

Positionality, Gender and Reflexivity in Outsider-Insider Research: A case study of interviewing police officers in China

Abstract

This article examines the intricacies of researcher positionality in a study examining women in policing in China. It aims to shed light on the manifold ways in which researcher positionality – the researcher’s relationship with the participants, gender and other identities – impacts the research process. The study draws from my own experiences, as a female researcher and former insider, engaging in qualitative interviews with both female and male police officers in the context of a feminist inquiry into women in Chinese policing. This article explores the advantages and challenges of outsider-insider research, dissects the role of gender in shaping the research landscape and probes how the researcher’s myriad identities may influence research access, information gathering, data analysis, findings and conclusions. Moreover, it discusses strategies adopted to overcome research barriers. By presenting this outsider-insider research as a case study, the article underscores the vital role of researcher reflexivity in unearthing the truth regarding women’s experiences and upholding academic rigour. It not only advocates for the use of qualitative interviewing as a tool for knowledge production, but also makes important contributions to the fields of feminist research and qualitative inquiry. In addition, it offers compelling narratives of women within Chinese law enforcement, thereby enriching the discourse on gender policing studies.

Keywords

gender, outsider-insider research, positionality, qualitative interviewing, reflexivity, women in policing

Introduction

Qualitative interviewing is commonly used in research into women in policing.¹ This method is favoured because qualitative research focuses on subjective meanings, enabling reflection on individual experiences and the generation of knowledge from women’s life stories.² Through interviews, researchers can gather narratives that provide true and rich insights, capable of capturing the intricate challenges women encounter in real life.³ However, research

¹ e.g. M Jardine, ‘A Southern policing perspective and appreciative inquiry: an ethnography of policing in Vietnam’ (2020) 30 *Policing and Society* 186; M Natarajan, *Women police in a changing society: Back door to equality* (Ashgate, Hampshire 2008); K Newton and K Huppatz, ‘Policewomen’s perceptions of gender equity policies and initiatives in Australia’ (2020) 15 *Feminist Criminology* 593; C Rabe-Hemp, ‘POLICEwomen or policeWOMEN? Doing gender and police work’ (2009) 4 *Feminist criminology* 114; E Cunningham and P Ramshaw, ‘Twenty-three women officers’ experiences of policing in England: The same old story or a different story?’ (2020) 22 *International Journal of Police Science and Management* 26.

² SN Hesse-Biber, ‘Feminist approaches to mixed-methods research’ in Hesse-Biber and Leavy (eds) *Feminist Research Practice* (Sage, London 2007).

³ P-C Hsiung, ‘The women’s studies movement in China in the 1980s and 1990s’ in Peterson, Hayhoe and Lu (eds) *Education, Culture and Identity in Twentieth-century China* (The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 2001).

interviewing often lacks transparency, and reflexivity is typically given insufficient emphasis in research.⁴ Reflexivity entails researchers actively acknowledging that their own actions and decisions inevitably influence the meaning and context of the experiences under investigation.⁵ Researchers' understanding, actions and decisions in research are affected by a range of factors, including the dynamics of researcher-participant relationships and the often intricate and ambiguous aspects of the research process. These aspects can be thought of as 'unsettling' accounts of research practice – details, dilemmas and complexities around what exactly occurred in research – and the ramifications of these 'subtle issues.'⁶ Despite the potential impact of these factors on research outcomes, they are often overlooked or insufficiently addressed in qualitative research.

The lack of transparency in research, of course, raises concerns about research validity and the accuracy of data. In qualitative interviewing, it is important to recognise that interviews are, in a way, performances. Interviewees may consciously or unconsciously exercise 'expressive control' or 'impression management'⁷ and effectively 'act out' their responses.⁸ Failure to consider the significant unspoken information that surfaces during interviews can considerably undermine the credibility of the data.⁹ Biases can infiltrate the research process. Researchers may unintentionally or unknowingly give participants 'their own voice', especially when the researcher does not share common identities or backgrounds with those they are studying.¹⁰ The representation of participants may be shaped by the researcher's own

⁴ B Harries, 'What's sex got to do with it? When a woman asks questions' (2016) 59 *Women's Studies International Forum* 48.

⁵ D Horsburgh, 'Evaluation of qualitative research (2003) 12 *Journal of Clinical Nursing* 307, 308.

⁶ G Philip and L Bell, 'Thinking critically about rapport and collusion in feminist research: Relationships, contexts and ethical practice' (2017) 61 *Women Studies International Forum* 71; also Horsburgh (n 5).

⁷ E Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (The Bateman Press, Edinburgh 1959).

⁸ K Charmaz and A Bryant, 'Grounded theory and credibility' in Silverman (ed.) *Qualitative Research*, 3rd edn. (Sage, London 2011).

⁹ CK Riessman, 'When gender is not enough: Women interviewing women' (1987) 1 *Gender and Society* 172; D Silverman, *Interpreting Quantitative Data*, 5th edn (Sage, London 2014).

¹⁰ MM Fonow and JA Cook, 'Feminist methodology: New applications in the academy and public policy' (2005) 30 *Signs* 2211.

needs, desires, and academic or political agendas.¹¹ Furthermore, the researcher's position vis-à-vis the researched directly impacts data collection, analysis and the ultimate generation of knowledge.¹² Specifically, the researcher's positioning determines whether subtle nuances within interviews can be identified and, if so, how they are incorporated and interpreted throughout the research process, influencing the knowledge obtained.

The absence of a strong epistemological foundation – reflections on the nature and status of the knowledge – undermines the value of both research and the research methods. As regards the use of interviews as a research methodology, this may lead to erroneous beliefs, such as assuming that interviewing is a natural skill¹³ or that in interviewing researchers' role is 'just asking questions.' Relatedly, some might view this method as more suitable for the preliminary or exploratory phases of qualitative research.¹⁴ To ensure the appropriate and effective use of qualitative interviewing, emphasising reflexivity is crucial. This involves acknowledging and contemplating interviewer's own position in relation to interviewees and its impact on the research. This approach helps in obtaining more robust data, uncovering truth and establishing academic rigour.¹⁵ Thus, reflexivity should be an integral part of research methodology, including feminist methodology.

This article places a focus on reflexivity and examines the concept of researcher positionality within the context of an empirical, feminist study on women in policing in China. The primary aim is to investigate how the dynamics of researcher-participant relationships, as well as the gender and other identities of the researcher, influence the research process. In the

¹¹ PT Clough, *The End(s) of Ethnography: From realism to social criticism* (Sage, Newbury Park 1992); M Crean, 'Minority scholars and insider-outsider researcher status: Challenges along a personal, professional and political continuum' (2018) 19 *Forum Qualitative Social Research*. [ssoar-fqs-2018-1-crean-Minority_Scholars_and_Insider-Outsider_Researcher.pdf](#).

¹² AI Griffith, 'Insider/outsider: Epistemological privilege and mothering work' (1998) 21 *Human Studies* 361.

¹³ Harries (n 4).

¹⁴ Silverman (n 9).

¹⁵ R Berger, 'How I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research' (2013) 15 *Qualitative Research* 219; also Horsburgh (n 5).

article, through a gender lens, I share my own experiences as a female researcher and a former insider, conducting interviews with both female and male police officers as part of a qualitative inquiry on women police. The article explores the benefits and challenges of outsider-insider research, examines the role of gender in the research journey, and scrutinises how the researcher's other identities might impact various facets of the research, including access, information gathering, data analysis, findings and conclusions. The article also discusses the strategies employed to overcome research barriers. By presenting the outsider-insider research as a case study, it underscores the importance of researcher reflexivity in finding the truth about women's experiences and securing scholarly rigour. In addition, it advocates for the value of qualitative interviewing as well as provides engaging narratives shedding light on the experiences of women in Chinese policing.

The article comprises five sections. Following the introduction, the second section sets the scene by conceptualising researcher membership status, with a specific focus on outsider-insider research, researcher's potentially multifaceted identities, and reflexivity in qualitative studies. The third section outlines the methodological context for the case study, laying the foundation for subsequent discussions. In the fourth section, I reflect on my position within the research. The final section of the article broadens the discussion, highlighting its implications and contributions to the fields.

Outsider-Insider Research, Researcher Identities and Positionality

An ample body of literature explores the concept of researcher membership status – insider, outsider or insider-outsider positioning – and its implications for research. Insider research typically involves scholars who are part of the research population they study,¹⁶ sharing the

¹⁶ M Asselin, 'Insider research: issues to consider when doing qualitative research in your own wetting' (2003) 19 *Journal for Nurses in Staff Development* 99.

same perspectives through experiencing similar circumstances.¹⁷ They may also have mutual experiences and knowledge of particular aspects of cultural identity, which they share with the study participants.¹⁸

In insider-outsider research, the situation becomes more nuanced. Researchers may share certain inherent identities – such as gender, age, race, ethnicity, sexuality, social class – with the researched. Despite that they may be recognised as ‘insiders’ in some respects, they do not apparently belong to the research group and may be perceived as outsiders, due to other distinguishing characteristics.¹⁹ This category includes former insiders who retain shared backgrounds – knowledge and experiences – with the research group²⁰ but no longer hold membership status. In practice, outsider and insider roles are relative, fluid and constantly shifting.²¹ While ‘insider-outsider’ and ‘outsider-insider’ may be used interchangeably, in this article I use the term ‘outsider-insider’ research or researcher to emphasise that the researcher was once part of the research population but no longer belongs to it.

The challenges of negotiating one’s membership positionality in qualitative research are widely acknowledged. In her self-reflective study on female senators in the United States, Brown²² drew attention to researcher’s multiple identities and their role in shaping researcher membership status, interactions with the research subjects, data collection and research outcomes. Past research indicates a diverse range of identities, including ascribed

¹⁷ See Berger (n 15).

¹⁸ See K Bhopal, ‘Gender, identity and experience: Researching marginalised groups’ (2010) 33 *Women Studies International Forum* 188.

¹⁹ e.g. Harries (n 4); Crean (n 11).

²⁰ e.g. D Flores, ‘Standing in the middle: Insider/outsider positionality while conducting qualitative research with opposing military veteran political groups’ in *Sage Research Methods Cases Part 2* (Sage, London 2018); M Young, *An Inside Job: Policing and police culture in Britain* (Clarendon, Oxford 1991).

²¹ N Hayfield and C Huxley, ‘Insider and outsider perspectives: Reflections on researcher identities in research with lesbian and bisexual women’ (2015) 12 *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 91.

²² NE Brown, ‘Negotiating the insider-outsider status: Black feminist ethnography and legislative studies’ (2012) 3 *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 19.

characteristics aforementioned,²³ as well as researchers' political, social and cultural stances.²⁴ These identities all influence how researchers position themselves in their research and how they are perceived by participants, ultimately affecting the data they collect.

Positionality – a researcher's perception of their identities in relation to the participants and the research²⁵ – is inherently subjective. A researcher may intend to be an insider due to shared identities with participants but might inadvertently position themselves as an outsider and subsequently be considered and treated as such. In the context of outsider-insider research, the researcher's professional background – a previous occupation for example – or personal identity, like race or gender, usually remain unchanged, but their perceptions and perspectives can evolve with their shifting, newfound status.²⁶ Consequently, the outsider-insider researcher might no longer possess 'insider knowledge' or may misinterpret it. Therefore, critical reflection on researcher positioning becomes imperative in a qualitative feminist study, in which the goal is to explore the subjective experiences of women in Chinese policing, a domain predominantly occupied by men. In the following pages, I present this case study before discussing researcher positionality.

The Case Study: Women in policing in China

My research aimed to examine the experiences of women police in China, primarily using qualitative interviews for data collection and analysis. In this study, I assumed and positioned myself as an outsider-insider researcher. As a former female Chinese police officer, I shared a background and gender with the women officers in the People's Police, whilst my current academic affiliation with a 'foreign' (British) institution placed me in an apparent outsider

²³ Brown (n 22); also P Cotterill, 'Interviewing women: Issues of friendship, vulnerability, and power' (1992) 15 *Women's Studies International Forum* 593; MW Sallee and F Harris III, 'Gender performance in qualitative studies of masculinities' (2011) 11 *Qualitative Research* 409; Harries (n 4); Hayfield and Huxley (n 21).

²⁴ See Berger (n 15); Crean (n 11); Flores (n 20); Riessman (n 9).

²⁵ M Hammond and J Wellington, *Research Methods: The key concepts*, 2nd edn (Routledge, London 2020).

²⁶ Crean (n 11).

position. The interviews with Chinese police officers were conducted over the summer in 2019, spanning three provincial force areas. After lengthy, painstaking negotiations, I secured access to several research sites. During the fieldwork, I recruited a snowball sample through my personal and semi-professional networks and finally conducted interviews with 51 police officers, including 28 female officers.

The interviews took place in various venues, including an office in a policing environment that I was offered to stay for a short period during the fieldwork, the meeting room at the participants' workplace, interviewees' own offices, tea houses, cafés, restaurants and outdoor, convenient places. The shortest interview lasted about 25 minutes and the longest one reached three hours. The material used in this article is drawn from my fieldnotes, including the interview notes and the research diary that I created to record all research-related activities, my observations, informal conversations with police men and women in professional and social settings, my comments on the relevant events and self-reflections.

The study that I reflect upon is part of a larger research project focusing on women police in contemporary China.²⁷ I purposively included male officers in the sample, considering that in the male-dominated institutions like the police, it is crucial to account for the influence of men's attitudes and behaviours on how women are treated, women's self-perceptions,²⁸ and how they 'perform gender'.²⁹ Analysing men's perceptions and expectations of their female colleagues is an essential component of understanding women's experiences. Notably, the inclusion of male respondents in the interviews here was not aimed at achieving gender symmetry in the study; instead, it presented a valuable opportunity to investigate how gender dynamics shaped the research.

²⁷ A Shen, *Women Police in Contemporary China: Gender and policing* (Routledge, London and New York 2022).

²⁸ L Warwick-Booth, *Social Inequality*, 2nd edn (Sage, Los Angeles 2019).

²⁹ C West and DH Zimmerman, 'Doing gender' (1987) 1 *Gender and Society* 125.

It is also worth noting that this article does not predominantly focus on examining women's experiences in policing. Rather, it places the spotlight on self-reflexivity and probes how researcher positionality – primarily, the researcher's membership positioning and gender – can influence the research process and knowledge production. As an additional outcome, the article discusses the intricacies of research interviewing, encompassing research methodologies, data quality and rigour. It also presents narratives that provide insights into the lives of women in Chinese policing.

Self-Reflections on Positionality in the Research Process

My research subjects were police officers in China. Police are knowingly a hard-to-reach population due to the nature of their work, which applies worldwide. In Britain, Young³⁰ wrote that the police, despite their stated willingness to welcome research, typically 'strive to impose rigid control over a system of preferred rules and regulations to negate open enquiry'. These challenges are similarly encountered by researchers studying the Chinese police, where gaining access can be even harder due to the security-conscious approach the communist regime takes. The People's Police are often hesitant to share information with outsiders, especially foreigners.³¹ Furthermore, as we will see, gender, a central theme of this research, could present its own set of difficulties. Unsurprisingly, my outsider status, especially my 'foreign' affiliation, posed an initial barrier to gaining authorisation to enter research sites. However, my previous insider experience, while not guaranteeing access, allowed me to establish connections with several key gatekeepers.

³⁰ Young (n 20) at 10.

³¹ KC Wong, *Chinese Policing: History and Reform* (Peter Lang, New York 2009) at 11.

Access to police officers

Drawing from my prior research experience, I was aware that, despite the challenges, recruiting participants from the public sector through personal networks was viable.³² However, I first attempted to secure access through official channels in the hope of achieving a more representative sample. To initiate this process, I approached M-1, the head of a police unit, who had been introduced to me by a contact within the regional police. The following excerpt documents my negotiation with this gatekeeper.

M-1: Why do you have to research policewomen?

Author: ... Researching women in policing has been an established sub-field in policing studies globally, but there is very limited information available about women police in China, including, for example, who they are, their roles, and their experiences as females in police work. I believe this research can fill a large void and contribute significantly to the international literature.

M-1: So, you plan to publish your findings outside China? [pause] Why should we let other people know about our female officers and what they do? Absolutely no point[!] And, you should know that such information could be sensitive and possibly confidential.

Author: Actually, I wasn't aware that this information might be considered confidential.

M-1: [pause] What about researching [a specific crime] that is widespread in our region and other parts of China? That kind of research could be more valuable and is something academics should spend their time on. I can help you arrange meetings with the investigators...

Author: Oh, that sounds good.

In this conversation, the male senior officer obviously recognised my former insider status, by wording such as 'why should *we* let *other people* know about *our* female officers'. He assumed

³² See A Shen, *Women Judges in Contemporary China: Gender, judging and living* (London: Palgrave 2017).

that I shared with him the same perceptions – sensitiveness and the perceived confidential nature of the research – and offered me an alternative opportunity to do policing research, rather than declined my request for entry completely.

Although the result of the negotiation was not unexpected, it was concerning at the time. In my reflective journal, I documented what was said during my meeting with M-1, the barriers I faced, and what else I could possibly do to secure access. I also noted my emotional encounters: ‘... my feelings now resonate with other feminist researchers in similar circumstances; and yet, this failed attempt forms a part of the narrative of the research’. This experience, indeed, further reinforced my conclusion that gender is not a concern in Chinese policing, that the need of women in police work and the significance of researching women in law enforcement are often disregarded.³³

Still regarding research access, in the same force area, I was introduced by the same contact to F-1, a female gatekeeper, who responded to my request differently. F-1 was in her early thirties and a junior member of top leadership of a police sub-bureau. She acknowledged my former insider status at the start of our first meeting and was more open and supportive of my research.

F-1: They say you were a police officer. Did this make you study women police?
What do you want to know?

Author: Indeed. Actually, I have been asking myself these questions. I think one important reason is that Chinese women police are virtually invisible in international literature, and I’d like to introduce *us* to the world, who *we* are, what *we* do and *our* experiences in the policing world. I am particularly interested in female leaders, like yourself, and wonder how you are able to reach a position of power in the male-dominated institution [original emphasis].

³³ See Shen (n 27).

F-1: That's interesting [smiling]. You know part of my job is HR management and team building... Women here are rarely interested in career advancement... I hope your research can find something that motivates female officers to be a bit more ambitious.

Author: Wow, you are one of a few people who truly understand why I am doing this research. Would you be interested in participating in my interviews?

F-1: Sure...

This fieldnote excerpt illustrates a candid, open and enthusiastic conversation. Despite being strangers initially, our shared background might have bridged the social distance³⁴ between us. Our shared gender and the budding woman-to-woman bond³⁵ that developed during our meeting were possibly also factors contributing to the positive outcome. Not only did the female police leader herself participated in my study, but she also facilitated most interviews within her own work unit and a neighbouring police station. As a senior officer in the region, her support lent credibility to my research, making it easier to secure interviews with other officers.

Reflecting on this experience, my former insider status allowed me to approach and gain the trust of some gatekeepers. Our shared gender – characterised by shared experience, understanding and concerns – and the fact that I was a ‘doubly former insider’, being a former officer and a former policewoman may have played a vital role in establishing rapport with the women leaders (and female participants) in this study. This combination of outsider-insider status and gender in the case study significantly impacted research access, the sample strategy, the composition and size of the sample. Embracing researcher positionality – with a critical awareness of my own positioning and identity – was instrumental in collecting, documenting and effectively analysing the data.

³⁴ J Finch, “‘It’s great to have someone to talk to’: Ethics and politics of interviewing women’ in Bell and Roberts (eds) *Social Researching: Politics, problems and practice* (Routledge, London 1984).

³⁵ A Oakley, ‘Interviewing women: A contradiction in terms?’ in Roberts (ed.) *Doing Feminist Research* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1981); also Riessman (n 9).

Interviewing as a female, outsider-insider researcher

Individually, police officers worldwide tend to hold conservative political and moral views, often cultivating a strong sense of internal solidarity and social isolation.³⁶ Collectively, the police profession has traditionally been male-centric, with masculinity deeply ingrained in police subculture.³⁷ The Chinese police are no exception.³⁸ In China, the law strictly prohibits police officers from challenging public policy, the Party-state or the police organisation. As a result, officers often refrain from expressing personal opinions and commonly adhere to mainstream perspectives without deviation. China's official statements and media consistently and persistently proclaim gender equality as a state policy, presenting men and women as equals within Chinese society.³⁹ This portrayal is widely embraced within the police.⁴⁰

In this context, the researcher's former insider status can offer advantages in building rapport and facilitating the capture of subtle details during data collection and analysis. It is suggested that being an insider can foster a sense of trust and openness among study participants.⁴¹ With the shared experiential position, an insider researcher, often possessing 'insights and the ability to understand implied content', is more 'sensitised'⁴² – being attuned to the intricacies of the data – and better equipped to grasp nuanced details in the research. In the case study, the researcher, functioning as an outsider-insider when interviewing Chinese

³⁶ R Reiner, *The Politics of the People*, 3rd edn (Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000).

³⁷ See V Garcia, 'Difference in the police department: Women policing and doing gender' (2003) 19 *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 330; T Shelley, MS Morabito and J Tobin-Gurley, 'Gendered institutions and gender roles: Understanding the experiences of women in policing' (2011) 24 *Criminal Justice Studies* 351; also Young (n 20).

³⁸ See Z Chen, *Measuring Police Subcultural Perceptions: A study of frontline police officers in China* (Springer, Heidelberg 2016).

³⁹ V Garcia and A Shen, 'An Equity-First Policy for Women Police Around the World: Strategies for change' (2023) 47(2) *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice* 131.

⁴⁰ Shen (n 27).

⁴¹ SC Dwyer and JL Buckle, 'The space between: On being an insider-outsider in qualitative research' (2009) 8 *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 54.

⁴² Berger (n 15) at 223.

police officers, assumed a ‘dual role’ benefiting from this positioning while confronting several challenges.

As regards advantages, knowing the culture, I had an overall clear understanding of what questions needed to be asked, how they should be structured, and how to pose them to participants to ensure that they responded openly and comfortably during the interviews. Past research indicates that participants are often more willing to share their stories where they feel a shared connection of feelings and experiences with the researcher.⁴³ This finding is corroborated in the current study.

During the interview, for instance, I asked F-2, a 47-year-old policewoman, about the issue of sexual harassment – a recurring theme in international gender policing literature.⁴⁴ Much like many other participants, she initially responded briefly, stating that, ‘You should know... this sort of thing is everywhere, not an issue [only] within the police,’ and halted there. Overall, my interview with F-2 proceeded well, and we even connected on Weixin, a Chinese smartphone App similar to Facebook or WhatsApp. On the following weekend, F-2 messaged me, inviting me to go cycling with her. During our ‘sister-to-sister talk’⁴⁵ on this leisure activity, she revisited the topic and discussed it candidly with me.

Knowing that she had provided me with valuable ‘data’ for my research, F-2 requested that I not reveal her identity, despite my earlier assurances regarding anonymity. I promptly recorded her account upon returning to my hotel room. In this instance, the shared experience

⁴³ See Bhopal (n 18); Dwyer and Buckle (n 41).

⁴⁴ e.g. CS Carter, ‘Sexual harassment and police discipline’ (2004) 27(4) *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management* 512; L-Y Huang and L Cao, ‘Exploring sexual harassment in a police department in Taiwan’ (2008) 31(2) *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management* 324; J Brown, I Gouseti and C Fife-Schaw, ‘Sexual harassment experienced by police staff serving in England, Wales and Scotland: A descriptive exploration of incidence, antecedents and harm’ (2017) 91(4) *The Police Journal: Theory, Practice and Principles* 356; H Davis, S Lawrence, E Wilson, et al., “‘No one likes a grass’ Female police officers’ experience of workplace sexual harassment: A qualitative study’ (2023) 25(2) *Journal of Police Science & Management* 183; also Cunningham and Ramshaw (n 1); Garcia and Shen (n 39).

⁴⁵ Brown (n 22).

and shared gender played a pivotal role in building trust, rapport, even friendship, and ultimately obtaining reliable information. In addition, qualities such as flexibility, reciprocity and sensitivity to potential biases are essential components of successful research interviews and contribute to the generation of high-quality data.⁴⁶

In data collection, my prior insider knowledge allowed me to remain attuned to the participants' responses, enabling me to accurately perceive explicit and implied meanings. Throughout the interviews, I diligently paid attention to all aspects of the participants' communication, including their spoken words and non-verbal expressions,⁴⁷ to ensure the fidelity of the data. A notable example emerged when discussing the deployment of female officers outdoors to respond to emergency calls. Male interviewees overwhelmingly concurred that it was appropriate not to assign female officers outdoor duties of this nature. They believed that policewomen would be reluctant to handle a wide range of situations in law enforcement, including both 'tough' scenarios like violence and 'rough' incidents which were frequently exemplified by managing a half-naked, intoxicated man. In contrast, the majority of female interviewees, especially those in grassroots policing, rejected this male perception.

Drawing on my experience as a former insider and my astute observation of participants' tones, facial expression and body language, I was convinced that the accounts of both male and female respondents were genuine and authentic. The male officers eloquently articulated their beliefs which aligned with existing literature, suggesting that the state, the gendered institution and men presume and act on the notion of women's needs and male protection, rather than women themselves.⁴⁸ In my role as the researcher, I faithfully recorded these seemingly

⁴⁶ Rabe-Hemp (n 1); Cotterill (n 23); Oakley (n 35).

⁴⁷ Goffman (n 7).

⁴⁸ A Shen, 'Women's motivations for becoming a police officer: A Chinese case study on women in policing, *Women & Criminal Justice* (2022). DOI: [10.1080/08974454.2022.2060898](https://doi.org/10.1080/08974454.2022.2060898); also Shen (n 32).

contradictory accounts as they were presented and embarked on the task of deciphering and contextualising them during data analysis.

Along with the benefits, as others warned, in this outsider-insider research, I sometimes experienced a kind of ‘role confusion’.⁴⁹ Initially, knowing the ‘usual’ cultural practice led me to engage in a degree of self-censorship that hampered data collection. My early reflection on the first few interviews indicated that I consciously eschewed several questions to evade awkwardness, inhibition and potential denial from participants. This self-censorship was, in fact, unnecessary given my particular researcher identity: I was not or no longer a colleague of the interviewees who might otherwise not want to share some of their personal experiences with me or fear being judged by a peer.⁵⁰ Reflexivity allowed me to make adjustments in the subsequent interviews.

In research interviewing, the power dynamic also significantly impacts the data obtained, often leading participants to withhold information due to the perceived researcher-researched divide.⁵¹ This power relation is especially crucial in gender policing research, as illustrated in this case study, for two major reasons. First, policing inherently embodies authority, with police officers universally expecting a certain degree of deference from the public.⁵² In China, the police belong to one of the most powerful government agencies.⁵³ In this research, male participants comprised frontline law enforcement officers, police academics, as well as individuals in supervisory, managerial and command positions. A small number of female respondents held mid-level police leadership roles. Paradoxically, researchers are traditionally considered to be part of a respected social class and maybe ‘powerful and arrogant’. However,

⁴⁹ e.g. PA Adler and P Adler, *Membership Roles in Field Research* (Sage, Newbury Park 1987); Asselin (n 16).

⁵⁰ Young (n 20).

⁵¹ Bhopal (n 18).

⁵² M Silvestri, *Women in Charge: Policing, gender and leadership* (Willan, Cullompton 2003).

⁵³ Shen (n 48).

in some research, especially in the case of outsider researchers, they may find themselves in vulnerable or powerless positions when interacting with research participants.⁵⁴

Second, the current research involved examining police managers – potentially a situation referred to as ‘researching up’⁵⁵ – introducing an inherent power imbalance in favour of the interviewees. While in feminist research it sometimes flips the script, with female researchers asserting more control in interviews with women,⁵⁶ this did not appear to be the case when interviewing female police managers in my study. The impact of gender on power dynamics and its effect on data collection, as well as my experience in balancing these delicate researcher-participant relationships, warrant a thorough discussion, to which I will return.

Overall, in the process of data collection, I maintained honesty, sensitivity and enthusiasm. I believed that my understanding of participants’ contextual circumstances, coupled with academic integrity and my passion for the study, could be seen, which might encourage the participating officers to open up and share their stories, personal views and feelings. Admittedly, not all interviews went as I had hoped. Some interviewees spoke very little, but what they did offer remained important to the research. Given the considerable restrictions on access, any insights were valuable for truth finding and knowledge production. For instance, my interview with the leader of an all-men crime investigation team lasted about 25 minutes, and my notes did not even fill one A4 page. Still, this interview provided rich and invaluable information that I have used in my research output.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Cotterill (n 23); Crean (n 11).

⁵⁵ N Puwar, ‘Reflections on interviewing women MPs’ (1997) 2 *Sociological Research Online*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.5153/sro.19>.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Shen (n 27).

Analysing and interpreting data

A researcher's membership positioning, intertwined with other researcher identities, significantly affects data analysis. In the case study, I adopted a grounded theory approach⁵⁸ and manually analysed the interview data. While reading and re-reading the fieldnotes, my fresh memory allowed me to vividly recall the scene of each interview: the venue, the participant's appearance, voice, tones, hesitations, pauses, facial expressions and postures. All of these little details helped me discern the true and deeper meaning behind the words spoken and understand what was of particular importance to the person conveying the messages. This approach served to prevent the important information from being incidentally 'cleaned up'⁵⁹ and allowed me to thoroughly investigate how my positionality might influence the recording and interpretation of the data. Reflexivity was particularly valuable when discrepancies arose between my findings and those in previous research.

In the existing literature, the occupational environment often signals to women that policing is not their domain. Despite advancements made by women in the police profession, discrimination against female officers persists.⁶⁰ Women have been battling to secure the same roles in law enforcement as men, often feeling pressured to conform to male standards.⁶¹ Interestingly, the female police officers in my research provided a rather different narrative.⁶²

⁵⁸ B Glaser and A Strauss, *The Theory of Grounded Theory* (Aldine, Chicago 1967).

⁵⁹ Riessman (n 9).

⁶⁰ e.g. J Brown and M Silvestri, 'Women police in the United Kingdom: Transforming leadership' in Rabe-Hemp & Garcia (eds) *Women policing across the globe: Shared challenges and successes in the integration of women police worldwide* (Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham 2020); Shelley and others (n 37).

⁶¹ C Rabe-Hemp, 'The status of women police across the globe: Women's voices from the field' in Rabe-Hemp and Garcia (eds), *Women policing across the globe: Shared challenges and successes in the integration of women police worldwide* (Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham 2020); Rabe-Hemp (n 1); Silvestri (n 52); J Acker, 'Gendered organisations and intersectionality: Problems and possibilities' (2012) 31 *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal* 214.

⁶² See Shen (n 27); also Shen (n 48); A Shen and DM Schulz, 'Trajectory of women's advancement in policing: A comparative study between China and the United States' (2022) 11 *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*. <https://www.crimejusticejournal.com/article/view/2344>.

Initially, I found myself somewhat perplexed, and it would have been easy to rely on the ‘commonly accepted generalisation’ that the participants’ accounts were ‘coloured’⁶³ and influenced by a desire to protect the police organisation or themselves. Alternatively, I could have assumed that, like other Chinese women, they might have customarily chosen not to reveal personal gender-specific challenges.⁶⁴ However, upon re-assessing the data and considering both the spoken and unspoken languages, my own previous experience, and the broader local socio-institutional context, I became convinced of the authenticity of their storytelling, reflections and narratives. During this process, I often found myself strongly concurred with the female police officers in the study. Consequently, my own positioning played a vital role in data analysis. This finding aligns with a ‘Southern’ point of view⁶⁵ that challenges the perception, rooted in a liberal feminist notion, that female police in Asia, Africa and Latin America, who remain in gender-specific roles, are lagging behind their Anglophone counterparts in the journey towards gender equality and are unhappy with their positions.

Notably, in my effort to comprehend the data within the Chinese context, I consistently reminded myself of research objectivity. This was to prevent any misrepresentation that might arise from my former insider status, where I could potentially engage in a ‘cover-up’ due to ‘loyalty tugs’,⁶⁶ or from an outsider perspective where I might interpret the data through a ‘Western’ or Northern lens. In the research, I maintained that my goal was to honestly, genuinely and accurately convey the voices and perspectives of the participants.

⁶³ Berger (n 15).

⁶⁴ C Wylie, ‘Femininity and authority: Women in China’s private sector’ in McLaren (ed.) *Chinese Women – Living and working* (RoutledgeCurzon, London and New York 2004).

⁶⁵ See K Carrington, J Rodgers, M Sozzo and MV Puyol ‘Re-theorizing the progress of women in policing: An alternative perspective from the Global South’ (2023) 27(2) *Theoretical Criminology* 283.

⁶⁶ T Brannick and D Coghlan, ‘In defence of being native: The case for insider academic research’ (2007) 10 *Organizational Research Methods* 59.

The roles of gender and other researcher identities

A researcher's gender assumes a prominent role in studies that revolve around gender performance.⁶⁷ It can influence participants' willingness to share their thoughts on gender-related questions and lead them to varied responses to the same queries.⁶⁸ The gender of the interviewer can sometimes complicate matters, particularly when a female researcher is questioning male participants.⁶⁹ For a female interviewer, her gender status might overshadow her role as a researcher.⁷⁰ Male participants might relegate the female researcher to subordinate positions⁷¹ and attempt to assert control during the interviews. These gender dynamics can introduce complexities in the interactions between female interviewers and male interviewees.⁷² In my research, the focus was on examining women's subjective experiences in policing, and male officers were invited to partake. Essentially, it was a study on women involving male participants, conducted by a female researcher. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, this study included interviews with police managers, potentially introducing complex power asymmetries and gender dynamics into the research. Several aspects of this complexity deserve particular consideration.

First, in the case study, male participants did not appear uncomfortable being studied by a female researcher,⁷³ as the study focused on women. In general, the police men and women I came across during the fieldwork were friendly and willing to help. Within the interviews, the participants all seemed at ease. However, some male police leaders were more relaxed than

⁶⁷ e.g. JN Gurney, 'Not one of the guys: The female researcher in a male-dominated setting' (1985) 8 *Qualitative Sociology* 42; R Horn, 'Not "one of the boys": Women researching the police' (1997) 6 *Journal of Gender Studies* 297.

⁶⁸ Sallee & Harris III (n 23).

⁶⁹ See e.g. T Arendell, 'Reflections on the researcher-researched relationship: A woman interviewing men' (1997) 30 *Qualitative Sociology* 341; D Lee, 'Interviewing men: Vulnerability and dilemmas' (1997) 20 *Women Studies International Forum* 553; Harries (n 4).

⁷⁰ Gurney (n 67).

⁷¹ Horn (n 67).

⁷² e.g. T Miller, 'Telling the difficult things: Creating spaces for disclosure, rapport and 'collusion' in qualitative interviews' (2017) 61 *Women Studies International Forum* 81.

⁷³ cf. Harries (n 4).

others and occasionally made contemptuous remarks about policewomen. I also observed that some policemen, typically those in supervisory or managerial positions, tended to ‘manage the topics.’⁷⁴ When interviewing these male participants, I remained vigilant about maintaining control and constantly steered the conversation back on track politely. Conversely, a small number of participants, mostly female officers in rural, grassroots policing, were laconic or reserved their responses, even when there were no apparent barriers between the researcher and the participants. It is worth noting that there is not a clearly gendered pattern of power relations evident in the data obtained. Throughout the research, I maintained ‘friendly working relationships’⁷⁵ with all participants, regardless of their gender, age or seniority.

Second, interviewing police officials – typically, individuals in positions of power within a remarkably powerful criminal justice institution in China – presents unique challenges. While I conducted interviews with both male and female leaders, my primary focus was on women in police leadership. Female researchers, such as Puwar⁷⁶ and Brown⁷⁷ who were then both doctoral researchers interviewing female political elites, have noted that when interviewing individuals in high-ranking positions, including powerful women, researchers often need to negotiate control of the interview situation. Talking of interviewing ‘women in charge’, Silvestri⁷⁸ revealed her experience, as a feminist researcher, with senior female police officers in Britain and recognised the complex nature of ‘the sharing of womanhood’ in the context of policing, which is heavily influenced by rank, hierarchy and the associated power dynamics.

My research was conducted within a notably distinct social setting compared to Western contexts. In China, feminism is not endorsed by the state, nor is it widely embraced within

⁷⁴ Arendell (n 69).

⁷⁵ J Acker, K Barry and J Esseveld, ‘Objectivity and truth: Problems in doing feminist research’ (1983) 6 *Women’s Studies International Forum* 423; Oakley (n 35).

⁷⁶ Puwar (n 55)

⁷⁷ Brown (n 22).

⁷⁸ Silvestri (n 52) at 10.

mainstream society, and feminist ideas are often not readily accepted among female professionals.⁷⁹ Therefore, during the fieldwork, I made a conscious decision not to openly identify myself as a feminist scholar to avoid potential controversies that might hinder my access to participants. In the interviews I refrained from signalling any overtly feminist cues that might trigger participants to exercise ‘expressive control’.⁸⁰ Instead, following other feminist scholars, I conveyed to the female police leaders (and any other participant) my genuine interest in women’s experiences and highlighted where appropriate or insinuated our shared experiences, mutual understanding or common gender.⁸¹ This strategy appeared to be effective, as despite the challenges, the majority of female police managers I invited to participate in the study accepted my invitation. They openly shared their perspectives on women in Chinese policing and their own personal stories as women in police and police leadership.

A noteworthy consideration when reflecting on my experience in researching female police leaders here is that none of the women managers I interviewed were on the top echelon in the regional police hierarchy (leadership of provincial or major municipal police administration). And their authority was primarily confined to the ‘women’s fields’, which is distinct from that of their male management peers.⁸² Thus, they may not be considered ‘the powerful’⁸³ in policing, and I, as a researcher, was apparently not an early career scholar. This may have resulted in somewhat ‘status matching’ – a level of parity or shared status – between the researcher and the researched. An example of this parity was evident in my interaction with F-3, the highest-ranking female participant, whom I first met on the day of the interview. After

⁷⁹ See A Shen, ‘Women judges who judge women offenders: A Chinese case study on gender and judging’ (2020) 27(1) *International Journal of the Legal Profession* 63; also Shen (n 32).

⁸⁰ Goffman (n 7).

⁸¹ e.g. A Oakley, ‘Interviewing women again: Power, time and the gift’ (2016) 50 *Sociology* 195; Brown (n 22); Puwar (n 55); Silvestri (n 52).

⁸² J Brown and F Heidensohn, *Gender and Policing: Comparative perspective* (Macmillan, Basingstoke 2000).

⁸³ J Fitz and D Halpin, ‘Ministers and mandarins: Educational research in elite settings’ in Walford (ed.) *Researching the Powerful in Education* (Routledge, London 1994).

providing a well elaborated personal account of women in commanding positions within the People's Police, she requested that I reassure her anonymity while seeing me off at the gate of her workplace.

Third, along with gender, the multifaceted identities of both the researcher and participants were interwoven, potentially affecting the dynamics of the interviewer-interviewee interactions during the interviewing and the subsequent interpretation of data. In the interviews, I inquired male police officers about the typical roles of policewomen in their units and in policing in general. This elicited a range of responses. For instance, M-2, a senior member of top leadership in a police sub-bureau, responded with a notable degree of scepticism:

M-2: What do they do? They do nothing [shaking his head and rolling his eyes].

Author: What do you mean? They get paid and must do something...

M-2: Well [pause], they don't want to work [hard]. If you ask them to work outside, they won't go. If you ask them to work in frontline policing, they'd say 'no'. [If] you ask them why, they'd say, 'I don't know how to do those jobs', or 'I cannot do it', and they do not want to learn[!] They cannot even take interview notes[!] They are lazy...

Another male manager, similar in age and rank to M-2, echoed these sentiments though with somewhat less intensity. Conversely, M-3 – the head of a rural police station in M-2's force region and a younger officer in his mid-thirties – offered his perspective, which aligned with M-2's account, but in a much milder and more amiable tone:

M-3: They [pause] do not do much, I mean, in operational police work. Our [the only one female officer] *nei-qin* [internal operator; administrator] is unable to take interview notes, and she doesn't want to learn. She is good, though. Female officers are *also* always very busy doing *their own jobs* [original emphasis]. They are deft at what they do.

While these male participants all spoke candidly and frankly, there were noticeable differences based on their age and perhaps rank, too. For instance, when compared with the older male

officials, the younger and lower ranking policemen, like M-3, appeared to take a more thoughtful approach. This contrast is not surprising and can be attributed to several factors, including the researcher's gender, age and professional status, which may have influenced participants and introduced social desirability bias into their responses.⁸⁴ It is plausible that the younger generations of police, typically composed of degree-holding graduate entrants,⁸⁵ took into account that the researcher, in their eye an experienced scholar in Britain where modern police originated, might judge them based on their responses and behaviour. They might have considered what the researcher would like to hear about women in Chinese policing.

The older and more senior male police managers, on the other hand, may be more entrenched in traditional gender norms governing male and female behaviour.⁸⁶ Their attitudes and behaviour might be deeply embedded in masculinity discourse,⁸⁷ a result of years of socialisation within policing. Consequently, they might not find it necessary to carefully calculate and manage their responses to questions about women in the police. In a 'researching up' scenario where they feel more in control,⁸⁸ these male senior officers might 'perform' less, camouflaging little but revealing more personal views on women in policing through their language and expressions. Furthermore, in this study, my researcher status might have superseded my gender. As we have seen, reflecting on positionality allowed me to capture many nuances that might have otherwise remained hidden.⁸⁹ These subtle details have been instrumental in making sense of some unexpected and 'irregular' findings.

In addition, the researcher's multiple identities – gender, age, origin, ethnicity, social class, and professional background – all likely played significant roles in the research process.

⁸⁴ CL William and EJ Heikes, 'The importance of researcher's gender in the in-depth interview: Evidence from two case studies of male nurses' (1993) 7 *Gender and Society* 280.

⁸⁵ Shen (n 48).

⁸⁶ AE McLaren (ed.), *Chinese Women – Living and working* (RoutledgeCurzon, London and New York 2004).

⁸⁷ Chen (n 38).

⁸⁸ Puwar (n 55).

⁸⁹ Berger (n 15).

From the perspective of the participants in the case study, I once belonged to their community, but now I am an outsider working outside China, yet still maintaining a strong connection as a native Chinese. My appearance, in line with traditional Chinese norms for clothing, hairstyle and mannerisms, presented me as a middle-aged female academic and a typical middle-class woman in China. This enabled me to fit well into various social categories among Chinese police officers, especially among the female participants.⁹⁰ This, in turn, likely contributed to their acceptance of me and their trust that I was a perceptive listener. My researcher identity was inevitably perceived by the participants and had affected their responses.

In the case study, a sizeable number of female officers expressed hesitation in recommending other women to join the police. They feared that an increase in female recruits might dilute the ‘privileges’ (informal differential, compassionate treatment) that policewomen currently enjoy as a minority gender group in an organisation predominantly male. Some officers raised concerns about the ‘status issue’ linked to the similarity of the police uniform to those of auxiliary police (*fu-jing*) and civilian security guards. Others nonchalantly noted that the heavier, dirtier and more tedious ‘women’s jobs’ were often assigned to female *fu-jing*, who, as contracted employees, received substantially lower pay compared with police officers and had no job security. Given my previous insider status and my perceived researcher identity, the participants openly shared their observations, perceptions and feelings.

These accounts must be understood within the local social and cultural landscapes. As an outsider-insider researcher, these findings underscore that not only gender but also social and class positions of female police officers – well-educated middle-class women holding secure, higher salaried jobs in an elite profession⁹¹ – play a role in shaping their experiences within the Chinese police organisation. Reflexivity has enabled me to critically listen to participants’

⁹⁰ See Shen (n 48).

⁹¹ *ibid.*

narratives, truthfully report their experiences and avoid imposing my own perspective or judgements on them⁹². As a researcher, my role is to learn and understand how these women police officers arrived their current positions ⁹³ and the realities they face.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article has explored the profound impact of researcher positionality on the research process and the importance of reflexivity. Through a detailed examination of a case study – an outsider-insider feminist inquiry primarily using interviews as a methodological device – the article has shed light on the complex and dynamic nature of qualitative research. The case study centred on Chinese women’s experiences within the police organisation, a domain typically restricts academic researchers. By revealing the intricate layers hidden ‘behind the scenes’ of the research, this article has illustrated that qualitative interviewing is a complex, multifaceted, ever-evolving endeavour, in which a researcher’s positionality – encompassing factors such as membership status, gender, age, race, ethnicity and social class – plays a pivotal role. The crux of this article aligns with existing academic discourse,⁹⁴ underlining the importance of meticulous attention to subtle nuances through reflective introspection regarding researcher positionality and research activities. Such a practice is essential for the evaluation, validation and meaningful interpretation of the acquired data. Neglecting this crucial facet of research, we may be misled by ‘the apparent linearity, thereby obscuring all sorts of unexpected possibilities’,⁹⁵ and leading to distorted representation of findings, rather than a genuine comprehension of truths. Critical self-questioning in research, instead, positions us to unearth nuanced realities that might otherwise be obscured by a superficially linear approach.

⁹² Clough (n 11).

⁹³ Crean (n 11).

⁹⁴ e.g. P Gibson and L Abrams, ‘Racial difference in engaging, recruiting, and interviewing African American women in qualitative research’ (2003) 2 *Qualitative Social Work* 457; Brown (n 22).

⁹⁵ GM Russel and NH Kelly, ‘Research as interacting dialogue process: Implications for reflexivity’ (2002) 3 *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*. <https://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/831/1807>.

The primary focus of this article is outsider-insider positionality. It highlights the advantages of this researcher status, including enhanced access, trust and rapport, and a deeper understanding of data, due to the researcher's connection with the researched. However, also because of the researcher-participant connection or bond, maintaining an appropriate distance from participants can be a challenge for outsider-insider researchers. Outsider-insider researchers – in fact, all researchers – must remain sensitive to preclude imposing their own experiences, perceptions and values on participants.⁹⁶

Indeed, insider-outsider and other identity boundaries can be blurry.⁹⁷ In the case study, there were distinct temporal, spatial and notional distances between me, the external researcher, and the Chinese female police officers I studied. Having lived and worked outside China for over two decades, my identities have naturally evolved and blended with my cultural upbringing. This has created a meaningful separation that did not need me to artificially 'manufacture.'⁹⁸ A related advantage of this distance is the minimal presence of 'comparison' and, possibly, the absence of 'competition'⁹⁹ or 'peer pressure'¹⁰⁰ within the researcher-researched relationship. Furthermore, my academic work in Britain allowed for a level of intellectual detachment. This detachment enabled me to observe and critically analyse the routine occurrences in Chinese policing, particularly the pervasive 'gender issues' that often disadvantage female police officers but are commonly overlooked by insiders.¹⁰¹ Yet, this position came with a caveat. I remained acutely aware of the potential danger of self-

⁹⁶ P Drake, 'Grasping at methodological understanding: A cautionary tale from insider research' (2010) 33 *International Journal of Research and Method in Education* 85; Riessman (n 9).

⁹⁷ Hayfield and Huxley (n 21).

⁹⁸ cf. G McCracken, *The Long Interview* (Sage, Newbury Park 1988).

⁹⁹ Berger (n 15).

¹⁰⁰ Young (n 20).

¹⁰¹ AP Cohen, 'Producing data' in Ellen (ed.) *Ethnographic Research* (Academic Press, London 1984).

importance, a pitfall that can befall outsider researchers, and diligently acted to ensure that my perspective did not block me hearing the valuable voices of the women police officers.¹⁰²

In addition to exploring the dynamics of outsider-insider positioning in a study of women's experiences within a gendered institution,¹⁰³ this article has examined the role that gender plays in the research process. Notably, apart from my own sense of a 'bond' between me, a female researcher, and the female participants, I did not discern any clearly distinct gender-based pattern in the power dynamics between the researcher and the participants. My own experiences as a female researcher seemed to be more influenced by local circumstances than by my gender. When navigating access to the powerful law enforcement agency, I occasionally felt frustrated and even helpless, but I did not feel these challenges were inherently gender specific. Likewise, during the interviews, I discovered that the feeling of control, or the lack of it, was not strongly associated with gender. I certainly did not encounter even a hint of vulnerability or powerlessness.¹⁰⁴ Both male and female participants displayed a wide range of communication styles. Some were loquacious, engaging and enthusiastic particularly when discussing topics of personal interest. Others were more reserved. It became evident that beyond gender, individual factors, such as personality, professional status and age, all played significant roles in shaping the quantity and quality of the data collected.

In my reflection on the impact of gender on the research, an intriguing observation emerged: both male and female participants inevitably 'performed' the police men and women that are expected of in China but displayed interesting distinctions. Male participants did not hesitate to present themselves as dominant players within the police organisation, whilst female officers appeared to readily accept their existing status as a group. This observation seems to

¹⁰² P Cloke, P Cooke, J Cursons, P Milbourne and R Widdowfield, 'Ethics, reflexivity and research: Encounters with homeless people' (2000) 3 *Ethics, Place & Environment* 133.

¹⁰³ J Acker, 'Gendered institution: From sex roles to gendered institution' (1992) 21 *Contemporary Sociology* 565.

¹⁰⁴ cf. C Smart, *The Ties that Bind: Law, marriage and the reproduction of patriarchal relationships* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1984).

be at odds with China's stated gender equality policy, which police officers are expected to uphold. One potential explanation for this disparity lies in differing conceptions of gender equality between China and Western countries.¹⁰⁵ In Chinese policing, roles are traditionally segregated by gender, and there is neither an expectation nor a desire for female officers to engage in the full spectrum of police work. Consequently, there is little need for them to 'do gender' to fit within this male-centred profession. Policing in China remains a men's world,¹⁰⁶ where Western notions of gender equality is perceived as inapplicable.¹⁰⁷ Additionally, the shared gendered experience, whether among women or men, may not be adequate to surmount the structural barriers imposed by differences in status and social class.¹⁰⁸ This underlines the complex interplay of multiple identities, both of the researcher and the participants, and their collective influence on the research process, data obtained and the subsequent findings.

Reflexivity leads me to ponder whether a different researcher – whether they be a Chinese police academic, a complete outsider scholar, a male researcher, or any other incarnation – would have gathered the same information, interpreted the data in a similar way and reached identical or similar conclusions. What is certain is that my unique researcher identity was a vital part of the research process,¹⁰⁹ and it put me in a privileged position to uncover truths in this inquiry into gender policing in China.

This article makes several important contributions to academic research. First, through the case study, it makes a convincing case for the use of interviews as a deliberate and effective research method. The discussion presented here bolsters the argument that academic interviews are not coincidental but carefully constructed tools.¹¹⁰ Given that interviews will continue to

¹⁰⁵ Garcia and Shen (n 39); Shen and Schulz (n 62).

¹⁰⁶ Shen (n 27).

¹⁰⁷ Shen (n 48).

¹⁰⁸ Cotterill (n 23).

¹⁰⁹ L Finlay, 'Reflexivity: An essential component for all research?' (1998) 61 *British Journal of Occupational Therapy* 453.

¹¹⁰ J Potter, 'Two kinds of natural' (2002) 4 *Discourse Studies* 539.

play a major role in scholarly research,¹¹¹ especially in fields like feminist and socio-legal studies in which understanding human lives is paramount, researchers must persist in advancing this method, by demonstrating its rigour, credibility and efficacy in data collection and analysis. As illustrated earlier, reflexivity is a crucial practice that promotes transparent, rigorous and sensitised qualitative research. Importantly, it requires knowledge, experience and skills to facilitate reflection on the researcher's role in the study, thereby ensuring transparency.¹¹²

Second, the article underscores the intricacy of critical reflection in the research process, which can be deeply personal. It demands not only insights but also the willingness and courage to delve into the researcher's true self, inner world and emotional encounters. This undertaking is undeniably important, particularly for feminist scholars, as critical reflexivity aligns with 'the mission of constructing meaningful, trustworthy and authoritative stories of women's lives.'¹¹³ Thus, this article makes an additional contribution to the body of feminist and qualitative research literature.

In a recent work, Carrington and colleagues¹¹⁴ elucidate the unique value of Southern feminism in the global transfer of theory and practice, aligning with the perspective of Connell¹¹⁵ that Southern feminist theories encompass a mosaic of epistemologies. This article reflects upon a feminist study examining women's experience in a once peripheral Southern territory.¹¹⁶ It was conducted by a female outsider-insider researcher based in the North, originally hailing from a Southern country, with multiple researcher identities. Therefore, the

¹¹¹ Silverman (n 9).

¹¹² Miller (n 72).

¹¹³ Oakley (n 81) at 209.

¹¹⁴ Carrington and others (n 65).

¹¹⁵ R Connell, 'Meeting at the edge of fear: Theory on a world scale' (2015) 16 *Feminist Theory* 49.

¹¹⁶ Shen and Schulz (n 62).

third contribution of this article lies in enriching international epistemologies by incorporating Southern elements. Moreover, considering the scarcity of English language literature about Chinese women police, this article contributes to the corpus of gender policing research by offering valuable narratives of women in Chinese policing, which are not readily accessible.