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COMMONALITY, DIFFERENCE AND THE DYNAMICS OF DISCLOSURE IN IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWING

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Abstract The last few decades have witnessed a notable growth in literature addressing the politics and ethics of social research. Much of this literature has stressed *difference* between the researcher and the interviewee, and has addressed the importance of sensitising researchers to the difficulties and dilemmas encountered in in-depth interviewing crossing sex, class, and race boundaries. We argue that an examination of the *cultural identities* of the researcher and the interviewee, and how they may impact upon the interview process, needs further exploration. As two independent researchers of Chinese young people in Britain, we found that our interview experiences as mixed-descent Chinese-English and Korean-American researchers 'positioned' us in terms of both commonality *and* difference *vis-à-vis* our interviewees. More attention needs to be given to how assumptions made by interviewees regarding the cultural identity of the researcher shapes interviewees' accounts. Interviewees could claim either commonality or difference with us, on the basis of gender, language, physical appearance and personal relationships.

Key words: cultural identity, extended interviews, commonality, difference, disclosure, multiple identifications.

Introduction

The last few decades have witnessed a notable growth in literature addressing the politics and ethics of social research. Much of this literature has addressed the importance of sensitising researchers to the difficulties and dilemmas encountered in social research crossing sex, class, and race boundaries. There has been growing attention to the actual 'doing' of research, particularly open-ended, in-depth interviews.

Feminist researchers have contested the masculinist 'objectivity' regarding knowledge claims, and have argued for research relationships which are more egalitarian (Oakley 1981; Duelli Klein 1983; Finch 1984; Smith 1987; Stanley and Wise 1993). In addition, feminists have insisted upon the need to address women's lives in terms of their personal lived experiences. As such, Stanley and Wise argue 'for the symbiotic relationship between ontology and epistemology' (1993:228): denying that the binaries of reason and emotion and subjectivity and objectivity are *binaries* at all. . . .' Awareness of how 'personal reflexivity' shapes the researcher's approach to and interpretation of interviews, has grown (Stacey 1988; Williams 1993; see also the special issue on 'Auto/biography' in *Sociology* 1993).

While gender has been the primary basis for feminist critiques of epistemological and methodological truisms, there has been a growing emphasis upon how racial and ethnic difference shape the relationships between the researcher and researched, in light of black analysts' criticisms that issues of 'race' have been neglected by white researchers, and that findings by white researchers may not apply to ethnic minority groups, or may misrepresent them (Carby 1982; Phoenix 1988; Collins 1990).

In recent years, some white, middle-class feminists have addressed the difficulties and issues surrounding white researchers' relationships with black interviewees, in terms of access to respondents, potential disjunctures of understanding and interpretation, and issues of power (Walton 1986; Edwards 1990; Reissman 1991). For instance, Cannon, Higginbotham and Leung (1991) reported that more 'labor-intensive' methods of recruitment, such as word-of-mouth and direct introductions, were required in recruiting black women, in comparison with white women. This finding was also confirmed by Edwards (1990), who found that a white woman researcher interviewing Afro-Caribbean women might engender their suspicion. In carrying out these interviews, Edwards also had concerns about her interpretation of black women's lives as a white female researcher:

> I worried that my assumptions about Black women's family lifestyles and cultural practices might be based on false understandings. I also worried (as it turns out with good reason) that Black women would not relate to me woman-to-woman, but as Black person to white person, and that this would affect the information I received from them. (1990:483)

Echoing similar concerns, some analysts such as Walton (1986) actually suggest that white researchers should not, in spite of the best of intentions, interview black people, given the myriad of pitfalls. Unlike the experiences of white female researchers interviewing white females, in which the interviewees were reportedly responsive and open to talking about themselves (Oakley 1981; Finch 1984), particularly if interviewees were also middle-class (Brannen 1988), the racial and ethnic difference between Edwards and the Afro-Caribbean women she interviewed tended to alternate the 'woman-to-woman' bond between them.

In the case of white people interviewing black people, difference in 'race' between the researcher and the interviewee is often perceived visually, based upon their respective physical attributes, most typically skin colour. In addition, black–white differences in Britain, as well as in many other societies, are also understood and experienced in terms of notable differences in power and privilege between the two groups.

One of the key difficulties of the literature on research involving racial and ethnic difference is that racialised categories applied to the researcher and the researched are conceptualised as too rigid and homogeneous. 'Black', juxtaposed to 'white', does not easily accommodate individuals who are of

mixed descent, or who are bi-cultural, and suggests too unitary an experience of ethnic minority status. In addition, it is important to note that the term 'black' has not usually been applied to some ethnic minority groups such as the Chinese in Britain. Researchers have tended to reserve the term 'black' for individuals of Afro-Caribbean and Asian descent, but the usage of the term 'black' has become an increasingly debated issue (see Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1983; Modood 1994; Song 1995).

Many ethnographic studies are also premised upon the notion of difference – ethnic and cultural – between the researcher and the researched. In most literature about ethnographic research, the researcher is seen as an 'outsider' to the group studied (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983; Clifford and Marcus 1986). Much sociological debate has revolved around the epistemological and methodological implications of occupying an 'insider' or 'outsider' position as a researcher (Merton 1972).[1] While the new reflexive anthropology (Clifford and Marcus 1986) has given valuable attention to the stylistic tropes and textual artifices by which such positions are constructed, the theoretical sophistication has not been matched by an integration of these insights into research practice. Thus the dual categories of 'black/white', as well as 'insider/outsider', have not only tended to obscure the diversity of experiences and viewpoints between and within various groups, but these categories have also obscured the diversity of experiences which can occur between the researcher and the researched.

Surprisingly little attention has been given to how the *cultural identities* of researchers may shape the research situations of ethnic minority researchers interviewing persons of the same or partially shared racial and/or ethnic background (see Chung 1985; Mama 1987). Recent debates within cultural studies on the hybridity and multiplicity of identities (Bhabha 1990; Hall 1988, 1991) have remained frustratingly disconnected from epistemological and methodological concerns. We hope to concretise these suggestive, but often abstract, formulations in examining in-depth interviewing.

This article has evolved out of some common concerns and experiences we had as two independent researchers on the lives of young Chinese people in Britain. As a male researcher of Chinese and British descent (David) and a female Korean–American researcher (Miri), we were struck by a number of common themes and issues which arose for us in our respective research projects. We both felt that existing scholarships on research methodology did not adequately address our own research experiences.

Dichotomised rubrics such as 'black/white' or 'insider/outsider' are inadequate to capture the complex and multi-faceted experiences of some researchers, such as ourselves, who find themselves neither total 'insiders' nor 'outsiders' in relation to the individuals they interview. As a result, our respective positionings *vis-à-vis* our Chinese interviewees, were not, *a priori*, readily apparent or defined. We would suggest that the unfolding of the researcher's and the interviewee's cultural identities is central to the ways in

which the researcher and researched position themselves in relation to the 'other'.

What issues arise, and what difficulties and/or advantages are there for the researcher who shares some racial and/or ethnic commonality with the interviewee? Our own uncertainty about how much we had in common with interviewees reflected the dearth of literature on interviewing Chinese young people in Britain. These questions tend to be omitted in the literature on 'doing' research. We argue that these research situations cannot be subsumed within literature addressing notions of racial and/or ethnic 'difference', as in literature by white researchers interviewing black interviewees. In this article, we aim to demonstrate how complex positionings occur throughout the interview process, by providing some examples of our respective interview experiences. We use the term 'positionings' to suggest the potentially unstable and shifting nature of the relationship between the researcher and the interviewee where they share some racial and/or ethnic commonality.

Chinese Young Peoples' Cultural Identity – David Parker

My study involved extensive interviews with fifty-four young Chinese people throughout Britain, and addressed their life experiences and senses of cultural identity (Parker 1994, 1995). Interviewees were reached in the main through a self-completion postal questionnaire; those who consented on the form were contacted and then interviewed face to face. Many people received survey forms from me in person in the Chinatown areas of Britain. Connecting my visual appearance to my English surname usually enabled respondents to guess in advance that I was of dual heritage. However, others wrote back, asking, 'Are you Chinese, or what?' Where my racial identity was not apparent, it unfolded in the research process itself, often through letters.

One of my most immediate experiences with the interviewees was that young Chinese people who strongly defined themselves as Chinese, often did so in contrast to me. This also occurred more indirectly through revealing their perception of what a part-Chinese person's identity was – 'mixed up' or a 'problem'. One person who knew of my dual heritage background said, 'If you say your identity is neither one nor the other, you will find there is a bit of a lack', and later in the discussion looked me piercingly in the face and stated: 'If one hasn't got his or her own cultural identity, he or she will feel really lost one day in the future, if not yet . . .' Clearly, my assumed confusion and ambivalence regarding my cultural identity was being used to buttress the interviewee's strength in being Chinese.

A number of young women indicated that they would be concerned if their children married someone English: 'I'm worried that my kid would have identity problems and not know who they were'. When I mildly challenged

some of these perceptions, respondents felt uneasy and altered their formulations. For example, a young man stated. 'I want to be pure Chinese,' and when I questioned what he meant, he demurred: 'Pure sounds a bit Nazi. . . .' He retreated from a stated desire for racial purity to wanting to be a more well-rounded Chinese person.

Those with strongly held Chinese identities were also keen to establish 'how Chinese are you?', 'can you speak Chinese?', or 'was it your father or your mother who's Chinese?'. I was never asked, 'was your father or your mother English?'. It was usually made clear that I had been taken as very English and that I was being talked to as if I was an English person.

However, there were also several ways in which commonalities with me were claimed by those with whom I was talking. One Chinese woman, not knowing I had one English and one Chinese parent, wrote to me, describing her dissatisfaction with being Chinese; she wished she was half English/half Chinese. On being informed in my reply that I was of mixed descent, she used that very fact to assume that I'd understand her sense of unease about being Chinese in Britain – 'So you *do* know how I feel then!' Thus, whereas those with strong Chinese identities attributed a sense of confusion to persons of mixed descent and wanted to distinguish themselves from me on those grounds, those with more mixed feelings saw it as a basis for greater mutual understanding.

Experiences of commonality were assumed by those who, like myself, had grown up in particular urban areas of Britain and experienced racial harassment. In one of the letters mentioned earlier, I related how I'd recently had a car driven at me on a pavement by a gang of white youths; this elicited a recollection of an incident by a young woman in her reply:

> I remember now, some customer skitted at me real bad in the shop and I ran upstairs and cried my eyes out and ripped off all my Tom Cruise posters, everything that had white skin.

Her recollection of this incident ended with a remark drawing both of us together: 'When things like that happen, I get really bitter, but I've kind of learnt how to deal with it, and I'm not afraid to express myself'.

Therefore, the positioning of me as someone 'totally English', particularly by those anxious to assert their sense of being Chinese, could be suspended when shared experiences of discrimination were being discussed. When one woman explicitly stated she regarded me as English, I replied, 'But what about when you said you hated the English?' Her response was, 'I suppose I thought you were on my side then. . . .' So when racial discrimination was the subject matter, shared experience could override attributions of me having a fixed English identity.

This claiming of commonality could be qualified, however. Chi Wai disliked her parents calling him half Chinese: 'I suppose when someone calls you half *English* you feel pretty defensive, don't you?' Again a presumption is being

made – that whereas Chi Wai's desired identity is Chinese, mine is English. Whilst seeking a parallel recognition from me in terms of feeling a sense of defensiveness, he did so in a way that marked him off as Chinese and me as English. This feeling of defensiveness and guilt about 'not being Chinese enough' was a recurrent feature in the interviews. Those talking with me often made sense of their own identities by laying bare their assumptions about mine. Thus Yeu Lai, increasingly exasperated by my questioning, spoke strongly: 'Look, people like us, you and me we've got a problem . . . of guilt, of admitting that we're English and British. That's why we're confused.' Once more, my 'confusion' was assumed!

What my research demonstrated was the complexity of these identifications and disidentifications; so many dimensions of sameness and difference can be operating at any given moment. And where two people may claim commonality on one dimension, they may fall apart on another.

The question of being part-Chinese interviewing other part-Chinese people added a further layer of complexity. I interviewed six other people with one Chinese and one English parent. To differing degrees, there were extra dimensions and points of recognition in relation to the other discussions. For example, we found that we all had difficult and isolated experiences growing up at school, and we cited the lack of understanding our parents had of issues of identity and racism.

The contact that I had with other part-Chinese people in my research profoundly affected my conceptualisation of identity formation. These shared experiences encouraged me to venture more of my *own* experiences in a way that I did not with respondents who were not of dual heritage. The result was less stilted exchanges and telling remembrances of falling outside of the prevalent black/white, Chinese/non-Chinese categorisation systems. A number of the part-Chinese people I interviewed summarised their sense of identity in terms exactly corresponding to the sort of vocabulary for which I had been struggling. More importantly, these connections were not presumed, in the way others had been, which ascribed 'confusion' and 'guilt' to me.

'Helping Out' in Chinese Take-away Businesses – Miri Song

My research examined the labor participation of young people in Chinese take-away businesses in Britain, and focused upon their often ambivalent experiences of 'helping out' (Song 1994). I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with Chinese young people (predominantly in their early-mid 20s) in twenty-five families, most of whom resided in the Greater London area.

The relationships which developed between me and interviewees were characterised by a persistent tension between feelings of commonality and of difference regarding our cultural identities, in spite of the fact that my research did not directly focus upon issues of cultural identity. I had not

anticipated the extent to which interviewees' assumptions and perceptions of me and my cultural identity, would shape the course of interviews. Like David, I found myself in situations where interviewees either openly or indirectly claimed points of commonality or difference in relation to me, based upon both known or presumed information about me and my life experiences. Rather than initiating claims of commonality or difference with the interviewees, I found myself having to decide if and how I would respond to these positionings of me by interviewees.

When I started my field work, I did claim some commonality as a strategy for access. As someone of Korean heritage, who had been raised in the U.S., I had anticipated that my being Korean-American, rather than Chinese, would limit access to Chinese families; in fact, I had considerable difficulty in recruiting, primarily due to concerns around privacy and trust. When I approached people about participating in the study, I was often asked why I wanted to study Chinese families in Britain. Although my own family had been privileged as immigrants, I spoke of my own experiences growing up in the U.S., where I felt some kinship with other East Asian groups, in terms of a Pan-Asian identity (Yen 1992).

My being Korean-American, as opposed to Chinese, in Britain, was often the source of some initial bemusement. Typically, my first contact with interviewees was by telephone. The interviewees I called had been contacted via Chinese social service workers and community workers, or via snow-ball sampling. The interviewees had been told that I was of Korean heritage by my Chinese contacts. Many of the interviewees seemed to experience a kind of cognitive dissonance upon speaking to me for the first time: a number of people expressed surprise that I *sounded* completely American (with 'no accent'), although I was of Korean heritage. It was the first indication that some interviewees did not know what to expect, and were uncertain about how to 'place' me (Edwards 1990). While Edwards found that 'the black women [she interviewed] were not willing to do the placing for me in any other way than race' (1990:486), there was no equivalent market of difference between me and the Chinese interviewees which was as immediately apparent, or as emotionally 'loaded' as the 'race' difference.

Upon meeting me in person, my physical appearance tended to engender claims of commonality on the part of interviewees. As a Korean-American, I am basically indistinguishable from the Chinese in Britain, and a number of interviewees remarked that I looked Chinese. Furthermore, my surname, 'Song', is also a Chinese surname, and it prompted jokes about a Chinese ancestor in my family tree.

My being Korean-American, and what that *meant* to the interviewees, was often the basis for assumptions of both commonality and difference with me throughout the interview process. A number of interviewees noted some common aspects of Korean and Chinese cultures. For instance, Foon claimed commonality with me on the basis of assumed cultural similarities: 'It's family,

you know? Chinese and Korean families expect a lot from the children; it's not like English families, where they're like friends, and they have conversations at the dinner table, you know?' Thus not only did Foon establish common ground between us, but he did this by contrasting us, together, with white English families. Although Foon claimed commonality on this point, he later pointed to difference between us, by articulating his exasperation at my inability, ultimately, to know what his life had been like – I was not a Chinese person who had grown up in a take-away.

In another interview, my being Korean-American meant that I was seen as different from the interviewee. I was told by Keryee that she felt more comfortable talking to me about her life in the take-away because I was Korean-American: 'If a Chinese customer comes into the shop, but it's pretty rare, than we all panic, like, a relative comes, and we have to be on our best behavior or something, you know?' Keryee did not worry about me scrutinising her family's shop or food because I wasn't Chinese, and I hadn't experienced life in a take-away. Perhaps I was a 'safe' person to talk to because I was neither 'the same (Chinese)' nor totally different (e.g white).

Claims of commonality or difference by interviewees, therefore, did not necessarily shape the interview process in predictable or systematic ways; such claims were very much contingent upon each moment in each interview. An exception to this was that experiences of racism and discrimination were always assumed to be a key point of commonality between the interviewees and me, and this recognition of commonality was important in establishing trust between us.

Interviewees' assumptions about my cultural identity were central in shaping what respondents chose to disclose to me, as well as the manner in which interviewees disclosed information about themselves. Throughout the interviews, it often seemed that the interviewees and I were 'circling' each other on certain aspects of our cultural identities – issues which were related to our discussions about working with one's family in a Chinese take-away. This 'circling' was due to concerns about disclosing and justifying certain markers of cultural identity. It seemed that both interviewees and I were concerned about being judged by the other: how Korean or Chinese, as opposed to American or British, were we perceived to be? Feelings of defensiveness or nervousness were engendered by fears that we were seen as not Korean or Chinese 'enough'. Two markers of cultural identity that seemed to require disclosure and justification were our language abilities and our intimate relationships with partners and friends.

The interviews were conducted in English, for I speak no Cantonese or Hakka, and some of the interviewees spoke only English. In the course of interviews, I asked interviewees which language they used with their families. Interviewees who spoke little or no Cantonese or Hakka often seemed embarrassed about this. In turn, I was almost always asked if I could speak Korean. When interviewees were told that my Korean was rather limited, and

that English was my first language, those who spoke little or no Cantonese seemed to be comforted by this fact, while I feared disapproval from interviewees who were fluently bilingual. Language fluency, as a marker of cultural identity, seemed to provide a base-line of sorts by which interviewees and I compared ourselves.

Another contentious marker of cultural identity was people's intimate relationships with others. As with not being able to speak one's 'mother' tongue, having relationships with individuals who were not Chinese, or Korean, was assumed to indicate a taboo 'defection'. There were points in a number of interviews when the issue of interviewees' personal relationships was raised – for instance, the difficulty of maintaining personal relationships, given work commitments to the take-away. Some interviewees seemed reluctant and/or uncomfortable about discussing this issue (which I did not specifically query them about), not only, presumably, because it was personal, but because interviewees did not know how I might feel about what was revealed.

In a few interviews, I was either directly or indirectly asked about my own personal life, before they spoke of their own. For instance, Lisa hinted strongly that there were parts of her life which her family know nothing about; I immediately guessed that she was referring to a relationship she had with someone who was not Chinese. Although she did not explicitly ask me about my own personal life, it was implicit that she wanted to know, and that she would not have discussed this issue without knowing 'where I stood'.

One way I was able to encourage disclosure was by disclosing information about myself first. Not only did I feel I should share some personal information with her, if she was interested, but I also hoped that my disclosure would encourage a more open interview with her. Throughout the interviews, I was sized up; knowledge (or assumptions) about me provided a yardstick of sorts to gauge what was 'safe' to disclose.

Toward Multiple Positionings and Identifications

Although we were positioned in different ways by our Chinese interviewees, we encountered a number of similar experiences throughout our interviews. For us, not only difference, but aspects of commonality, were key in shaping our relationships with our interviewees. Binaries such as 'black/white' and 'insider/outsider' often put too much emphasis upon difference, rather than on partial and simultaneous commonality and difference between the researcher and the interviewee. Such oppositional rubrics are based upon notions of *fixed* identities which are based upon readily identifiable and socially recognised points of difference. Unlike the situation between a white researcher and black interviewee, where racial difference is immediately

recognised as the basis for difference, our relationships with interviewees were much more ambiguous.

First, this was because the perception of each other's cultural identities developed, over time, in the interviews. We, as researchers, as well as our interviewees, had to disclose to each other in the course of the research process, from the first points of contact, via letters, telephone, direct introduction, to the extended interviews themselves. Various markers of cultural identity, such as language fluency and accent, physical appearance, and personal relationships, were used by interviewees in claiming either commonality or difference in relation to us.

Secondly, the positionings between the researcher and the interviewee were often unstable and required revising, as the process of disclosure and justification gradually revealed more information about ourselves. Interviewees could distance themselves from us on one dimension and yet seek commonality on another dimension, and vice-versa. As a result, there tended to be multiple positionings throughout the course of an interview.

Anthropologists have tended to examine ethnicity and ethnic identification in terms of a social boundary system. According to Wallman:

> Ethnicity is most usefully described as a reaction occurring where two sets of people, or individual members of two set of people, come into contact or confrontation with each other. It is a *felt* boundary between them which involves both difference, and the meaning put upon difference (1978:202).

Wallman further notes that two people may not put 'the line of difference' between them in the same place (1978:212). We would argue that while the *perception* of difference and/or commonality often occurs along these markers of cultural identity, the implications and effects of perceived differences and/or commonalities are somewhat variable and unpredictable in shaping each interview encounter.

Both of us were in situations where the interviewees claimed difference or commonality in relation to us, the researchers: For instance, there were some instances in which interviewees claimed commonality which Miri, based upon assumed similarities between Chinese and Korean cultures, or difference, based upon perceptions that Miri was more 'Western' than the interviewee. David was attributed both difference (when seen as English) and commonality (when 'confusion' was assumed to be shared) by some interviewees in relation to themselves. A commonality which was consistently claimed by our respective interviewees was that of experiences relating to racism and discrimination. This point of commonality had a consistently 'positive' effect in terms of establishing a sense of trust and understanding in our interviews. In addition, it was a point of commonality which was mutually shared and recognised by both the interviewee and the researcher.

Aside from the positive effect of a common recognition of racism upon the research relationship, attributions of difference or commonality by inter-

viewees did not consistently or predictably result in either 'good' or 'bad' effects, in terms of the richness or 'validity' of the interviewees' accounts *per se*. For instance, interviewees' accounts which were premised upon difference in the research relationship could be just as revealing as accounts premised upon a point of commonality.

Interviewees' attributions of difference or commonality, in relation to the researcher, however, could affect what they chose to reveal to us, as well as the manner in which they did so: for instance, interviewees who perceived commonality on one or more points may have felt 'safer' about disclosing their thoughts or feelings than those who perceived points of difference; the latter were more likely to engage in 'circling' around disclosure. On the other hand, some interviewees seemed emboldened in speaking about themselves, when they claimed difference in the research relationship – particularly if the interviewees occupied the 'moral high ground' of a strong sense of Chinese identity. For example, David often found interviewees with a strong sense of Chinese identity confidently defining themselves in contrast to him.

In addition to attributions of commonality and difference, based upon perceptions of cultural identity, two other factors structured our interviews in ways we feel are important: gender and language. Gender was not just a perceived and relative 'line of difference' between the researcher and the interviewee, but an incontrovertible reality. Both of us experienced certain barriers in our cross-gender interviews (McKee and O'Brien 1983).

In Miri's case, gender seemed to be prominent in the interviews, where she and interviewees 'circled' each other regarding sensitive issues, such as one's personal relationships. In contrast to female interviewees like 'Lisa', who confided in Miri about her English boyfriend, after Miri spoke of her own personal life, few male interviewees spoke to Miri about their personal lives, although when they did refer to partners, they almost always made clear that they were Chinese. This seemed to point, again, to our awareness of taboos about inter-racial relationships and pressures not to 'defect' from one's own ethnic group. Both the male interviewees and her were more reluctant to discuss personal relationships, for there was a heightened sense of 'boundary-keeping' in cross-gender interviews. Thus gender symmetry enabled the disclosing of highly sensitive personal information between Miri and female interviewees.

David found that gender difference limited claims to commonality, even with other part-Chinese interviewees, with whom he felt more comfortable. For instance, one woman who connected her bi-sexuality to being of mixed descent explicitly pointed to the limitations of his being male: 'There are certain questions a woman would ask that you don't'. Thus where David might have expected the closest sharing of perspectives, based upon both he and an interviewee being part Chinese, gender difference structured the discussions, problematising any notion of a wholly shared part-Chinese perspective.

The choice of language also structured the interview process. Both of us conducted the interviews in English. Chinese interviewees whose second language was English, were bound to feel more constrained and less comfortable in expressing themselves throughout the interviews. Furthermore, it underlined the fact that the interviews were conducted on the researcher's terms, not theirs (on the use of interpreters see Edwards 1993). The fact that these interviews were conducted in English were also significant in ways we can only speculate about: if David had spoken Cantonese with the interviewees, would he have encountered the implication by some that he was not really Chinese? If Miri had spoken English with an English, as opposed to an American accent, how might that have affected interviewees' perceptions of her, if at all?

Disclosure and Power in the Research Relationship

Although, in theory, both the researcher and the interviewee engage in the construction and the collapse of social boundaries during interviews, we have emphasised the ways in which we were positioned by interviewees in terms of our perceived cultural identities. As a result, not only was the relationship between the researcher and the interviewee unstable, but it was also often imbued with ambivalent feelings. This was particularly the case when we, as researchers, found ourselves positioned by interviewees, either implicitly or explicitly, in ways we found objectionable.

Traditional caveats about reactivity in the interview relationship have focused upon the fact that interviewees' accounts are subject to social desirability bias – that they will say what they think the interviewer would approve of. As Jane Ribbens notes, there are often contradictory injunctions about how open researchers should be about themselves in the course of extended interviewing:

> It does seem to me that to talk about yourself completely openly in an interview situation might significantly shift what is said to you, in fairly unpredictable ways. We need more work on the various advantages and disadvantages of such different approaches. Perhaps what we should be sensitive to, is to take our cue from the person being interviewed (1989:584).

We both had interview experiences in which many interviewees were active in eliciting information about us. There were, indeed, many 'cues' to reveal ourselves, ranging from calculatedly provocative remarks, direct questions, and hinted questions. On fraught issues surrounding cultural identity, we felt it was incumbent upon us to disclose information about ourselves when we were invited to do so. Furthermore, talking about ourselves (in response to attributions of our cultural identities) sometimes took on a personal importance independent of the research.

David seemed to encounter more explicit attributions of cultural identity

than Miri did. This may have been partly due to the fact that David's research was centrally about issues of cultural identity, while Miri's was not. However, whether or not the substantive area of research concerns issues of cultural identity, perceptions of cultural identity are bound to shape all research relationships where the researcher and the interviewee share the same or partially shared racial and/or ethnic background.

We sometimes challenged attributions of commonality or difference in interviews. Aside from the fact that doing so potentially illuminated the substantive object of discussion, challenging positionings of ourselves was also motivated in a purely personal way. Both of us were at points directly or indirectly positioned in ways which we found objectionable and/or hurtful (most typically, implications that we were not sufficiently Chinese or Korean, by virtue of our appearance/language (dis)ability/personal relationships). Of course, it is possible that some of our interviewees objected to what they perceived to be mistaken and objectionable attributions of them by us.

By stressing how we have been positioned by interviewees in the interview process, we do not mean to characterise our participation in these interviews as one in which our power and privilege as researchers is actually undercut.

The vulnerability of interviewees to researchers' objectification of them has rightly received attention (Wise 1987). The work of Wendy Holloway (1989) and Amina Mama (1987) on gender and black subjectivities, respectively, have pointed to the importance of the mobilisations of defences against anxiety in the construction of people's sense of who they are. However, interviewees who are of the same ethnicity or 'race' as the researcher are not necessarily less vulnerable to objectification by the researcher than in situations where they are of different ethnicities and 'race'. For instance, perceptions of cultural identity can provide a different set of criteria along which objectification may take place.

When Stanley and Wise suggest that a researcher 'constructs a viewpoint, a point of view that is both a construction or version and is necessarily partial in its understandings,' (1993:7) they do not give enough emphasis to how researchers may react to how interviewees have positioned them, or to how the responses of interviewees can radically shift that version. We would argue that more attention needs to be paid to how researchers themselves may be actively constructed and perceived by interviewees. Furthermore, researchers may feel, for various reasons, that they want to respond to positionings of themselves, and that this is an integral part of any interview dynamic. Responding to interviewees' positionings, as researchers, is likely to be more difficult and fraught in research relationships where researchers feel and are seen to be more powerful and 'different', in comparison with interviewees.

Conclusion

In our research experiences with young Chinese people, we were both

surprised by the extent to which our own cultural identities as researchers were either directly or indirectly questioned or commented upon by respondents. More attention should be given to how assumptions made by interviewees regarding the cultural identity of the researcher is a crucial factor in shaping the interview process. Such assumptions shaped interviewees' accounts in that: interviewees may withhold or disclose certain kinds of information, depending upon their assumptions of the researcher; interviewees might describe aspects of their lives and their identities in terms which compare themselves to assumptions about the researcher.

Markers of cultural identity, such as language fluency, physical appearance, and one's personal relationships, can be the bases for claims of either commonality or difference. In addition, gender and the language in which the interview is conducted, are important in structuring not only what may be revealed in interviewees' accounts, but also the way in which information is revealed. We would argue that *multiple* positionings and (dis)identifications, which shift during the interview process, rather than a unitary sense of identity, occur in the course of an interview. It is only through the illustration of how identifications and dis-identifications actually occur in specific moments of interviews, that some of the debates about cultural identity and the research process can move ahead.

Recent feminist and ethnographic literature on the ethics and politics of social research needs to be brought into dialogue with the emerging literature on new formations of cultural identity. The partial and unfixed modalities of identification shown to be operating in our research experiences add weight to the formulations of authors such as Bhabha (1990) and Haraway (1991), and may help our understanding of 'unclosed' identities more generally. The processes through which multiple positionings and identifications are ascribed, disclosed, and contested, need further examination in many other kinds of research relationships involving extended interviews.

Note

1. For instance, feminist standpoint epistemologists have argued that certain marginalised groups in society have special insight into situations where 'insiders' may not (Harding 1987; Collins 1990).

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