

Negotiating Professional and Social Voices: gendered, racialised and professional connection and differentiation in primary care organisations

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Introduction

The project discussed in this paper is a qualitative interview based study which explores the subjective gendered and racialised professional identifications of health and social care professionals¹. Participants for the project were drawn from recently formed Primary Care Trusts.

There is increasingly wide recognition that institutional racism and sexism occur within health and social care, with a number of policy responses which attempt to counteract these tendencies (NHSE, 2000; NHSE, 2001). However the relationship between institutional and personal racism and sexism within health and social care is ambiguous. Charges of the 'unwitting' or unconscious reproduction of sexist and racist institutional norms heighten anxiety and confusion within health and social care organisations around issues of gender and ethnicity. Health and social care professionals within this context experience 'a recurrent, and disconcertingly unpredictable, encounter with self' where values, behaviour and professional practice are rendered visible and problematic (Husband, 1996:46). It is this 'encounter with self' and its implications for the development of health and social care policy that the research seeks to explore.

The research questions for the project include:

- How do health and social care professionals negotiate their gendered, racialised ['social'] and 'professional' identities?
- How do they reconcile these potentially conflicting identifications?
- What implications might this have for how they identify with a variety of different others including other professionals and other users?

So for example, how do women general practitioners identify themselves? As women? As general practitioners? Do these identifications conflict? How do women for example negotiate normative notions of profession where these normative notions might be masculine? Equally how do male managers negotiate elements of profession? Do they unproblematically identify with the masculine nature of that? If that is the case, can they provide an impetus for challenging the masculine basis of profession?

By drawing attention to the position of those involved in policy development and provision, the aim is *not* to devalue or draw attention away from the experiences of service users. Rather, in order to understand how the experiences of service users can be *genuinely* incorporated into the design of social policies, we need an understanding of the conditions which might be facilitative of this. An important element to achieving this, is understanding how welfare professionals understand themselves and 'others' and the relationships and experiences which are constitutive of this (see Hunter, 2002; Hunter, forthcoming).

In this paper I discuss the challenges in carrying out this research from a feminist [standpoint] perspective and the potential benefits of adopting a feminist psychosocial perspective to researching these issues within the context of Primary Health Care Trusts. Firstly I identify, health and social care professionals as an elite and defended group. Secondly, feminist standpoint

and elite group approaches to research are contrasted and critiqued, suggesting that these fail to account for social difference and power in research situations. Finally, a feminist psychosocial perspective on voice is outlined and offered a corrective for these inadequacies.

The research participants as an elite and defended group

Three Primary Care Organisations were involved in the research. A range of Professional Executive Committee members were interviewed from each organisation, including nurse members, GP members, social service reps, chief executives, primary care development managers. The notion of what constitutes an elite group remains contested (see Van Dijk, 1993). However professional executive members of Primary Care Trusts can be regarded as an elite group in terms of their position of relative power in relation to the politics of health and social care (see Neal, 1998 for a similar perspective). Equally, most participants held positions of relative privilege in relation to either the politics of gender or ethnicity and many cases in relation to both, participants being in most cases, 'white' women or men.

There were a number of practical challenges to working with these organisations and particularly to developing participatory methods for the research:

- The health and social care policy context is one of continual and rapid change
- There is a level of uncertainty and potential 'threat' experienced at the local policy development level in relation to Central Government initiatives
- Organisations and professionals have limited time and resources
- There is a level of suspicion present with regards to being involved in research (particularly of critical nature)
- There is also a context of confusion and anxiety surrounding issues of institutional racism and sexism within health and social care.

The difficulties of conducting feminist research with elite and defended groups

I share a basic commitment with feminist research (specifically feminist standpoint approaches) to democratising the process and products of social research. However suggested strategies for researching elite groups and feminist standpoint strategies clearly conflict. What I want to suggest is that whilst the strategies conflict, **both** are based on the same underlying assumption that gaining more valid/richer/objective or 'truthful' data, is based on minimising difference or conflict between participant and researcher.

Feminist standpoint approaches²

The starting point for feminist standpoint approaches to social research, is the experience of marginalised social groups (See for example Harding, 1987; 1993; Harstock, 1987; Smith; 1987). These approaches reconceptualise objectivity in research. They employ the notion of 'strong objectivity' (see Harding, 1993) as creating valid social knowledge, precisely because this knowledge is not divorced from lived experience. Strong objectivity is conceived of as the product of marginalised social location, or identity. Voice

is viewed as reflective of this experience, as a means of resistance and expressing subjectivity.

Elite group approaches

In contrast working with elite groups is based on the assumption that the participants are in a position of relative power (see Moyser and Wagstaffe, 1987). Their experience is perceived as in some way distorted as a result of this social power, reflective of organisational or institutional logic and therefore, requires reinterpretation on the part of the researcher.

Conflicting strategies

As a result of these different starting points these approaches suggest almost diametrically opposed strategies for approaching the research situation. The assumption that the researcher is in a position of power over participants guides strategies for valid knowledge production in the standpoint research situation. Reflexive strategies should be adopted by the researcher to remedy power imbalances within this situation. These include:

- Creating research and interview situations which are anti-oppressive, empower participant's to express themselves on their own terms, rather than imposing the agenda of the researcher.
- Matching the social location of researcher and participants in order to equalise the research relationship (see Gill, 1998).
- At the very least the social location of the researcher should be noted, and reflected upon (see Gill, 1998).
- Establishing reciprocal negotiated, open and trusting rather than confrontational relationships with participants requiring honesty and openness with participants about all elements of the research. This research should prioritise participant's needs over the need to collect data (see Mirza, 1998:81).

For elite groups however, the assumptions and therefore the strategies differ. In terms of the process and type of interview to be conducted, a semi-structured format is considered more appropriate, as this type of interview tends to tip the balance of power in favour of the researcher (Moyser, 1988). What is often considered key in these situations is that the researcher is able to maintain control over the interview situation and avoid co-option by participants, but also that enough space is allowed to 'get beyond the party line' (see Duke, 2002). Joan Cassell (1988:90) even suggests that investigator's overall approach must out of necessity involve 'a certain falseness'. This type of strategy is clearly at variance with the feminist strategies identified.

The potential for anxiety in the elite group

A final complication to this set of basic issues is the subject matter to be explored in this particular research. Within the current racialised and gendered context of health and social care, researching and talking about gender and ethnicity and any impact this might have on working relationships and identities is rendered problematic. The subject matter of such research

potentially provokes anxiety for participants, particularly if they are members of the dominant social group within racialised and gendered social relations. Gaining access and conducting interviews in relation to these issues and from a critical standpoint is then potentially problematic. Indeed these are issues research participants from all social locations will typically 'defend against' in interview. Equally this type of subject matter does not lend itself well to semi-structured questioning format suggested as best for use with elite groups.

Formulating an approach for research

In contrast to the ideal situations proposed for standpoint and elite strategies in this research the power relationships involved in research interviews were multiple and contradictory and certainly were not characterised in terms of a one-dimensional hierarchical relationship between researcher and researched (see Duke, 2002; Millen, 1997). Equally matching the social location of researcher and participant was impossible. Rather than a comfortable trusting environment, research situations were characterised by anxiety. Designing the study as a whole and creating appropriate research tools for conducting the research was particularly challenging and potentially impossible if either the practical or the ethical strategies were to be followed in a purist sense.

Compromising conflicting approaches for the research interviews

Despite the apparent clash between theoretical and practical intent in relation to the project the intention was to design appropriate research tools to 'get at the data', whilst maintaining as much as possible the ethical and theoretical impetus of the project. Initially this represented my attempt to **manage** these contradictions and was inevitably a compromise in relation to a purist notion of standpoint research (see Millen, 1997).

The interviews consisted of semi-structured biographical interviews and were split into four sections focusing on:

1. work and professional life
2. personal biography
3. gender and ethnicity
4. working relationships

Each section began with a broad 'tell me about...' question with a set of other questions to prompt and guide further discussion. Similar types of interview have been called interpretive biographies or guided interpretive biographies (Duncan, 2000: 4, see also Belenky *et al* 1986 for a similar approach to interview design).

The third section of the interview was the first point at which gender and ethnicity were introduced into the interview by the researcher. The choice to ask open and direct questions of participants about their own gendered and raced identifications and their meaning sits uneasily with a standpoint perspective focused on facilitating voice and trust between participant and researcher. However, the aims of asking such questions were ethical, firstly in that these questions *did* enable participants to label themselves, and explore the meaning of those labels and issues surrounding them. But, the questions

were also designed to explicitly challenge silenced or unacknowledged gendered or racialised power (see Hurtado and Stewart, 1997 and Nakayama and Krizek, 1999). This discussion however, was prompted later rather than at the beginning of the interview, in order to avoid encouraging defensive or rehearsed responses in participants throughout the whole the interview.

Throughout the project **MANAGING** the tensions between maintaining honest open and trusting relationships with participants, some of whom were hostile or at least ambivalent to both me as a white female social scientist, and to elements of the research I was conducting, and getting the research done, was challenging. Often (but *not* always) interviews were uncomfortable in places and practically and emotionally difficult for both parties, cut short by participants, second interviews were refused, the research and the methods employed were consistently questioned and information initially freely given by participants was sometimes 'withdrawn' after transcript return.

Critiquing the assumptions underpinning standpoint/elite approaches

The type of 'problems' that I encountered over the course of fieldwork are the sort which often prevent researchers from carrying out research with powerful groups (see Millen, 1997; Cassell, 1988), and would often be considered 'weaknesses' to be accounted for in the data produced. Despite the emphasis on reconceptualising objectivity in standpoint research, what this actually seems to do is 'flip this on its head', still requiring some explanation of the 'weaknesses' in research data, but from the opposite perspective. This is not however, my perspective on these emotional and practical challenges.

Common **applications** of both standpoint and elite approaches can be criticised on a number of levels. The concept of 'strong objectivity' invoked in some standpoint approaches seems to assume firstly that individuals are either oppressed or oppressors, powerful or powerless (see Hill Collins, 2000 for a different position); and secondly that a certain social identity or experience automatically leads to the adoption of a certain standpoint (see Gill, 1998; Mirza, 1998). Equally the strategies developed for working with elite groups tend to suffer from a similar problem – assuming a one-dimensional hierarchical relationship between researcher and researched - but this time in favour of the researched.

The strategies suggested by both approaches seem to fail to appreciate the micro-politics of the research situation (see Gill, 1998; Millen, 1997 for a discussion in relation to elite groups). They avoid exploring HOW different standpoints are constructed [and that these are constructed] through DIALOGUE and difference (see Haraway, 1991; Hill Collins, 2000; Yuval Davis, 1994; Stoetzler and Yuval Davis, 2002). These perspectives fail to recognise social actors as multiply positioned in relation to the social relations of power and also seem to perpetuate a view of research relationships as in some way 'false' or fundamentally different relationships than 'everyday' relationships.

Whilst there are differences between them, both research and social situations occur in the context of socially constructed relations, to suggest that

research relationships should be, or *are*, more or less so seems to miss the point. Adopting a perspective which suggests research and everyday social relations are different fails to acknowledge that 'in practice, inclusiveness is produced in the micro-politics of day to day interaction' (Schick, 2002:647, see also Cassell, 1988).

A feminist psychosocial conceptualisation of voice and the defended subject

The perspective I have adopted on voice in the research differs in its assumptions from both standpoint and elite approaches. It draws loosely on psychodynamic accounts of subjectivity (see, Clarke, 2002; Hollway and Jefferson, 2000) and relational identity and develops this in relation to a feminist voice-centered relational methodology (see Brown and Gilligan, 1992; McLean Taylor *et al*, 1995). The 'psycho' of this psychosocial coupling is therefore rooted in psychodynamic accounts of the self and identity and the 'social' is explicitly feminist³.

There are a number of ways in which this approach diverges from common applications of standpoint approaches. Firstly it posits a 'defended subject' (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000) which suggests that there is no absolute and direct link between experience and voice. Social subjects don't always 'tell it like it is' (2000: 10-11) because they use unconscious defence mechanisms to split off unpalatable experience which threatens their sense of self. These defence mechanisms are developed through social relationships and experience. Voice 'mediates' between identity and experience, where neither is stable nor fixed. Subjects' voices then are not straightforward expressions of needs or 'how things are', but are a means of negotiating in relationships with others different social identifications and potentially a means of resisting oppressive normative definitions of identity and subjecthood (Brown and Gilligan, 1992; McLean Taylor *et al*, 1995).

The notion of dialogue and relationship is crucial to this perspective on voice (see Brown, 1998). Speech and listening are forms of interdependent social action which are intra and intersubjective (see Gilligan, 1993; Brown, 1994) what is important is **HOW** the standpoint of the subject is produced (Gill, 1998). In relation to research practice this approach requires that the intersubjective relational dynamics of the interview situation be examined. This includes paying attention to what is said, what is not said, how it is said, the dynamics which enable or foreclose speech, dialogue and the negotiation of meaning (Brown *et al*, 1991; Gilligan *et al*, 1990).

Some concluding remarks

Using this perspective on voice in the research *did not* make data collection any easier; I still faced the same dilemmas. However, what it did do was reconceptualise these dilemmas as something VALUABLE to the research (see Collins, 1998). Rather than something to be managed and accounted for after data collection, the 'problems' encountered when 'studying up' are no longer conceptualised as problems as such, but are crucial to our

understanding of what it means to be located at the centre, and indeed the margins.

The defences typically invoked by participants (and myself) in interview situations were important precisely because they indicated the ways in which participants negotiated gendered and racialised social relations and notions of profession and also how gendered and racialised identifications were managed. What is equally important from this perspective is that neither the researcher nor participant is perceived as engaged in a 'false' social relationship which has to be accounted for in the finished product of research. It is precisely the social differences which underpin these relationships, how these are constructed and managed through voice and dialogue, which are the important issues. Indeed this perspective is premised on the view that social relationships are as often difficult as they are comfortable and it is strategies adopted for managing difficult social relationships, which require exploration.

Notes

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² I do not want to suggest that a feminist standpoint is a homogenous or uncontested theoretical or epistemological position, for reasons of space the description presented here inevitably loses the variety and sophistication of approaches 'labelled' standpoint (see Ramazanoglu with Holland, 2002 for a comprehensive discussion of these approaches). What I am seeking to do in this paper however, is to critique common *applications* of these approaches to research methodology and methods which do seem to derive from a specific [mis?] reading of Harding (1993).

³ I state this feminist intention explicitly here firstly, because some psychosocial approaches seem to be pitted in opposition to feminist methodology and methods, particularly standpoint approaches, Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) work seems to be an example of this. Secondly, because some psychosocial methodological approaches also seem to maintain a set of quite rigid rules for interview practice which fail to appreciate the value of dialogue in the sense I intend this to be understood (see again Hollway and Jefferson, 2000 particularly chapter 3). The feminist approaches discussed however, do.

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