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## **Ethics of engagement and insider-outsider perspectives: issues and dilemmas in cross-cultural interpretation**

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### **Abstract**

This article offers insights into the ethics of engagement and methodological issues and dilemmas in cross-cultural interpretation for researchers who are positioned at different points of the insider-outsider spectrum. The discussion uses examples from qualitative research with Sikh families in Britain and focuses on the design of the methodology and co-interpretation of data from in-depth interviews, both during the interactive data gathering phase and the post-interview analysis and interpretation phase. The researchers represent differing degrees of insider-outsider status in relation to the British Sikh community; one is a cultural insider (a Sikh) whilst the other is an outsider (non-Sikh). In other respects they share a number of characteristics, including gender, a history of migration, bilingualism and living and teaching in superdiverse communities which all impact on the nature of their engagement with the research participants and with each other as co-researchers. Our reflexive analysis shows that established binary distinctions and polarities in research practice, such as insider/outsider, are inadequate for conceptualising the fluidity and complexity of the ethics of engagement in co-researching. We argue that both theoretically and empirically a more nuanced conceptualisation reflects the realities of multiple researcher positionalities, interpretations and power relations.

**Keywords:** ethics, qualitative research, insider-outsider, reflexivity, co-interpretation, co-researching

### **Introduction**

The ethics of engagement in qualitative research where the research team represent differing degrees of insider-outsider positioning in relation to the community they are researching raises complex methodological issues and intricate ethical dilemmas. These extend beyond long-standing debates over research perspective, method and competing paradigms as manifested in dichotomies of quantitative *vs* qualitative and positivist *vs* interpretive positions

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(Sparkes 1992; Crotty 1998; Somekh and Lewin 2011). In research which engages participants who are close to a researcher through personal, professional, social or community networks the delicacy of ethical and methodological issues are heightened and can present deep challenges to a reflexive research team (Shacklock and Symth 1998; Etherington 2004; Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2009). The complexity is further increased when one researcher is a cultural insider whilst the other is an outsider in relation to the researched community; hence, the research is cross-cultural as it mediated by different cultural lenses and reflexive academic dialogue about interpretation of findings. In this article, we use examples from our research with Sikh families in Britain to reflect on the ethics of engagement with the Sikh community, the ethical dilemmas and methodological issues we encountered (as cultural insider and cultural outsider) and our co-interpretation of interview data from the initial stages of fieldwork.

We distinguish between *engagement* and *participation* in qualitative cross-cultural research and discuss ethical issues and dilemmas emanating from this deeper more reflexive involvement in shaping the methodology and interpretation of situated knowledge. We argue that where power relations are more equally distributed amongst the research team, as in the complementary roles of cultural insider and cultural outsider, a deeper engagement for both researchers leads to a more insightful analysis of the context for generation of new knowledge. We contrast engagement with participation both for the researcher and the researched, using examples from our fieldwork to illustrate reflexivity and engagement in making sense of layers of experience and narratives as lived by individuals, families and their communities. We regard the hierarchical polarities of insider/outsider and principal investigator/research assistant as inadequate for conceptualising engagement in qualitative research though they may be sufficient for describing participation. Participation in contrast to engagement may involve a contract researcher, with no previous or continuing relationship

with the research participants, being bought in by a research team to carry out semi-structured interviews, which are then transcribed by an external transcription agency and analysed using a qualitative data analysis computer software package. Engagement, on the other hand, is a much more dialogic and time consuming methodology to design and implement but as we hope to show in this article, it offers richer and deeper insights into the social world.

The rest of this article is organised into three main sections which problematise and analyse the ethics of engagement from theoretical and empirical standpoints. The first section reviews research literature on ethical protocols and issues arising from insider/outsider perspectives in cross-cultural and cross-language research. The second section develops and applies the concept of engagement ethics to an empirical research project being undertaken by two researchers, one of whom is an insider, a member of the community being researched (a Sikh) and the other who is an outsider (non-Sikh). It addresses the ethical and methodological considerations that influenced the design of the methodology, data gathering using co-interviewing and post-interview analysis and co-interpretation of data. The third concluding section offers some implications of this type of engagement ethics for qualitative research in other contexts.

### **Ethics of engagement and insider-outsider positioning**

Educational research in any context needs to adhere to rigorous ethical protocols and guidelines, such as those produced by the British Educational Research Association (BERA 2011; updated as BERA 2018), university ethics committees and professional bodies/associations. The research methods literature also provides similar and plentiful guidance in a range of texts by authors from differing ontological and epistemological perspectives offering education and social science researchers principles and procedures for research ethics, for example Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2007; Denzin and Lincoln 2011;

Cresswell 2014. However, the actual level of *engagement* by researchers in explicitly using such guidance in their reflexive research practice can be variable, particularly once ethical approval has been obtained from the relevant ethics committees. Issues of anonymity, confidentiality and informed consent are usually carefully addressed and reported on in published research outputs but more complex aspects of engagement, such as trust, reciprocity and emotional reactions are less frequently analysed. In insider research and in the concept of engagement, which is central to our argument in this article these are precisely the types of ethical issues that need to be reflexively examined and followed through in all stages of the research process from research design to data gathering, analysis and interpretation.

Insider research is now a well-established feature of qualitative methodologies and distinctions between insider/outsider (Le Gallais 2008), ‘multiples selves’ (Coffey 1999), ‘multiple positionalities’ (Caretta 2015) reflect the range of notions associated with the application of this concept to research in different contexts (Luttrell 2010). McNess, Arthur and Crossley (2015) in their re-examination of the concepts of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ in comparative education suggest that a ‘third space’ may offer the potential for constructing new meanings which go beyond essentialist notions of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. These debates and emerging terms encapsulate the complexities and fluidity of researcher positioning in relation to the field of study and the dynamics of power relationships between participants (organisations, individuals, groups and communities). Insiderness may relate to the relationship of the researcher to the organisation they are researching, their membership of a specific group or community, or shared history, values or motivations for engagement in a particular form of research. As Le Gallais has identified, ‘the insider researcher has access [to] past and present histories... shared experiences engender a sense of sameness’ (Le Gallais 2008, 146). Our research reflects these aspects of insiderness in that one researcher is

a member of the ethnic group we are researching and shares a family history of migration from India to England with the Sikh families we are interviewing. The other researcher is not a Sikh but shares a family history of migration from Wales to England. Both researchers are bilingual in their respective first language and in English and are skilled in the method we are using, face-to-face interviewing. These aspects of our history and linguistic and research skills illustrate the shortcomings of regarding the insider/outsider distinction as a dichotomy, particularly in relation to the ethics of engagement.

In our research practice we have found it useful to distinguish between insider and outsider perspectives in research design and fieldwork, as we illustrate in the next section, but the duality of insider *or* outsider is too simplistic as a conceptualisation of ethical and methodological considerations. We agree with Bridges (2001) that the insider/outsider polarity should be challenged, since people are insiders in some respects but outsiders in others, as illustrated above by our family histories and experience and skills as researchers. There is a need for a more nuanced conceptualisation of insider-outsiderness to reflect the multiple positionings researchers may represent in a research project and the potential and pitfalls of such fluidity in interpretation and analysis of data. Furthermore, the same person can move between differing degrees of insider-outsiderness during the phases of a research project, from design to implementation, analysis and evaluation, which has implications for co-construction of situated knowledge. The implications of such influences are found in more recent reflexive analyses of researcher positioning (see e.g. Perryman 2011; Milligan 2016; Obasi 2014; Pace 2015; Nakata 2015).

Perryman (2011) considers the 'blurred boundaries of insider/outsider', Obasi (2014) speaks of the 'insider/outsider continua' and Milligan (2016) puts forward the concept of the 'inbetweener' researcher to add to the continuum of 'Insider-outsider-inbetweener'. The idea of a continuum reflects more accurately the multiplicities of insider-outsiderness and the

ethical issues and dilemmas it raises for researchers when carrying out research in the organisations where they work (Drake 2010; Mercer 2007) and with the groups and communities with whom they have close connections (Pace 2015; Taylor 2011). Pace's research with close relatives identifies 'sticking points' in relation to anonymity, informed consent, representation and dissemination and Taylor (2011) suggests that negotiating the ethics of established friendships in field-based research reshapes the researcher's role and experience of their own culture. These aspects of intricate power dynamics emerged in our fieldwork but power relations were not binary in the sense that we as researchers (both insider-outsider) always represented the more dominant voices in shaping data gathering and interpretation. There were places when our interviewees led and steered the conversation and we became *listeners* rather than interviewers. Furthermore, for some the interview was a means for making sense of their background and experiences and gaining a deeper understanding of their identity and culture through their reflexive accounts in conversation with us as co-researchers representing insider-outsiderness. For example, our first interviewee commented 'this is really interesting [the focus of the research study], I've **really**<sup>3</sup> been thinking about it ...and you're right no one has investigated it but it's really made me think about what has helped me and my family to achieve though I don't regard myself as being really successful yet...but my dad is'...he's worked really hard' (3rd generation female doctor, age range 25-30).

Drake cautions insider researchers when interpreting data from interviews and argues that 'the validity of insider research requires reflexive consideration of the researcher's position', (Drake 2010, 85) as the same data can generate different interpretations due to personal relations, expectations and motivations for engaging in the research. These issues generate

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<sup>3</sup> Indicates original emphasis by the speaker

deeper fundamental questions about what counts as truth, knowledge(s) and interpretation of cultural experience when we (the co-researchers) represent multiple insider-outsider positionings, both in relation to each other and the community we are researching. For example, whose interpretation has more validity - insiders or outsiders? Should insider knowledge be used to inform analysis or should we only use the verbatim data from an interview transcript? If data that is not directly related to the main research questions of the study are generated from interviews should this be ignored, even if it really interests and surprises the outsider but constitutes unsurprising common cultural knowledge for the insider? Where do we draw the line between insight and intrusion? How do we balance the needs of privacy and sharing knowledge about individual and group experiences through our dissemination of research findings? These questions pose significant ethical dilemmas for reflexive researchers in following the ethics of engagement and represent issues which go beyond established concepts and procedures for strengthening validity in qualitative research, such as piloting, triangulation, bracketing and respondent validation (Silverman 2001).

In crafting our methodology and constructing new knowledge about Sikh families in Britain we explicitly and openly discussed such ethical dilemmas during the iterative process of honing our research design, which we call bilingual-bicultural ethnography. This term encapsulates the considered use of our language, cultural and insider-outsider positionings and our skills and experience in the methods used for research. In the following section, we discuss the ethical considerations which influenced the development of our research design and the application of engagement ethics to the research process.

### **Ethical considerations in our research design**

The factors that influenced our research design stem from the motivations for engagement in the project and its potential to make an original contribution to knowledge through cross-



cultural interaction between the two researchers, as well as with the research participants. My (JD) motivation stems from my observations as a cultural insider that though Sikhs are a minority ethnic group in every country where they are settled they have achieved marked socio-economic success over a relatively short period of time. In Britain, the families of Sikh migrants who came with '£3 in their pocket' in the 1960s have become multi-millionaires in less than 50 years, contributing £7.63 billion to the British economy in 2014 (BSR 2014); though they constitute only 0.7% of the population. Of course, not all Sikh families have experienced this upward trajectory in their socio-economic position but as a second generation Sikh living in England since 1961, I have observed that it is not atypical of the Sikh community. This phenomenon of Sikh success puzzled me and warranted systematic investigation.

My colleague, friend and co-researcher (NT) had also observed this phenomenon from her experience of living for 56 years and teaching for 24 years in a superdiverse area in England. Superdiversity is an emerging field of study which focuses on the implications for policymakers and practitioners of 'an unprecedented variety of cultures, identities, faiths, languages, and immigration statuses' (IRiS 2016). The first institute for research into superdiversity in the UK is located in Birmingham, in the Midlands region of England. We (JD and NT) and our research participants live and work in the Midlands region. Our existing relationships (colleagues in higher education who became close friends) and our new relationship as co-researchers in this study raised deeper ethical issues and dilemmas for research design than the more technical established procedures we had used for previous rigorous, systematic research in education (e.g. Dhillon 2009; 2013; Dhillon and Wanjiru 2013). These deeper ethical considerations relate to four aspects of decision making in research design; firstly, how we conceptualise our respective roles as researchers, secondly, the framing of research questions, thirdly, the sampling strategy and fourthly, the nature of

the interview method. For us, these aspects constitute a methodology of co-researching, as we exemplify below.

### ***Co-researching as a methodology***

Firstly, in our research design, NT is a *co-researcher*, not a research assistant to JD, who may well be described as lead researcher or principal investigator (PI) in other research contexts. This is a significant distinction and reflects power positions in the dialogic process of knowledge construction and the dynamics of power relations in research design and fieldwork. In her reflexive analysis of situated knowledge in cross-cultural, cross-language research, Caretta (2015) considers how power relations are mediated among researcher, the assistants and the participants in her study. In our research on Sikh families, our subjectivities and positionalities are explicitly negotiated and our engagement as co-researchers of equal worth shapes not just the design of the study but also the gathering, analysis and interpretation of the data, as the examples from our fieldwork provided later in the article will show. Our engagement in the study as co-researchers is designed to strengthen the validity of the findings and to balance the interpretation of cultural insider with cultural outsider. In one of the seminal texts for research methods, Denzin (1989) distinguishes between four basic types of triangulation: namely data, theory, investigator and methodological triangulation. Our methodology centres on investigator triangulation and extends Denzin's conceptualisation by incorporating a further dimension to strengthening the authenticity and trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba 1985) of qualitative enquiry. We, like other qualitative researchers, regard the person of the researcher(s) as the critical tool(s) in all stages of the research process. The dual and complementary engagement of two researchers with insider and outsider characteristics and the dynamics of their on-going triangulation of perspectives in the fieldwork bring an additionality to analysis and interpretation which is multiple layered and deeply illuminating, as illustrated later in this article in the section on

data gathering using interviews. The important point for research design is not just to have two researchers to achieve investigator triangulation but to give careful consideration to the respective insights that each researcher will bring to the analysis.

This careful consideration of respective insights is illustrated in the framing of our research questions. JD, a reflexive researcher living in Britain, with insider knowledge of the international trajectories of Sikhs had observed both their global distribution, largely through migration, and their relative educational and economic success over generations. Academic researchers (for example, Thandi 2014) and online Sikh community networks (for example, Oxfordsikhs 2017) have documented different aspects of Sikh migration and transnational distribution. JD's extended family exemplifies this transnational distribution as she has relatives living in Canada, USA, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, India, Italy and Germany who have increased their economic and social capital over generations. This had led her to ponder what conditions or characteristics had contributed to this phenomenon and the framing of our first research question:

How have Sikh families developed and changed their social and economic position in Britain over three generations, since they arrived as immigrants in the 1960s?

NT with her substantial experience of teaching and living in a superdiverse area had also observed the phenomena of Sikh success in relation to other ethnic minority groups and wondered whether this was due to religion, culture, family or community. NT was aware of symbolic aspects of the Sikh religion, e.g. turban-wearing males, (Takhar 2014) but had not engaged in any research study which involved systematic investigation of the phenomena of Sikh economic success. A series of reflective discussions between JD and NT about the family trajectories of Sikhs and other ethnic groups settled our second research question which is:

How has each generation deployed different forms of capital (economic, social, cultural, religious, aspirational) to support members of their own and other families to achieve economic, educational and occupational success?

Our third research question reflects our interests as educationalists, reflective practitioners (Schon 1991) and social researchers who view empirical research as a means of informing and improving our understanding of the social world through systematic investigation. This coupled with our commitment to social justice and promoting equalities in life chances by learning from the diverse and lived experiences of others, in this case the trajectories of migrant Sikh families, led to the formulation of the following question:

What can other families and communities in British society learn from the aspirational life histories of these Sikh families?

Our multiple positionalities thus, not just informed our thinking but were central in our research design. They shaped our sampling strategy, choice of methods and steered data gathering during the fieldwork. They also gave rise to sensitive ethical issues and methodological dilemmas, which we resolved through our engagement with each other as co-researchers. Our research questions and complementary positionalities meant that purposive sampling was the most appropriate strategy for choosing participants for in-depth face-to-face interviews. In this article, we focus on the issues raised by using interviews for data gathering although our overall methodology of co-researching includes other methods; observations, field notes and analysis of secondary data. In purposive sampling, it is the characteristics of a population and the objectives or research questions of the study that determine the choice of participants (Denscombe 2014; Crossman 2016). In this approach to sampling, researchers use their judgment to choose participants that they consider will add most meaning to advancing the research. For us, this was both an advantage but also a source of ethical

dilemmas that we tried to resolve by designing a strategy of combining insider, outsider and co-interviewer, which we discuss in the following section.

### ***Data gathering using interviews: insider/outsider/co-interviewer***

The advantage of purposive sampling for interviews was that JD could use her insider cultural knowledge to identify and approach first, second and third generation Sikhs from families whose trajectories most closely addressed our research questions. This meant that we could maximise the potential of reaching participants who could add most meaning to the research in comparison to other forms of sampling, e.g. random or convenience sampling (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007). In addition, JD could use both English and Panjabi in the interviews to interpret the dialogue and non-verbal communication of participants who were less proficient in English, in particular first generation Sikh females, hence reaching insights unavailable to a monolingual researcher. This is especially germane in cross-cultural contexts as concepts and vocabulary that exist in one culture and language may not translate directly to another so a level of instantaneous interpretation is needed to determine communicative meaning between speaker and listener, as in the dialogic interaction of face-to-face interviews. However, these advantages were to some extent a double-edged sword as they posed a number of delicate ethical dilemmas for data gathering and generally for our research practice 'in the field' (Burgess 1991; Mercer 2007).

Firstly, some of our potential interviewees were members of personal, professional and social networks and thus issues of privacy, confidentiality and anonymity became sharply pertinent; especially in treading the fine line between being 'in the field' as a researcher and continuing to be a trustworthy member of these networks after the completion of the fieldwork.

Secondly, in the cultural context of the transnational Sikh community the extended family

and community networks between Sikhs who originate from the same village (pind<sup>4</sup>) or region (district) in Punjab, India are strong. This added a further layer of complexity to the delicacy of ethical issues. As a member of the British Sikh community, JD has first-hand experience of the power of networks amongst Sikhs whose families originated from Punjab, settled in various parts of the UK and other countries but still exchange news about the progress and pitfalls of people from their village/region. News (good and bad) still travels quickly through these networks, often spreading like a flame, and has the power to damage individual and family reputation and respect as well as to enhance it. Family respect and reputation remain strong features of contemporary Sikh families and so as researchers, we had to engender trust as well as confidentiality and anonymity in our ethical engagement with the individuals and families who agreed to participate in our data gathering.

Our strategy in striving for ethical engagement was to use different configurations of insider/outsider/co-interviewer for conducting interviews with first, second and third generation Sikhs. The strategy was partly in response to the ethical dilemma that some of our potential interviewees were close members of JD's family and professional networks and thus may be less comfortable in an interview with a close insider. Other Sikhs, who were more distantly connected, may welcome speaking to a cultural insider, with the additional advantage of being able to communicate in shared languages. Thus NT, as an outsider, conducted the interviews with individuals who had close connections with JD, (family and professional colleagues). JD, as a second generation Sikh and hence cultural insider, carried out the interviews with individuals who were more distantly connected (wider extended family and distributed community networks). The third strand of our strategy was to co-interview a sample from each generation, bringing insider and outsider perspectives to bear on the interview as it was happening and then reflexively discussing the dialogic interaction

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<sup>4</sup> Panjabi word for village

in the post-analysis and co-interpretation phase, following the interviews that mainly took place in participants' homes.

This approach to interviewing brought out quite unexpected findings, for example as we were driving home after co-interviewing a first generation female Sikh, NT commented 'now she's had a sad life, I could see it in her eyes' (Interview debrief 29<sup>th</sup> April 2015). This observation was a complete surprise and shock to JD who had known the 78-year-old Sikh woman interviewee for many years as a confident, outgoing woman who was a powerful decision-maker in her immediate and extended family. However, JD had never interviewed this person as part of a research study and so the co-interviewing strategy uncovered meanings that were new knowledge for both insider and outsider researcher. It was the combined and complementary skills, cultural knowledge and experience of both researchers that led to this finding and its explanation in interpreting the interview data. This first generation female interviewee had come to Britain as an educated woman from a well-off family in Punjab but had to 'clean toilets' and take unskilled work in factories in England and though this reflected common trajectories of other Sikhs, so in that sense was not surprising, the extent to which it had affected her life experience was unexpected. During the interview she said 'when I came...[as a young bride to live in England] and I was asked to clean the toilet, I couldn't do it because in Punjab we had housemaids who did that and so I had never done it ...but **now** it is no problem for me as I have got used to it.' (Interview 29<sup>th</sup> April 2015). Her house was immaculately clean and it was evident that she was immensely house proud. This example also highlights the centrality of the person of the researcher(s) as the critical tool in our research. The ability to pick up verbal and non-verbal clues from dialogic interaction in face-to-face interviews was part of the meaning making process. We were not only co-interviewing but also co-observing and co-interpreting during the process of data gathering in the field.

The interviewing strategy (insider/outsider/co-interviewer) was designed to achieve triangulation of different perspectives, provide balance and counter bias or cultural subjectivity in data gathering and co-interpretation. We tried to create an open, relaxed and comfortable setting for interviews as well as ensure confidentiality in capturing individual perspectives and family trajectories. To provide both structure and flexibility in the interview process, we devised a semi-structured interview schedule, information sheet and consent form, following standard procedures in qualitative research practice (Somekh and Lewin 2011; Cresswell 2014). Our main research questions, discussed in the previous section of this article, were used to construct the interview schedule, which after piloting was used in conducting all the interviews. Most interviewees chose to be interviewed at home and a few in their place of work.

Arranging and conducting interviews in homes also gave rise to cultural and ethical issues, some more significant than others. These ranged from the issue of Sikh hospitality to dealing with emotional reactions as some interviewees needed empathetic and sympathetic responses from both interviewers during the on-going dialogue that consisted of two or three people engaging in a conversation in the interviewee's home. In relation to Sikh hospitality, the well-established custom of providing food, usually a full meal if a visitor comes to your house near a mealtime posed an issue, as we did not want interviewees to spend time and effort cooking for us. Thus we avoided arranging interviews around lunchtime and in one case had to tell a 'white lie' and say we were meeting someone else for lunch to stop Mrs H preparing a meal for us, as her interview was at 11am and we had another arranged for 3pm in the same town. Despite this, she had prepared an array of snacks for us before we arrived and insisted we had to eat before starting the interview, as we had driven over 40 miles to reach her house. NT was struck by the extent and variety of snacks provided by Mrs H as it was more like a meal and when I discussed with her the 'white lie' could understand the reason for it.



However, from an ethical standpoint, it was not being completely honest with the interviewee and so was an ethical dilemma. In the cultural context of Sikh hospitality, we felt it was justified in this case in order to avoid additional work for Mrs H who was 71 years old at the time of the interview. This tradition of hospitality is particularly strong amongst first generation Sikh women and is linked to aspects of the Sikh religion, such as the serving of free food (langar) and selfless service (seva) in Sikh Gurdwaras (see Sikhiwiki 2017 for further explanations). This became an unexpected influence in our analysis of the data during the post-interview and co-interpretation phase of the research.

### ***Post-interview analysis and co-interpretation***

The example of Sikh hospitality illustrates how issues that emerged from the interviewing strategy influenced co-construction of knowledge during the post-interview phase of the research. Following our interview with Mrs H as we were driving home, NT commented:

I need some context to understand things like the effects of partition, the importance of the Guru Granth Sahib, the role of the Gurdwara, 1984... on the narratives of the individuals, families and the Sikh diaspora to fully understand and engage with the interview data (NT, 29 April 2015)

Since we were passing a Gurdwara on our way home, JD offered to show NT around and provide an explanation of some of the socio-cultural and religious practices mentioned by our interviewees. NT had visited a Sikh Gurdwara to attend a wedding fairly recently but had not had the opportunity to hear an insider explanation of the significance of the Guru Granth Sahib or experience the practice of free food (langar) and selfless service (seva) in operation on a daily basis in Sikh Gurdwaras. Although our study was not designed to focus on religious aspects of the Sikh community, it emerged as a theme in our research data. Thus, as reflexive qualitative researchers, we needed to explore and explain its significance in crafting

our analysis of the data. Sikh Gurdwaras in transnational diaspora communities serve a social purpose as well their religious function as places of worship. They are hubs of community cohesion where elder Sikhs who are mostly retired meet on a daily basis to talk, eat and pray together. Many men and women undertake daily seva in their local Gurdwara by preparing and serving langar to anyone who visits the Gurdwara, and this was a practice we observed when we visited a Gurdwara during our fieldwork. Our visit to the Gurdwara illustrates how qualitative researchers need to remain alert to unexpected findings when implementing their research design, something that is less likely in quantitative research.

From an outsider perspective, the need to understand more about the history and culture of the researched community in order to make meaning was matched with surprising revelations from an insider perspective. During post-interview discussion of the interviews we had completed, JD commented:

From the interviews, I'm finding out things about individuals that I never knew even though I have known them well for many many years...I mean, I really had no idea that in 1954, Mrs H's husband brought the Guru Granth Sahib to the UK in a ship... was met by the Sikh community from Gravesend who came to receive the Guru Granth Sahib (JD, 12 May 2015)

The two examples of reflexive comments quoted above illustrate the on-going dialogic process of co-interpretation that strengthened the quality, rigour and depth of our analysis. We met on a regular basis to discuss the interviews, either straight after an interview or within 2/3 weeks to debrief each other, as our strategy consisted of configurations of insider/outsider/co-interviewer for conducting interviews. In some cases we listened to the audio recordings of interviews that were had not personally undertaken to compare insider and outsider interpretations of the data. It was a time consuming process but enriching and

enjoyable for us as researchers for we went beyond conventional investigator triangulation (Denzin 1989) to reach deeper insights into the experiences of the individuals, families and community that was the focus of our research.

In addition to insider and outsider reflexivity, we used other means to balance our subjectivities and positionalities in our interpretation and analysis of the interview data. We chose to have the interviews transcribed by a professional transcription agency not merely to save us time in transcribing lengthy interviews, but to add a layer of neutrality to the process of data analysis. Also, after each interview NT wrote up detailed notes which contained her observations and reflections of responses to the questions used in the interview and additional aspects that emerged from the interactions. JD kept field notes, which contained verbatim quotes from interviewees, observational notes of non-verbal communication taken during interviews, and her reflections post-interview. The data we used for analysis post interviews thus consisted of full verbatim transcripts produced by someone not involved in the design or implementation of the research, audio files of interviews, notes of interviews produced by a cultural outsider (NT) and field notes produced by a cultural insider (JD). All these forms of evidence were brought together in thematic coding and synthesis of the key themes emerging from the data.

Our engagement with each other as co-researchers and with the Sikh community generated multiple layers of interpretation, which in the context of cross-cultural interpretation raised ethical issues about truth(s) and validity in knowledge construction during each stage of our analysis. During and immediately after each interview our notes and observations provided our individual interpretation of the interview from our respective insider and outsider lenses. In post-interview analysis and co-interpretation, we brought both insider and outsider perspectives together to make sense of the interviews and discussed our respective individual interpretations to explain themes emerging from the different data sources in relation to our

research questions. During these stages of iterative analysis we had to grapple with delicate and difficult ethical dilemmas in cases where our interview strategy had produced troubling data which was not directly relevant to our research questions. For example, one interviewee revealed aspects of her childhood as a Sikh girl, which we both agreed, was beyond the scope of our study and decided to delete a section of the audio file before sending for transcription to the professional transcription agency. Our decision was based on the grounds that the interviewee was now an adult and the revelations did not raise safeguarding concerns with respect to her current life. Thus, in our role as researchers it was appropriate for us to take this course of action but it was a prickly ethical dilemma which we considered post-interview in depth. Balancing the care and aftercare of participants and the research questions of a study is a delicate and complex ethical process in co-interpretation of qualitative data from cross-cultural viewpoints.

This section of the article has discussed how we developed and applied the ethics of *engagement* to an empirical research project, from research design to data gathering and co-interpretation of data. We have illustrated how our positionalities as insider and outsider in relation to the researched community and as *co-researchers* generated insights into our own research practice as qualitative researchers, and for interpretations of the data from our fieldwork. The next concluding section considers some implications of this type of engagement for qualitative research in other contexts and summarises the conclusions from the work we have undertaken as co-researchers.

## **Conclusion**

The ethics of *engagement* in qualitative research as discussed in this article is a process that theoretically and empirically goes beyond traditional boundaries and distinctions in ethical research practice. In our distinction between *participation* and *engagement*, we capture the

deeper, richer dynamic of the latter, both between members of the research team and with the participants in a study. The ethics of this type of engagement raises delicate, sometimes tricky, relational issues and dilemmas, which add further layers of complexity and fluidity to established binary distinctions and polarities, such as insider/outsider, researcher/researched, PI/RA. These binaries reflect and affect power relations between members of a research team and the dynamics of their interaction with participants and with each other during fieldwork. We propose that the methodology of co-researching, as exemplified in our research with Sikh families, reveals the limitations of binaries and hierarchical polarities and thus moves thinking on in terms of researcher positioning and engagement with the researched community.

Theoretically, the concept of *co-researcher* challenges tacit power relations embedded in established research practice where PI is knowledgeable expert and research assistant and/or co-investigator the lesser contributor to the research project. This may not be an explicit intention, of a PI or a research team, but is implicit in much research practice, and manifest in processes of knowledge generation and dissemination. Traditionally, the PI takes the lead in research design, analysis and publication of research outputs and occupies a hierarchical position as 'the expert' but in *co-researching*, either researcher can take the lead in the different stages of the collaborative research process, especially in data gathering, analysis and interpretation, as illustrated in our fieldwork with Sikh families. This collaborative positioning reflects a shift in power relations so that different perspectives are of equal value, both intellectually and empirically e.g. in cross-cultural interpretation where cultural insider and cultural outsider lenses are brought together to generate new knowledge about a social phenomenon. In our study of Sikh families, this approach enabled us to present a more complete picture of the phenomena of Sikh socio-economic success over generations.

Empirically, *co-researching* is a testing research strategy that poses delicate ethical issues and tricky relational dilemmas for researchers. Tensions can arise when confronted with uncomfortable data or pursuing lines of enquiry which one researcher is interested in but the other views as being less relevant to the research questions. For example, in our study of Sikh families NT as cultural outsider was interested in exploring the practice of arranged marriages with interviewees whilst JD as cultural insider viewed this as being less pertinent to the focus of the enquiry, which centred on factors that had contributed to socio-economic success over generations. Further delicate issues arose during our fieldwork, when an interviewee revealed culturally sensitive aspects of her childhood as a Sikh girl but we both agreed that this data was beyond the scope of our study. Our decision was based on the grounds that the interviewee was now an adult and the revelations in her account did not raise safeguarding concerns with respect to her current life. These examples illustrate practical ethical challenges and decision making when treading the fine line between interpretation and intrusion, particularly in cross-cultural contexts. This type of ethical engagement requires a high level of trust between co-researchers and the ability and preparedness to appreciate and value negotiated meanings from different perspectives.

In our methodology of co-researching, neither insider nor outsider positions were privileged and in the design and implementation of our study, we strove to transcend binaries and hierarchal polarities to generate new knowledge that balanced and complemented insider and outsider interpretations. This enabled us to present a more complete version of social reality by negotiating the space between insider and outsider knowledge and insight through the interactive process of co-interpretation. As qualitative researchers, we bring our multiple selves to the field, and our associated baggage, but through the meaning making processes of co-interpretation and co-analysis, we can recognise and account for multiple lenses, subjectivities and positionalities. These types of processes present ethical and empirical

challenges but can transform us as researchers as well as add to the depth and reach of our analyses of individual, group and community experiences.

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