FQS FORUM: QUALITATIVE SOCIAL RESEARCH SOZIALFORSCHUNG

Volume 7, No. 3, Art. 7
May 2006

# Cultural "Insiders" and the Issue of Positionality in Qualitative Migration Research: Moving "Across" and Moving "Along" Researcher-Participant Divides

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**Key words**: positionality, migration, qualitative, interview, insider

**Abstract**: Positionality has, to-date, been conceptualised by social scientists as a central component in the process of qualitative (and to an extent quantitative) data collection. This paper intends to build upon this conceptualisation by reflecting upon the influence that class and generation can have on qualitative migration research. Specifically, the authors argue that being insiders in the social interview is much more complex and multi-faceted than usually recognised. They also claim that, to a large extent, interviewing within one's own "cultural" community—as an insider—affords the researcher a degree of social proximity that, paradoxically, increases awareness amongst both researcher and participant of the social divisions that exist between them. The authors will use the case of an Italian researcher interviewing Italian migrants in Nottingham (UK) and a British researcher interviewing British migrants in Paris (France) to illustrate this. In doing so they will first highlight the way in which researchers may "move-up" socio-economically when interviewing, but will also stress that whilst such movement is possible—through strategies of constructing rapport—a certain power imbalance is inevitable. Second, the authors will highlight, through reference to notions of the adopted insider and impartial observer, the way in which interviewers can (at least partially) "move across" generational divides within the migrant community. This methodological reflection is designed to aid and improve future research conducted from "inside" the migrant community.

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## 1. Introduction

The dynamic between researcher and participant has become a key focus for academic attention over recent decades, and qualitative researchers have critically examined the epistemological, methodological and ethical issues associated with this. The *positionality* literature is now vast and variegated, emanating from a range of disciplinary fields with their own particular subject specialisms, research philosophies and academic cultures. This paper will connect to this burgeoning literature by analysing the issues that surround what

we term the "insider" interview, and in particular, how these issues relate to research on contemporary international migration. [1]

The paper will use evidence from two migrant communities—the Italians in Nottingham (UK) and the British in Paris (France)—to argue that being an insider in migration research is more complex and multi-faceted than usually recognised. It will also show that interviewing within ones own cultural community—as an insider—affords researchers a degree of social proximity that, paradoxically, increases awareness amongst both researcher and participant of the social divisions that structure the interaction between them. The paper is divided into six main sections: the current introduction; a literature review; an overview of the two qualitative research projects; two empirical sections reflecting upon, respectively, the role of class and generation in the qualitative interview; and a concluding discussion on the methodological issues raised by insider migration research. [2]

By "insider" research, we mean social interviews conducted between researchers and participants who share a similar cultural, linguistic, ethnic, national and religious heritage. This insider status takes on an added degree of importance, moreover, when research involves social interaction between a migrant researcher and a migrant participant from within the same *imagined* community. Insider interviews of this type create a distinct social dynamic, whereby differences between researcher and participant are brought into focus as a result of shared cultural knowledge. We term this "diversity in proximity" which effectively means that as insiders we are better able to recognise both the ties that bind us and the social fissures that divide us. Our insider status can make us accepted within the group, but it can also affect the way in which others perceive us within this relatively close social world. [3]

As insiders it is easy to take-for-granted ones social proximity and the advantageous consequences this may have. It is important, however, to temper this with the realism that such status gives us, and our participants, greater access to our private selves. [4]

When conducting insider researcher the boundary between private and public self is different (it is closer to our private selves) to where it would be when conducting research as an outsider and this matters. It can influence our objectivity, and more importantly for this paper, it influences the social dynamics that shape the qualitative interview. As MARTINIELLO (1997, p.6) warns us:

> "During data collection, for example, an ethnic background can be very helpful. Ethnic researchers can have privileged relations with immigrant groups, which can facilitate access to the field. Similar advantages arise from familiarity with the languages and the physical space of the researched group. On the other hand, such closeness between a researcher and his/her subject can also harm the research process" (in BOUSETTA, 1997). [5]

## 2. Literature Review

If qualitative methods were hegemonic research tools in some branches of the social sciences over the course of the post-war era, then in others like geography, it was not until the 1990s that they became the "new orthodoxy" (CRANG, 2002). The reasons for this methodological "diffusion" are complex, however of particular importance were the feminist critiques of the "old" positivist orthodoxy, an orthodoxy that once dominated the research toolkits of academics. These critiques illuminated the subjectivity of knowledge production (MADGE et al., 1997; ROSE, 1997), and the importance of reflection at all stages of data collection, analysis and representation. [6]

The critiques effectively showed that in social research, researchers and participants are equally involved in this production (GEERTZ, 1993), demonstrating the need to consider qualitative research more holistically. Every type of knowledge, including the academic one, is situated: from the way interviewer and interviewees relate to each other, to the types of values they attach to that knowledge (CLIFFORD & MARCUS, 1986; SMITH, 1993). To this end, writers have tackled in great detail the epistemological basis of social research. The interview dynamic has been a particularly important area of critical reflection, and for at least the past two decades academics have skilfully examined the nature of this construction. The "… non-neutrality of the researcher and the power relations involved in the research process" (MADGE et al., 1997, p.87) have been illustrated most adroitly through the in-depth social interview. The debates that associated with this have tended to crystallise around an insider-outsider dynamic; insider status is generally viewed as the "holy-grail" for the qualitative researcher, whilst outsider status is viewed more problematically. There are, for example, a range of ethical issues associated with social research carried out by outsiders (MULLINGS, 1999). [7]

In reality both insider and outsider status require critical reflection, however we do not feel enough attention has so far been directed to the complexities and contradictions that surround the insider interview. We know, for example, that generation and class—and an array of other social fissures—shape the "knowledge" we produce; but how they do this, the many contradictions involved in their influence, and what can be done to address their effects, are question that require more detailed thought. Similarly, we must not assume that insider status leads to greater proximity in the social interview, and an ultimately smaller divide between researcher and participant. On the contrary, we argue that whilst insider status is generally beneficial to the research process, it also brings to the fore a range of social fissures that structure interaction between researcher and participant, fissures that may otherwise have remained hidden. We term this the phenomenon of "diversity in proximity", a phenomenon that has a particular resonance for qualitative migration researchers. [8]

## 3. Qualitative Research Projects

The evidence used to illuminate this discussion on the role of positionality in the insider interview is drawn from two pieces of qualitative migration research. Both take "invisible" migrant communities as their focus, and both involve researchers with the same ethno-national backgrounds as their participants. [9]

The first research project was carried out by SCOTT, and is a study of the skilled British migrant community in Paris. The project involved 36 in-depth interviews, a survey of 110 British organisations based in Paris, and visits to a selected number of these organisations in order to participate in and observe their activities. The research focused on first-generation skilled British migrants and sought to: map their residential distribution across Paris; examine motives underpinning British emigration; explore and explain the British communality observed; and, identify the different skilled migrant types resident in Paris. [10]

The British population in Paris and the surrounding region of Ile-de-France is in excess of 20,000, and has grown by over 65% since the 1970s. The potential interview population was therefore vast in both scale and scope, and a number of recruitment strategies were used in order to try to capture this. Notwithstanding this diversity, all interview schedules for the 36 semi-structured interviews covered the following six areas:

- Migration to Paris
- Finding a home and settling in
- Sense of belonging and long-term plans
- Everyday attachments to British communal activities, social networks and cultural norms and values
- Transnational links between Paris and the UK
- Balance between French and British identity [11]

As a fellow skilled British migrant, SCOTT perceived himself to be a cultural "insider" when entering the "field". Being British, he thought, was something that would assist him in the interview process, and to a large extent it did. However, the author also realised that qualitative research—particularly the issue of positionality and the social dynamic that exists between interviewer and participant—was far more complex and deep-seated. Sharing a sense of belonging to an "imagined" ethno-national community made him an insider in one breath, but in the other it emphasised social differences between himself and the fellow British migrants he was researching. [12]

This issue of insider positionality in qualitative migration research is what unites SCOTT's Paris project with GANGA's research analysing intergenerational transmission of ethnic/cultural identity amongst Italians in Nottingham. [13]

GANGA's findings build on previous studies of migration and of ethnic identity construction, and the interpretation explores issues related to the ethnic self-perception of the children and grandchildren of immigrants who arrived in England in the 1950s and 60s. The research involved three-generations (grandparents, children and grandchildren) of ten Italian families from the Nottingham area. [14]

In the period after the Second World War labour shortages affected several Western European countries and a number of labour flows became established. This phenomenon triggered a considerable movement of people, with the dominant pattern of migration occurring between southern and northern/western Europe. Although these labour market imbalances were understood to be temporary, as suggested by CASTLES (1987) in the 1980s, the southern European migrant workers remained in their countries of residence "for good". They started families, which now extend to at least three generations (GANGA 2006). [15]

The Italian community of Nottingham was certainly amongst one of the most important destinations for Italian labour migrants coming to the UK, and it is now home to well over 2,000 people of Italian origin. Three generations on and the community remains distinct—through endogamy, residential clustering and in-group social networks—showing just how strong the desire to continue to exist as a minority group can be. However, there has almost been no research looking at the long-term integration/assimilation of the labour migrants of the 1950s/60s and their offspring. [16]

Because of the inter-generational nature of the research, semi-structured interviews were considered to be the most suitable method to use. The interview schedule consisted of a list of topics identified in advance, differentiated according to the particular generation of the respondents. Various types of questions were included in it:

- Biographical: i.e. date and place of birth, education
- Behavioural/experience-based: description of activities, description of behaviour in specific circumstances
- Attitudinal/belief: of the type "what do you think about …?", "what would you do if …?", etc. [17]

The different questions included in the interview schedule were intended to address the variegated nature of the topics identified as crucial for the explanation of issues related to the intergenerational transmission of cultural/ethnic values in families of migrant origin. [18]

In both the British and Italian research projects different social relationships existed between researcher and participant, and in the section that follows, we will reflect on the two most notable differences. For the British in Paris, the influence of "class" will be explored; from the perspective of a post-graduate student researcher conducting interviews with high-status, wealthy British

migrants. The extent to which one can/should "move-up" socio-economically when interviewing in this way, and the strategies used to negotiate class divisions within a migrant community, will be discussed. For the Italians in Nottingham, the influence of generational difference will be explored; in relation to a native Italian post-graduate researcher interviewing retired Italian migrants and their second/third off-spring. The extent to which one can/should "move-across" the age-ranges when conducting inter-generational migratory research, and the strategies used to negotiate age and generational divides, will be discussed. [19]

## 4. Class and the Migrant Interview

Clearly being a cultural insider has many advantages when researching migration, particularly in terms of negotiating access to migrants, in understanding the spoken and unspoken "language" of the interview, and in terms of the recognition of idiosyncratic cultural references. Insider status is also important in bringing internal divisions within an imagined minority community to the fore, and related to this, it helps the researcher to understand reasons for such difference. Research on the British in Paris uncovered six types of skilled migrant and these different migrant types were embedded within the British community in Paris in different ways and to differing degrees of intensity. [20]

Undoubtedly, SCOTT's own position as an "insider" brought these differences into view early on in the research process, and afforded him the time and the relevant experience to examine and explain the internal social divisions of the British community in greater depth than would have been possible had he been an "outsider". However, the researcher's experience in the field quickly taught him that any binary insider-outsider division is misleading. There is a paradox to being an insider: whilst researchers are closer to those migrants they are studying, both themselves and their participants are much more aware of each others social position as a result. Being an insider brings the investigator closer to the reality that migrant communities are rarely united, and almost always divided by social fissures such as class, generation, age, and gender. [21]

One particular social divide was central in shaping SCOTT's interview experiences in Paris; that of socio-economic "class" position. Three of the six types of British skilled migrant were highly-paid professional expatriates, living in relatively "elite" residential areas, and moving within relatively exclusive social networks. The issue for the author was that he had never before witnessed such opulence or met so many people from such privileged backgrounds. A significant number of interviews were carried out in the offices of large transnational corporation—elite international workspace never previously visited. Few of the professional expatriates had any discernible regional accents, most had received a private education, a sizeable minority of whom had gone on to study at Oxbridge or one of the other UK universities known for its "elite" intake (Bristol, Edinburgh, St Andrews, Nottingham, Durham). In terms of geography, many had extensive international experience beyond Paris—from either career moves elsewhere in the world, or from a childhood spent following a parent's inter-national career. Moreover, almost all professional expatriate interviewees had

links to London and the south; in only a few cases were the high-status British expatriates from northern England, Wales or Scotland. [22]

As an "insider" researcher, the researcher was fully aware of the class divide between himself—a student from the north of England, educated at state school and a "red-brick" university, with an annual income of a little over 9,000 euros—and his participants. Anecdotally, one of the researcher's first interviewees, for instance, invited him to lunch prior to the interview. The lunch was a set menu and cost 60 euros; this caused slight panic because it amounted to the researcher's entire budget for the week. Luckily, the interviewee offered to pay! Likewise, he received invitations to two Champagne receptions during the time of his fieldwork in Paris, and whilst he thoroughly enjoyed both, they further emphasised the socio-economic divide between researcher and participant [23]

The question SCOTT kept reflecting upon in the early stages of his research was: how is it possible to "move up" the socio-economic scale and bridge this divide? This was, with hindsight, the wrong question to ask. High-status migrants are generally very sentient and savant individuals and the skills that they rely on in day-to-day professional interaction would have quickly "found SCOTT out" had he tried to "be like them". His strategy was therefore to develop rapport without being false, and use the rapport in other areas to compensate for class difference.

- The fact that the researcher was young, and that many of the older professionals interviewed had children of his age was a clear benefit.
- When people found out where he was from (Manchester/Sheffield) then any geographical connections, however loose, worked surprisingly well to start the conversation moving.
- The fact that he was simultaneously carrying out a survey of British organisations and attending their activities and events was also useful, and this often led to the realisation between himself and his interviewees that we shared mutual acquaintances.
- At the time of the research there were also some issues unifying the British community, including: "foot and mouth"[1] and the general state of UK farming; the flooding in southern England; and, the UK election. These all acted as shared topics of interest that crossed the class divide. [24]

Whilst all these strategies of rapport worked well, it was also clear that the class divide meant a difference in power-relations between the researcher and his participants. Specifically, professional elites are used to being in control of social situation, and often use this for their own ends. He was aware that he was effectively supplicant in the interview, but unsure of whether anything could be done about this. Thus, whilst he had developed strategies of rapport to overcome

1 According to DEFRA (Department for the Environment Fisheries and Rural Affairs), foot and mouth is an infectious disease affecting cloven-hoofed animals, in particular cattle, sheep, pigs, goats and deer. The last UK outbreak was in February 2001, during the time of the Parisian fieldwork, when 2,030 cases occurred. The foot and mouth outbreak made national and international news and was the subject of widespread debate in the UK (DEFRA, website).

the class divide, these strategies could not overcome the power and control that comes more naturally to those in elite socio-economic positions. [25]

What this meant in practice was that, when visiting the ostentatiously understated style of the "steel and glass" corporate head-quarters, he felt his presence there to be somewhat incongruous. Professional interviewees also invariably had time constraints related to their high-powered, high-pressured, incredibly long working day. Paradoxically, the effect of these time constraints was to make him feel more grateful for getting less of an interview window; yet he felt nowhere near so grateful when constraints were absent, and when interviews went on for much longer. Moreover, it seemed that professional elites were more naturally guarded and diplomatic in what they had to say, they were used not to giving anything too personal or too revealing away. It is also true that the privileged expatriates he interviewed are likely to have had ideas around what he was looking for and perhaps thought he expected to find stuffy, highly-paid British elites, living an exclusive lifestyle in Paris. They may have, therefore, been cautious and controlled because of what they and he knew about the stereotypical quasi-colonial British "expatriate". [26]

## 5. Generation and the Migrant Interview

The insider/outsider divide in qualitative migration research is far from straightforward, as SCOTT has shown in relation to the British and as it will now be shown in relation to the Italian community in Nottingham. [27]

In order to establish herself in the Italian community, GANGA made with the chairperson of the *Associazione Anziani di Nottingham* (Italian Association of Older People of Nottingham). The researcher was attempting to gain entry to the younger members of the family via first generation members of the association. Her assumption, as an "insider" with a shared ethnic/cultural origin, was that this would be a relatively simple strategy. However, the reality of the situation soon disproved this theory. The first-generation Italian members of the association demonstrated a certain reluctance to act as liaison between the researcher and their children/grandchildren. [28]

These circumstances were unforeseen. The investigator had clearly made assumptions based upon a shared insider status that, in reality, was of little practical relevance. Like the British community in Paris, the Italian community in Nottingham was socially divided, and this had implications for the qualitative research process. However, this time the divide that was the most important was that of age/generation, and it became clear that a negotiation of roles between researcher and respondent was needed. In particular, the researcher soon realised the following:

- The idea of "Italianness" for older Italians was different from, and based on different values to the investigator's idea of what it meant to be Italian. This meant that many older Italians considered their offspring unsuitable for the

research because of their inevitably more limited linguistic or cultural knowledge. The researcher had a different opinion on this.

- It was a mistake to assume that the researcher would be making the selection, because in many cases the older Italians were the gatekeepers and they were fundamental in the choice of second and third generation potential respondents.
- More generally, and in light of these "Italianess" and "selection" issues, the researcher had to re-evaluate her position as an insider in the community. [29]

To begin with, the older first-generation migrants considered GANGA an outsider, and this was only exacerbated when they discovered that the research was "official" and was based at the University of Sheffield. Such formality, alongside the obvious age difference, obliterated any sense of commonality that the investigator and her participants may have had as fellow Italians. In fact, her attachment to the University even generated suspicion: she was seen by some as an "official representative" from an organisation who wanted to collect personal information and look at family connections. [30]

The following excerpt is symptomatic of the value that older respondents attached to privacy within the Italian family. By opening their door to a stranger, who could potentially be a threat, Gioacchino—a first generation respondent—emphasises his "trust" and expectation that the interview will not involve anything "dishonest":

> "My son always says: 'Before letting anybody in, try to understand what they want to do'. In short, there's so much dishonesty around that you cannot even imagine" (Gioacchino, first-generation). [31]

This extract can be understood as both a warning to the stranger not to disappoint the host, and as a welcome to the researcher into the respondent's home. [32]

It was clearly necessary for the researcher to acquire the trust of the older first-generation respondents before being able to ask for an interview and, subsequently, being given access to their children/grandchildren. After demonstrating her commitment, however, the researcher was granted the status of "adopted insider". This took considerable time and involved taking part in many of the events of the community and becoming a "familiar face": interestingly, such status worked to dissipate most of the doubts first-generation respondents held about the "genuine" nature of the research. [33]

Nevertheless, even with this "adopted insider" status, GANGA felt as though she was constantly moving between being an insider and outsider. For the older members of the first-generation, she was not like them and could not be put into any known categories:

- The researcher's permanence in the United Kingdom was considerably shorter than that her respondents and she was still seen very much as a migrant rather than a permanent member of the Italian émigré community.
- Her age was also an issue: she was considerably younger than the first-generation Italians, yet she could not be likened to their children/grand-children because they were born in the UK and she was from Italy.
- The researcher's cultural identity was also difficult to place because although born in Italy, she had much less in common with the first-generation migrants and much more in common with their children/grandchildren.
- Her personal and professional reasons for living in the UK were considered unconvincing, largely because they were very different to the reasons given by the older first-generation Italians. [34]

Through snowballing, the researcher moved from first-generation to second and third-generation migrants. This move meant that she was effectively leaving fellow Italian-born migrants behind, but was moving to interview people who were much closer to her in terms of age and generation. In fact, the children/grandchildren of the 1950s and 60s migrants were generally intrigued by the cultural likenesses and differences between themselves and the researcher. As a result of these "reflections", the author was often considered by the children and grandchildren of the Italian immigrants in Nottingham as an "impartial observer". Essentially, second and third generation respondents could relate to the researcher because of their closeness in terms of age/generation, but, they felt far enough removed from her because of the fact that she was Italian-born and they were British-born. This insider/outsider position gave them a unique "space" in which to share views; views that the second and third generation migrants confessed to rarely discussing with their Italian born parents and grandparents. [35]

To summarise GANGA—because of the nature of her investigation—found that she was continually negotiating an insider/outsider dynamic and that this dynamic varied according to age and generation. Like her colleague, she also falsely assumed that insider status (shared culture, nationality, migrant background, etc) would be the overriding research dynamic and underestimated the level movement needed "across" the age and generational divides to effectively research Nottingham's Italian community. [36]

## 6. Discussion

The paper has reflected upon and compared two different experiences of qualitative migration research. In both cases the researchers were cultural "insiders", but at the same time they experienced divisions within their respective ethno-national communities. Being insiders, paradoxically, raised researchers' and participants' awareness of the social subtleties that divide their respective "imagined" migrant communities. [37]

Evidence from the British community in Paris examined the influence of class on the skilled migrant interview. SCOTT showed how, whilst he struggled to "move up" a class when interviewing "elites", he was nonetheless able to establish rapport that at least partially transcended the socio-economic gradient between himself and the highly-skilled professionals he interviewed. Notwithstanding this negotiation, the elite professionals were both powerful and used to controlling social situations, such that whilst rapport helped to bridge the class divide un-equal power-relations remained. [38]

For the Italian community in Nottingham generation and age-related divisions were more significant in shaping the migrant interview than class. GANGA faced a double dilemma. On the one hand, she shared a common Italian heritage with first-generation migrants, however, these migrants were largely elderly and of a different Italian generation. On the other, she was of was of a similar age/generation to second and third-generation migrants, but they did not share her Italian heritage. We conceptualised these dynamics in relation to two research roles: the "adopted insider" (when interviewing first-generation migrants) and the "impartial observer" (when interviewing second and third-generation migrants). [39]

Drawing the two examples together, it seems that the evidence from Paris cautions against the idea of "moving-up" to bridge any class divide whilst evidence from the Italians community in Nottingham cautions against the idea of simply "moving-across" the age/generation divide. At the same time, both examples show how, as "insiders", researchers are likely to be more aware of the social divisions between themselves and the migrant community they seek to represent. We hope that these findings will help qualitative migration researchers both reflect upon and improve this process of research and representation. [40]

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank their respondents in Paris and Nottingham, who they regard as the co-authors of the paper.

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## Citation

Ganga, Deianira & Scott, Sam (2006). Cultural "Insiders" and the Issue of Positionality in Qualitative Migration Research: Moving "Across" and Moving "Along" Researcher-Participant Divides [40 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *7*(3), Art. 7, http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs060379.