct research in multiethnic contexts have, for too long, been assumed, particularly in much anthropological research. It is only relatively recently, and as a result of an increase in ethnic minority researchers, that taken-for-granted research practices and methodologies that involve putting ‘others’ under investigation by researchers from the hegemonic ‘mainstream’, have been interrogated by researchers in general. The work of black scholars such as hooks in the United States (2003), Mirza in Britain (1995) and Moreton-Robinson (2003) in Australia has contributed to raising the consciousness of white researchers and has lead to the scrutiny of research that focuses on the ethnic and racial ‘other’.

As white academics, we are normatively positioned outside the minority ethnic groups and the experiences we aspire to understand. What is of interest to us from a research perspective, that is; culture and ethnicity, is also what constitutes a significant point of difference between us and our respondents. Foldy, a white woman researching the experiences of black women claims, “My white identity didn’t only influence my choice of topic, it also influenced how I went about the research” (2005, 38). In this paper we draw upon our current respective research projects, *Indigenous Teachers: Understanding their Professional Experiences and Career Pathways* and *Refugees Into Teaching in Scotland (RITeS)* to highlight the dilemmas we, as majority ethnic researchers experience when conducting research in ethnically diverse contexts. Specific mention is made of the ways reflexive and critical ethnographic research methods can assist in alleviating some of the difficulties inherent in research conducted in contexts where researchers are cultural outsiders. We argue that this is particularly important in current global times where education research, in response to changing school demographics, is concerned with research into ‘the other’.

**Researcher and Researched: A Complex Relationship**

The notion that research is an inherently subjective exercise and that research practices are embedded in a researcher’s experiences and life views is well established in qualitative research methodology literature (for example, Brewer 2000; Schostak, 2006; Pole and Morrison, 2003). Data collection is not an objective, unbiased task that provides the ‘raw materials’ through which ‘the truth’ will be revealed upon analysis. On the contrary, researchers are not just ‘collectors’ of data, as though they exists in some predefined form, ripe for the picking. Increasingly, researchers are regarded as actively involved in fashioning, co-constructing and co-producing data in conjunction with research participants. What researchers see as worthy of investigation, the questions they ask during interviews, what they look for during observations and how they interpret and analyse informants’ stories of experiences, are shaped by their subjectivities (eg. Nelson and Gould 2005; Foldy 2005; Klaas,
These subjectivities are an amalgam of the ethnic, racialised, gendered and classed ‘self’. Foldy, who has examined her research practices in relation to her racial self, suggests that “research and identity reverberate through each other” (2005, 50).

The intersection of subjectivities and research practices raises a number of important considerations for researchers who work in multiethnic contexts. We, like most qualitative researchers, accept that our research practices are not neutral and unbiased but constituted by, and through our own subjectivities. The people who are the focus of our research are usually black, usually non-native speakers of English, often immigrants or refugees and nearly always members of marginalised communities. We, on the other hand, are white, middle-class and members of the hegemonic ‘mainstream’. Therefore, the differences between ourselves and our respondents in terms of our cultural identities, raise a number of interrelated methodological issues that must be considered.

Such methodological issues include those of a practical and ethical nature. For example, access to the field may not be easy for researchers who are cultural outsiders. They often lack knowledge of particular cultural practices and/or mores of communication. Knowing how to make contact with potential participants and how to effectively communicate with them can present difficulties if there is not a shared language or a set of cultural practices with which both parties are competent and confident. Other methodological concerns focus on the ‘trustworthiness’ of data and their analysis. Because researchers and research participants bring different sets of cultural knowledge to their understandings of concepts and ideas, how researchers hear and interpret participants’ words may be vastly different from how they are intended. How possible it is to really understand and represent the perspectives of those with whom researchers have little in common? Bowl, researching non traditional entrants into Higher Education in the Britain, points to the problems inherent in a mismatch in experience between researcher and researched. She claims: “The stories we tell and are told will vary according to the assumptions made about the listener and her understanding of, for example, racism. I can only understand racism from a white perspective, not from the perspective of someone who has experienced it day to day” (Bowl 2003, 8-9).

Of great concern to us is how our status as outsiders impacts on our relationships with our participants, especially those from communities that are not only culturally and ethnically different from the mainstream, but also marginalised. Haig-Brown suggests that research by members of the academy into “any traditionally excluded group” (2001, 21) can be counterproductive [because it] holds the danger of a re-inscription of colonization” (Haig-Brown 2001, 21). As outsider-researchers in marginalised minority ethnic communities, potentially we can find ourselves in research relationships “mired in social power differentials. We cross historically-entrenched boundaries to study populations that have been historically colonized, exploited and monitored by dominant races and classes” (Nelson and Gould 2005, 328). As a result of such history, ‘Gatekeepers’, that is, those with whom access to potential participants and research sites is negotiated, may deny right of entry to the field. They may be suspicious of outsider-researchers’ motives for conducting research in communities that are not their own. Such suspicion may arise because previous research has resulted in little benefit for the communities under investigation, or it has been harmful. For example, Australian Indigenous people have been ‘subjects’ of
research by non-Indigenous researchers for many years. However, frequently the
research has had little affect on their lives — Indigenous people remain the most
disadvantaged and marginalised group in Australia in terms of educational outcomes,
poverty and health (Commonwealth of Australia 2002; Malin and Maidment 2003).
Linda Tuhiwai Smith, a Maori researcher argues that research on Indigenous people
has had less of a positive impact on their lives than it has on the careers of non-
Indigenous researchers. She goes on to say:

The word itself, 'research', is probably one of the dirtiest words in the
indigenous world's vocabulary. When mentioned in many indigenous
contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile
that is knowing and distrustful (Smith 1999, 1).

Although we are mindful of the need to attend to the dilemmas of researching in
cultural contexts to which we do not belong, the construction of the binary opposite,
‘insider-research’ and ‘outsider-research’ can be problematic because it can fail to
take account of the complexities inherent in either category and the relationship
between them. Even those researchers who belong to the same ethnic or racial group
as their respondents can be outsiders in other ways, because of their gender, social
class or because of a multitude of other factors that intersect with culture and ethnicity
in complex ways. Identities, understood from a poststructuralist perspective are
complex and multifaceted, changeable and fluid. It is also possible to identify with
different ethnic groups at the same times, or as in the case of Bhabha’s notion of
hybridity (1994, 1991), to take up a position in a ‘third space’, a new and different
space where cultures come together to create a new way of being. Identification with
a particular ethnic group is not necessarily fixed and a constant state of being.
“Cultural identity … is a matter of “becoming” as well as of “being”. It belongs to the
future as much as to the past” (Hall 1990, 233). The complexity of classed, ethnic and
gendered identities means that our membership of the hegemonic ‘mainstream’, like
many other researchers, is not straightforward. There are some elements of our
research participants’ experiences that resonate with us on a personal level because
we, like many researchers, are “insiders and outsiders in different ways and in
different settings” (Shah 2004, 556). We are women of working class background,
and one of us, author one, identifies as an Australian of Italian and Scottish
background. In these ways, we share, to varying degrees, some of the experiences of
our research participants. However, we consider that we are more outsiders than we
are insiders to the social contexts we research. We are now middle-class, we are white
and our work as university academics positions us in relatively powerful ways.
Therefore, in order to guard against the problems inherent in researching the
experiences of ‘the other’, we have developed a critical, reflexive approach to our
work.

Critical research is best understood in the context of the empowerment
of individuals. Inquiry that aspires to the name critical must be
connected to an attempt to confront the injustice of a particular society
or sphere within that society (Kincheloe and McLaren 2000, 291).

We, like other critical researchers believe that through the adoption and consideration
of appropriate approaches and methodologies, research can, and should be, a catalyst
for change and empowerment (Thomas 2003). It has the potential to transform the lives of those who are members of marginalised communities by making visible their experiences and giving voice to those who are often silent or silenced. Our respective research projects highlight the teaching experiences of refugee teachers in Scotland and Indigenous teachers in Australia, both ethnic minority groups within the profession who experience obstacles in entrance to, and progression in their careers (Santoro & Reid 2006; REMIT 2003). However, we are conscious of the need to not assume that our research will be empowering for Indigenous or refugee teachers. Our views about what constitutes empowerment and who is in need of empowerment are shaped by our own classed, ethnic and gendered positionings and therefore not necessarily shared by our research participants whose lived experiences are vastly different from our own. We must ensure that we interrogate and make visible such assumptions.

In what follows, we discuss, with reference to our respective research studies, our mission to give voice and agency to our research participants as well as our attempts to develop research relationships of trust and respect that reduce the power imbalance between researchers and researched.

**Critical ethnographic research: using complex researcher-researched relationships as a research tool.**

In order to avoid the potentially exploitative effects of research into marginalised ethnic minorities, it is important that researchers reflect upon “the social processes that impinge upon and influence data” (Brewer 2000, 127). Reflexivity, well established within post-positivist approaches to ethnography “requires a critical attitude towards data, and the recognition of the influence on the research of such factors as the location of the setting, the sensitivity of the topic, power relations in the field and the nature of the social interaction between the researcher and the researched” (Brewer 2000, 127). The refugee teachers involved with the RITEs research project face many structural and institutional barriers to following their profession in Scotland. Conducting research with them must be undertaken sensitively and must not lead to false promises or unrealisable expectations as to how the researchers and their participation in the research will assist them in overcoming these barriers.

We are acutely aware of the need to put in place strategies and research practices that address the power imbalance between researcher and researched. Practices such as member checking, prolonged researcher time in the field, and the use of intensive semi-structured interviews are integral to, and well established within ethnographic research (Atkinson et al. 2001; Delamont 2002; Denzin 1997; Woods 1996). These practices contribute to the development of relationships of mutual trust because they are based on the premise that respect for research participants extends beyond superficial contact. One principle in particular that has been key to our research has been the involvement of members of the targeted research community as research collaborators. In this way, we have overcome some of the practical and ethical issues concerning researching ‘others’. In the case of author one’s research, two Indigenous researchers have been involved in the project since its inception. They are both former teachers with strong links to Indigenous teacher networks. One is currently working as a teacher educator in a university and the other is a senior officer in the
Department of Juvenile Justice where she is concerned with policy and practice in relation to young Indigenous offenders. They have worked with the team during the conceptualisation of the project, the preparation of the funding application, the development of the interview questions, recruitment, data collection and data analysis. The team has also co-authored journal articles and conference papers. The RITeS research team includes a refugee teacher who himself has a PhD and currently works as a teacher of English as an Additional Language in the bilingual unit of a large Glasgow secondary school. He has had an integral part in the development of the project, has assisted in the funding application, co-developed and responded to the pilot research questions and has given the team insight into the possible reasons why refugees might be resistant to being involved in research. Importantly, the local education authority supports his release from school to participate in the research project. Additionally, the research assistant employed by the RITeS research project is also a refugee teacher whose ability to empathise with respondents has resulted in them willingly participating in the research and providing rich and extensive interview data.

By including and consulting members of the community under research we are addressing research protocols relevant to our respective national research contexts. One of the 11 principles of research into Indigenous communities, as set out by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, asserts the importance of research partnerships with Indigenous people; “Indigenous researchers, individuals and communities should be involved in research as collaborators” (AIATSIS 2000). Similarly, the Scottish Association of Black Researchers (SABRE 2001) has produced an ethical code for research which asserts that the anti-racist researcher must challenge theoretical assumptions that are rooted in a historical legacy of racism by adopting frameworks that address institutional racism in research. The code emphasises the need for anti-racist research to be embedded in Social Justice and Human Rights concerns and requires the research to be explicit in its commitment to Anti-racism and Social Inclusion. Anti-racist research must be empowering and actively include black and minority ethnic peoples' perspectives. It must ensure that it does not pathologise, stereotype or exploit black and/or minority ethnic communities and must acknowledge the 'power-relations' between the 'researchers' and the 'researched'. Adherence to such research protocols as SABRE and AIATSIS ensures that those from the targeted research community are consulted. Such consultation can extend from scrutiny of the initial research proposals by the relevant community to the obligation of researchers to deliver progress reports to community members as well as reports of project findings. This means that research proposals to which minority ethnic people have input, are likely to be relevant to their concerns. Furthermore, knowledge about research methods and practices that have generally been the domain of white academics, can be passed on, as well as scrutinised for cultural inappropriateness.

For some of the reasons mentioned earlier in this paper, recruiting members of minority ethnic groups as research participants for projects conducted by majority ethnic researchers can be difficult, especially if there is little personal contact made by researchers in the recruitment process and if researchers are not known to potential participants. In the Australian project, the Indigenous co-researchers, made the initial contact with the Indigenous teachers, many of whom were members of their personal and professional networks. It was the co-researchers’ trust in the non-Indigenous researchers and in the value of the project that positioned the researchers as
trustworthy. The potential participants approached by the team were not only prepared to be interviewed by the non-Indigenous researchers, but were enormously generous with their time. Such a snowballing recruitment method was also used in the RITeS project where involved teachers reassured other refugee teachers that it was alright to talk to the team. For refugee teachers, their experience of interviews since arriving in the United Kingdom has been within the formal structures of British immigration legislation. Such interviews are a clear signifier of a particular power relationship which the RITeS research strives to overcome. Some of the respondents indicated their unwillingness to be audio recorded because their legal status as refugees, as opposed to asylum seekers, was still in doubt. The immensely personal nature of the stories all our respondents have been prepared to share with us as outsiders continues to amaze us.

Ethnographic research draws heavily on interview conversations as a way of obtaining rich data (Delamont 2002). In the case of the Australian project, in-depth semi-structured interviews with current and former teachers lasted at least two hours and were conducted in community centres, the interviewees’ home or places of work. In the longitudinal component of the study, 2-hour interviews with new graduates were conducted twice a year for 3 years. Interview questions for new graduates as well as former and current experienced teachers aimed to elicit chronological, experiential and evaluative accounts of the participants’ family, school, pre-service teacher education and working lives. These narratives form the basis of a set of case studies that focus on aspects of their working lives in schools, including their response to sanctioned curricula, policy, professional relationships with students, parents and colleagues, professional challenges, successes and disappointments. Additionally, a focus group consisting of eight volunteer participants was convened in order to follow up issues that emerged as significant across a number of the individual interviews, and to validate the emerging themes of the analysis through a collective member-checking process. In the RITeS project individual interviews were conducted with teachers from a range of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds and a variety of teaching experiences. In addition, conversations were held with those refugees who were working in classrooms in Scotland either as teachers, student-teachers or on work shadowing experiences. As with the Australian research, focus groups were held to validate the emerging themes from the interviews and conversations. The resultant data gives a picture of the similarities and differences between teaching in Scotland and the teachers’ countries of origin, in terms of both pedagogy and values.

In both our projects our co-researchers also had very important roles to play in the development of interview questions. They vetted our questions for cultural insensitivity and advised us about questions that would develop relationships of trust. In the Australian project for example, the non-Indigenous researchers learnt about the importance of prioritising, early in the interview, a question about the interviewee’s tribal connections and traditional land. In RITES, the co-researcher helped the team understand the complexity of teacher education systems across the world and the different languages used in teacher education and schools. He was able to bring his own experience to bear on eliciting responses when there was reticence on the part of the interviewees. This is another significant aspect of critical ethnographic research: the need for researchers to reveal something of themselves and their own lives and histories and is important for establishing rapport with interviewees. According to Carter, “…it is the gap in experience between interviewer and interviewee that creates
a space for respondents to describe and tease out meanings and assumptions that may otherwise remain unspoken” (Carter 2004, 348). In the Australian project the ‘gap in experience’ between Indigenous interviewees and the non-Indigenous interviewers was bridged by the non-Indigenous researchers offering their personal perspectives on the questions they were requiring the interviewees to answer. For example, author one spoke of her own experiences as a former teacher and of her experiences as the first, and only member of her family to receive a university degree. Such sharing of experiences helped reduce the power imbalance that interviewers often have in an interview situation.

Some of the Australian project’s interviews were conducted by the Indigenous co-researchers and the data generated through these insider interviews have provided an interesting point of comparison with the data generated through the interviews conducted by the non-Indigenous researchers. However, it was important, as a sign of commitment to the project, that the non-Indigenous researchers did most of the data collection, the majority of which involved car travel of many hundreds of kilometres for each interview. Rather than delegating the fieldwork to a research assistant, leaving it to the Indigenous co-researchers or conducting telephone interviews, the team hoped to avoid the research being seen as simply another example of “hit and run” research (Vincent & Warren 2001, 51) by white researchers unprepared, or unable to put the time into setting up and conducting fieldwork. In the RITeS research the only data collector is the paid research assistant. This is not a case of delegation, but a belief that he is the best person to both collect and analyse the data with assistance from the team of academics and the assistance of another refugee teacher.

The majority of the Australian project’s data have been analysed through a collaborative process of intercultural dialogue between members of the research team. The team has interrogated and debated the data together, drawing on each member’s personal, professional and historical experience, including a range of insider/outside perspectives. Such collaborative cross-cultural dialogue has supported both the work of critical reflection on our own positioning and biases as researchers and the articulation of a number of summary statements about the nature of the school experience of Indigenous teachers and students that were presented to the focus group for confirmation. In Scotland the data analysis is just beginning and involves the refugee teachers in helping the team understand what to look for in the data. As with the Australian project, the analysis benefits from collaborative cross-cultural dialogue, both within the team and among the focus group.

Concluding Remarks

Given that in many parts of the world, schooling systems and classrooms are characterised by cultural diversity and that there is significant research conducted in these contexts, it is important for researchers to be aware of the complexities and challenges of researching ‘the other’. One possible solution to the ethical and practical difficulties discussed earlier in this paper is to leave such research to those from the ethnic group under study. It might be argued that in this way the research will be controlled by researchers who understand the context best and who can access the field and collect data more easily. However, as Selby claims, “There is no seamless fit of researcher to researched” (Selby 2004, 153). Even when each shares the same
culture, there may be other factors including age, social class and gender differences between researched and researcher that can impact on the ability of each to establish effective relationships and/or to interpret or communicate data in resonance. Increasingly, ethnic minority researchers are writing about the tensions of insider research and the problems of a simplistic insider-outsider binary that does not take into account the complexities of identities that straddle insider-outsider boundaries (eg. Merriam et al. 2001; Shah 2004). Bishop, a New Zealand Maori researcher suggests that for reasons of social responsibility, research into Maori should not be conducted exclusively by Maori. He writes, “…for Pakeha [white] researchers to leave it all to the Maori people is to abrogate their responsibilities as Treaty partners” (in Haig-Brown 2001, 20).

Olesen, drawing on the work of Scheperson-Hughe’s notion of the ‘cultural self’, asserts that what ‘every researcher takes into his or her work is no longer a troublesome element to be eradicated or controlled but rather a set of resources’ (2003, 355). Such ‘resources’, including a researcher’s cultural values and beliefs, while possibly different from those of his/her targeted research group, constitute a set of different and potentially rich perspectives from which to draw. However, the ways in which researchers’ positionings shape their research work needs to be interrogated and to be made explicit. “The way in which we produce stories is undeniably influenced by our own gaze, our standpoint, the history we bring to a research moment” (Nelson and Gould 2005, 329). If researchers do not acknowledge that their standpoints and histories are mediated through culture and ethnic belongings, there is the risk that the knowledge generated through research into the ‘ethnic other’ will be simply another form of colonisation. Kincheloe and McLaren argue that

all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are social and historically constituted; […] that certain groups in any society are privileged over others and, […] that mainstream research practices are generally, although most often unwittingly, implicated in the reproductions of systems of class, race and gender oppression (2000, 290).

The difficulties presented by research into ‘the other’ are not insurmountable. Critical ethnography, while not the only solution to the dilemmas faced by researchers in multiethnic contexts, is one way of engaging in reflective and respectful research practices. Not only do critical ethnographic research approaches attend to issues of power within research relationships and how they shape data collection and analysis, such an approach usually involves researcher engagement in the field for extended periods of time and the development of on-going relationships with participants. Furthermore, research protocols such as those developed by AIATSIS and SABRE that stipulate the inclusion of members of the targeted research group into research teams, have significantly assisted us in our goal to be reflective researchers. Through debate, discussion and collaborative data analysis with co-researchers who are members of the community under investigation, we have had opportunities to hear, with greater clarity, the voices of those we seek to understand. In research contexts where protocols such as those developed by SABRE and AIATSIS do not exist, they need to be developed with the relevant communities, and where they do exist, they need to be highlighted to researchers. However, as communities and priorities change, such protocols need to be open to ongoing interrogation and review.
There is a need for researchers interested in investigating multiethnic contexts to prioritise the development of knowledge in regard appropriate methodologies and ways of working. Learning how to conduct respectful, reflective and meaningful research is an ongoing project and one that will contribute to intercultural dialogue in educational and other research communities.

References:


SABRE (Scottish Association of Black Researchers)

http://www.sabreuk.org/pages/ethical_code/index.html


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i The project, *Indigenous teachers: Understanding their Professional Experiences and Career Pathways* (Santoro, N.; Reid, J.; McConaghy, C., with Crawford, L. and Simpson, L.) is funded by the Australian Research Council Discovery Grant Program (2004-2007). For further details about the project’s research design and findings see, Santoro & Reid 2006; Reid & Santoro 2006.

ii The Refugees Into Teaching in Scotland (RiTëS) Research project is funded by the West of Scotland Wider Access Forum, (2006-2008).