Interviewing Mothers and Daughters: Reflecting on the Role of the 'Insider'

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Introduction

Having arrived in the UK as a five-year-old immigrant child, and vividly remembering those early days when everything for me was very different and alienating, formed one of the inspirations for my study on the influence of immigration on families. The influence of my mother, the person central to my care and upbringing, was the core reason for my study on immigrant South Asian families and the way that mother and daughter roles evolve. Mothers are often key role models, as well as being a critical source of support and reassurance, for their children.

The vastly differing experiences of my mother, an eighty-four-year-old first-generation immigrant, compared to my third-generation nineteen-year-old daughter, as well as my own intermediary position as both second-generation mother, and daughter, led me to reflect on how the categories and expectations of immigrant South Asian motherhood and daughterhood have shifted over this tripartite generational evolution. My research question attempts to explore the changes in the experiences and lives of mothers and daughters from South Asia over three generations.

I have conducted the first set of interviews for my study. I will discuss reflections from these interviews, specifically examining my role as an 'insider'. This reflection has allowed me to identify the benefits of an insider role in qualitative research interviews and how the lived experience of an insider can be a useful method for oral history interviews.

Study background

In-depth narrative interviews were chosen as the main research methods to tease out the way immigration is intertwined with the life stories of mothers and daughters. The interviews allowed me to understand how the lives of these women have changed over the generations and unravel the personal histories of South Asian Women (SAW) as mothers and daughters. For the first generation of women, I examined how immigration and the culture and religion in which the women were brought up influenced their roles as mothers. The second

generation of women are the core group for the research as they have both the experience of being both mothered and mothering. The third generation of women are those who have very limited experience of mothering or are not mothers themselves but have performed the role of daughter and granddaughter. The intergenerational aspect of the study has allowed me to examine themes of mothering relationships and being mothered. This requires analysis of what values are taught and what is passed onto the next generation, what religion and cultural ideas are transmitted onto the next generation and how this differs for the various generations. The focus of the first phase of interviews was on three key themes: gendered identity, attitudes and access to education, and attitudes towards marriage. I will be discussing the reflections on the interviews that I conducted for this phase.

Discussion

As a SAW, I was able to adopt an insider role in the process of conducting my research. This has helped me gain access to the group much more easily. Research has shown that when the participants share similar characteristics with the interviewer, they can feel much more at ease in terms of making a contribution (Takhar, 2013; Ashraf-Emami, 2017; Kabir, 2010). It can help reduce interviewer bias. The 'insider role' allows one to immerse into the topic with depth and with a level of familiarity which makes the qualitative oral history interview an ideal method for researching the lives of SAW.

The insider role

As a South Asian Woman, I have a role in the research process. This includes the insider role, as someone who can identify with the subjects, which can lead to assumptions, ideals, expectations and even curiosity from the people I interview. Ashraf-Emami (2017) states that the Muslim women in her research were able to speak more freely and build rapport during the interview, knowing that as a Muslim woman researcher she was sensitive to their concerns and cultural parameters. It is variables like religion, gender, race and age that can influence the interviewer and interviewee relationship and can contribute towards the validation of the data. Bhopal (2001) argues that race is important, and some form of sameness allowed her to gain access to a community for her research. Bhopal argues that in oral history interviews the interviewees provide much more rich data on their personal experiences, and this can be difficult if the participants do not feel confident in the person interviewing them.

The insider role provides obvious advantages and can also provide a platform for the researcher to reflect on their own position as a potential subject in their own research. However, this can merge the insider/outsider role. This merging is not necessarily a disadvantage, because researcher reflexivity is important too. Takhar (2013) writes: "Reflexivity forms an important part of an ethical research process […] it signifies writing the

researcher into the research." (p. 80). The reflective process of interviewing women who have much in common with me has allowed me to reflect on my own experience and learn from the similar but different experiences from the lives of other SAW.

Reflections from my interviews

My sample of the first fifteen interviews for this phase of my research was based on people I knew. Often those I interviewed had some kind of connection with other people I knew, such as a sibling of a long-time friend, or a cousin of a friend. I struggled to gain a purely random sample. This did make a difference in the interview process.

There were many occasions when I felt that the interviewee trusted me and was willing to share confidential and honest answers. For example, when asking questions about marriage, one of the interviewees said, 'let me shut the door' (Myeda). The act of shutting of the door was to ensure that others in the family household or nearby did not hear the conversation. With most of the second-generation women I interviewed, I felt at ease as they were mainly of a similar age and the same generation as me, and they were willing to share more detailed information about their lives. There was mutual understanding between us as women, second-generation, and we shared a similar cultural background. The insider role helped facilitate this. However, this was also a weakness as most of the time, the women assumed I knew what they were talking about, but on some occasions, I needed to get clarification. I needed to probe more and ask additional questions to be more explicit and clarify my understanding of what they meant. The insider role here was not useful.

The fact that I was somehow related or a friend to someone they knew also played some part in the kind of answers I received. The issue of trust may still be something that these women felt they needed to protect, and I felt there was some degree of 'playing safe' in the responses received. As an 'insider', I felt at ease in probing and asking for clarification, but the fact that I knew these women through family or friend contacts may have hindered some of the responses.

The insider role also allowed me to develop rapport with the women during the interview process. The women discussed information about their upbringing, knowing that I understood their lives and could relate to their experiences. This allowed me to hear deeply personal and rich stories and details of the lives of women, which could have been more difficult if I was an interviewer who had totally different personal characteristics and background.

The insider role also allowed me to observe the etiquettes of South Asian culture in terms of addressing others based on factors like age, and the use of language. Since these interviews were conducted over Zoom, I was not meeting the interviewees in person which created a level of distance between us. However, I still used common language of politeness

to ease the interviewee into the conversation. For example, I addressed the first-generation woman I interviewed as “auntie”, as it would have been considered impolite to address a much older person by their name. Knowing these cultural etiquettes made it easier for me to put the interviewee at ease.

Conclusion

Interviewing familiar subjects can provide many advantages as it can ease the interview process and the familiarity can allow the interviewer and the interviewee to build rapport and trust, as well as observe cultural etiquettes. The ‘insider role’ allows the qualitative interviewer to gain a deeper level of trust, understanding, and to use their own experiences to reflect on the research process. The lived experience of the researcher can allow them to embody the insider role for the purpose of research and can serve as a useful tool for conducting research using qualitative oral history interviews, which produce rich personal accounts of people’s lives.

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