Amanda L. Couture
University of Ontario Institute of Technology, Canada

Arshia U. Zaidi
University of Ontario Institute of Technology, Canada

Eleanor Maticka-Tyndale
University of Windsor, Canada

REFLEXIVE ACCOUNTS: AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH TO EXPLORING THE FLUIDITY OF INSIDER/OUTSIDER STATUS AND THE RESEARCHER'S IMPACT ON CULTURALLY SENSITIVE POST-POSITIVIST QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Abstract Reflexivity and acknowledging the role of the researcher in the research is a well-established practice in post-positivist research. In this paper we use reflexivity to examine our personal experiences in conducting qualitative research. We use reflexivity to understand how our intersecting identities and resulting insider/outsider status may have influenced the data collection phase of a study regarding the culturally and religiously sensitive issue of male-female intimate relationships. Using an intersectional approach, we explore the fluidity of our insider/outsider statuses resulting from our multiple and intersecting identities such as ethnicity, religion, age, and sex. The multiple identities a researcher possesses can cause him/her to be perceived as an insider and outsider simultaneously, which can play a significant role in shaping the interactions between the interviewer and interviewee. We present reflexive accounts on how our identities may have affected the data collection process and participants' comfort level when discussing sensitive issues, in this case sexuality. Overall, we seek to provide insight into the role of intersecting multiple identities and the resulting insider/outsider status in qualitative data collection when examining culturally and religiously sensitive issues from the perspective of the researchers.

Keywords Intersectional Approach; Insider/Outsider; Sensitive Research; Reflexivity; Qualitative Research; South Asian Youth

Amanda Couture has a B.A. (honours) and M.A. in Criminology from the Faculty of Social Science and Humanities at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT). Her research interests include: immigrant youth experiences (e.g., identity, acculturation, gender issues, and violence/victimization), intersectionality, and intimate partner abuse (including dating abuse from the perspective of immigrant youth).

Dr. Arshia U. Zaidi is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Social Science and Humanities at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT). Her quantitative and/or qualitative research focuses on issues of immigration, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, family, and intimate partner violence surrounding, but not limited to, South Asians.

Dr. Eleanor Maticka-Tyndale holds a Tier 1 Canada Research Chair in Social Justice and Sexual Health and is a University Professor in the Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Criminology at the University of Windsor (Ontario, Canada). Her research focuses on sexual health and rights for marginalized and underserviced groups.

email address:
amanda.couture@uoit.ca

email address:
arshia.zaidi@uoit.ca

This paper advances the area of post-positivist qualitative research. First, our analysis challenges the dichotomous static division of insider/outsider status. Second, our method of inquiry takes on a unique approach by going beyond extant methodological scholarship and introducing an intersectional approach[1] to understanding the role of a researcher's multiple identities in shaping and negotiating insider/outsider status and, consequently, qualitative data collection. Taking an intersectional approach means recognizing that individuals possess multiple, intersecting, and inseparable identities that shape their lived experiences (Brah and Phoenix 2004), which can include identities such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, and so on (Sokoloff and Dupont 2005). Within the research process, these identities are recognized as playing an integral role (Lumsden 2009). As Devine and Heath argue, researchers "cannot be divorced from their autobiographies and will bring their own values to the research" (1999 as cited in Lumsden 2009:503). How participants interact with the researcher is contingent on how the participants perceive the researcher

1 Intersectional approach is synonymous with intersectionality, a term frequently used in the literature by authors such as Crenshaw (1991), Davis (2008), Verloo (2006), Yuval-Davis (2006), and Zine (2008).

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or the role they assign to the researcher (Walker 1998 as cited in Lumsden 2009). Thus, who the researcher is, as a person, and the identities that person has, are relevant in the research process (Moran-Ellis 1995 as cited in Lumsden 2009), and the data collection process in particular. This is especially so when using interviews as a data collection method because they are social encounters or "socially situated" activities (Fontana and Frey 2008:145).

To achieve our goal, we explore the literature on reflexivity in research. We then explain and problematize the dichotomy of insider/outsider status. To support our argument that insider/outsider status is not merely a dichotomy, we present an intersectional approach to address the complex nature of identities. We extend this methodological discussion by examining the fluidity of intersecting identities and the resulting researcher identities, namely insider/outsider status, within a qualitative study of a culturally and religiously sensitive topic. More specifically, we use an intersectional approach to examine our personal reflections on being insiders and outsiders simultaneously. We do so by drawing on and describing our experiences conducting interviews on the sensitive issue of sexual intimacy with second generation South Asian youth. Overall, this paper sheds light on the role of having multiple intersecting and inseparable identities in being an insider/outsider and how being an insider/outsider is neither a binary nor static status, but rather is constantly changing and negotiated depending on who is being interviewed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Being mindful of the complex ways in which our identities impact data collection and analysis has significant implications for research practice. As Campbell has said, "researching the researcher…is a much needed new area of investigation" (2002:9). This is because "the biographical journeys of researchers greatly influence their values, their research questions, and the knowledge they construct" (Banks 1998:4). A post-positivist research framework allows for the penetration of researcher and research participant's subjectivities in the research process (Russell and Kelly 2002) to better understand the relationship between the knower, the known, and the process of knowing (Sprague 2005). Hawkesworth maintains that a researcher's epistemological stance to claim "superior knowledge" should be to accept "a minimalist standard of rationality that requires that belief is apportioned to evidence and that no assertion be immune for critical assessment" (1989:557 as cited in Sprague 2005:40). One way of doing this is to share reflexive accounts of research experiences to acknowledge and understand the role researchers play in the research process.

Reflexivity

Discussions of reflexive methodology began in the 1970s as a reaction to criticisms of classical, colonial ethnographic methods (Pillow 2003). As social sciences began to embrace qualitative methodology, there was a general consensus in qualitative research that reflexivity in methodological inquiry and understanding how

"knowledge is acquired, organized, and interpreted" (Altheide and Johnson 1994:486 as cited in Mauthner and Doucet 2003:416; see Macbeth 2001; Kusow 2003) is critical and goes beyond "navel-gazing" (Sultana 2007:376). Many scholars over the years have made great efforts to define reflexivity, as well as explain how it is used in qualitative research, especially in immigrant communities (Kusow 2003; Hamdan 2009). While there is no universal definition of reflexivity, the literature offers various descriptions. For example, some argue that reflexivity focuses on the on-going dialogue of "how" and "what" I know (Hertz 1997 as cited in Pillow 2003:178). Here, the reflexive construction of knowledge is seen as a social process, which may not be so transparent (Dowling 2006; Riach 2009). Others define it as "a process of self-examination that is informed primarily by the thoughts and action of the researchers" (Porter 1993 as cited in Russell and Kelly 2002:2; see Barry et al. 1999). It has also been seen "as a challenge to common-sense worlds" (Gray 2008:936), critical awareness (McNay 2000), to perceive beyond one's self (Skeggs 2005), and to establish "how one is inserted in grids of power relations" (Sultana 2007:376). Being reflexive means recognizing a researcher's involvement and awareness throughout the research process, as well as giving careful consideration to their own assumptions such that meaningful analysis can be constructed (Barry et al. 1999; Watt 2007). It forces one to see beyond the unthinkable (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992 as cited in Gray 2008) and "contributes to producing knowledge that aids in understanding and gaining insight into the

working of our social world, but also provides insight on how this knowledge is produced" (Pillow 2003:178). Furthermore, reflexivity calls upon the researcher to realize that their interactions with participants alter the direction of the research from start to finish (Barry et al. 1999; Watt 2007). It also points to the importance of considering how the researcher is part of the data (Richards 2005; Watt 2007; Gray 2008). More specifically, we, as researchers, affect "the collection, selection, and interpretation of data" (Finlay 2002:531) and data analysis (Mauthner and Doucet 2005; Watt 2007; Gray 2008). According to Gray "the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the object of study has important affective dimensions with implications for research practice" (2008:936). The end product of reflexivity, according to Barry and her colleagues (1999) as well as Guillemin and Gillam (2004) is to enhance the quality and validity of data by expanding awareness and understanding of the social phenomenon under study, as well as knowing the limitations of knowledge production.

Insider and Outsider

In being reflexive, researchers consider their own role in the research process and one way this is done is by considering their insider/outsider status. There are advantages and disadvantages to data collection that go along with being an insider or an outsider. An insider is best defined as someone who shares similar characteristics, roles, and/or experiences with those being studied (Dwyer and Buckle 2009). Due to this, there is general agreement that if

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you are an insider, you are able to easily establish rapport with your participants (O'Connor 2004) and have an enhanced understanding of your participants lived social realities (Dwyer and Buckle 2009). It is argued that an insider "can provide insights, inner meanings, and subjective dimensions that are likely to be overlooked by outsiders" (Hamnett et al. 1985:374 as cited in Hamdan 2009:381). Moreover, the participants may be more open with the researcher thus generating more data (Dwyer and Buckle 2009). Dwyer and Buckle (2009) argued that this is because the participants feel the researcher is one of them and therefore able to understand them. Furthermore, considering race specifically, Rhodes (1994) argues that there are aspects of racial experiences that a researcher of a different race may not have the language or cultural knowledge to understand. Thus, similar identities (i.e., being an insider) are thought to lead to more successful communication between a researcher and participant (Rhodes 1994), which may translate into more "authentic" accounts (Allen 2004).

Too much familiarity, however, may breed a lack of "interpretability" and "presumptions" that may not exist if the researchers are outsiders (O'Connor 2004:169). In other words, the researcher may presume to understand meanings that an outsider would further investigate (O'Connor 2004). Or, as Dwyer and Buckle (2009) suggest, some participants may not completely explain their experiences to an insider if the participants assume that researcher already understands. Furthermore, there is increased probability of role confusion on behalf

of the researcher, which is when the researcher "responds to the participants or analyses the data from a perspective other than that of a researcher" (Asselin 2003 as cited in Dwyer and Buckle 2009:58). Another shortcoming of being an insider, especially within immigrant communities, is becoming a "suspicious insider" (Kusow 2003:595). This occurs when participants begin to question the researcher's true intentions (Kusow 2003). This complicates the research process further because an automatic divide between "community expectations" and "intellectual impulses" exists (Kusow 2003:594). Moreover, being an insider can blur the boundaries between the researcher and the research insofar as community members begin to advise the researcher about what to write and how (Kusow 2003). Community members can sometimes think that you, as a researcher, should only write about the *good* qualities of your people or present them in a positive light. Another issue is recruitment. While being an insider to the community provides access to places of interest and can help in developing a sample, issues of trust and rapport can, despite popular belief, remain problematic (Kusow 2003). Furthermore, when recruitment is successful and there is an interview, if the participant is still uncomfortable, responses may be limited to short one-word answers (Kusow 2003), thus lacking necessary descriptive accounts for an in-depth analysis.

Outsiders, on the other hand, are the opposite of insiders; they are researchers who are not seen as similar to their participants. It has been argued that this causes a lack of empathetic

understanding or, as Max Weber puts it, *verstehen* (Kusow 2003). Some suggest, however, that there are benefits to being an outsider. For example, an outsider "may achieve greater clarity in their work" (O'Connor 2004:169) because they will ask for further clarifications or details during the interview phase to ensure they are understanding and/or correctly interpreting what is being said to them. An insider, on the contrary, may assume to understand what the participants are saying because of the "shared" knowledge amongst them (O'Connor 2004:169). Furthermore, some have argued that outsiders are more objective as they do not have loyalties to the culture being studied (Banks 1998). This loyalty is believed by some scholars to be a "corrupting influence…upon the human understanding" (Merton 1972:19 as cited in Kusow 2003:592). For instance, Mullings pointed out "outsiders also argue that they are likely to have a greater degree of objectivity and ability to observe behaviors without distorting their meanings" (1999:340). In addition, Rhodes (1994) has suggested that outsiders have "stranger value," which can result in the researcher being given information that would have been presumed as understood by an insider. Sometimes an outsider status is preferential "as it is free from potential bias that arises from too close affiliation with research subjects or «going native»" (Allen 2004:15; see Kusow 2003).

Clear-cut insider/outsider dichotomies, however, tend to oversimplify the complexity of the researcher's identity. As Naples has stated, "the insider/outsider distinction masks the power differentials and experiential differences be-

tween the researcher and the researched…and creates a false separation that neglects the interactive processes" (1996:84). The post-positivist view of research, especially noted by feminist and critical scholars, is reassessing the epistemological and ontological implications of such binary divisions. There has been much effort to shifting modes of inquiry by deconstructing the traditionally rigid methodological beliefs and encouraging relationships that shape, define, and challenge the research experience. Scholars such as Hartstock, Haraway, Smith, and Hill Collins have embraced the reality of holding "multiple" or "plural" viewpoints by exploring the relational, as well as subjective nature of the research process via reflexivity (McDowell 1992; England 1994; Gilbert 1994; Archibald and Crnkovich 1995; Lawson 1995; Pratt and Hanson 1995 all as cited in Mullings 1999; Russell and Kelly 2002; Sprague 2005). For example, Naples suggested that "outsiderness and insiderness are not fixed or static positions; rather they are ever-shifting and permeable social locations that are differentially experienced and expressed by community members" (1996:84). More scholars are now recognizing and have clearly stated that it is next to impossible to have a fixed dichotomy of insider/outsider membership roles since these roles are fluid entities continuously being negotiated and re-negotiated during the interactive research process. Essentialist and reductionist claims of insider/outsider status are now being challenged (Rainbow 1977; Messerschmidt 1981; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Rosaldo 1989; Karim 1993; Naples 1996 all as cited in Sherif

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2001; Dowling 2000 as cited in O'Connor 2004). For example, Mullings (1999) wrote:

> [t]he insider/outsider binary in reality is a boundary that is not only highly unstable but also one that ignores the dynamism of positionalities in time and through space. No individual can consistently remain an insider and few ever remain complete outsiders. Endeavors to be either one or the other reflect elements of the dualistic thinking that structures much of Western thought. (p. 340)

Extant research reveals cases of "partial" insiders (Sherif 2001). Moreover, these statuses, according to Kusow (2003), are more complex and dependent on the socio-political context and situation than is typically recognized and thus insider/outsider status cannot be completely isolated or reduced to a mere dichotomy. Being reflexive, as well as critical during the research process is imperative in negotiating and going beyond insider/outsider statuses (Hamdan 2009). Therefore, during the reflexive process, it is essential for researchers to think beyond a unilateral understanding of their insider/outsider status.

Intersectional Approach

Recognizing that the researcher is not confined to being an insider or an outsider is further justified when we acknowledge intersecting identities. Merton argued that "individuals have not one but multiple social statuses and group affiliations that interact to influence behaviour and perspectives" (1972 as cited in Banks 1998:7). Kusow's (2003) experiences studying his So-

mali community echo the need to recognize the researcher's multiple identities. During his research, he began to call attention to the impact of not only his ethnicity, but also his gender and how those two identities affected his data collection in different ways depending on the context. This supports the application of an intersectional approach in particular. Acknowledging an intersectional approach as part of the reflexive process encourages the researcher to consider individuals' multiple, intersecting, and inseparable identities that shape their lived experiences (Brah and Phoenix 2004). Moreover, the categories, or identities, we fall into are not static and distinct (Stanley and Slattery 2003). The various identities one can possess are countless and can include, but are not limited to, race, ethnicity, class, and religion (Sokoloff and Dupont 2005). These identities are synchronous and intersect with each other in unique ways (Joseph 2006), which, again, will affect individuals' experiences. While identities are inseparable, the prominence of each can change depending on the context or the situation the individual is in (Anderson and Hill Collins 2006). Even during an interview, the importance of various identities or status may change (Rhodes 1994). Here, issues of race, class, gender, occupation, age, power and other factors play a critical role in how one identifies and positions oneself within the dynamics of research (Banks 1998; Merriam et al. 2001; O'Connor 2004). Banks (1998) maintained that social status affiliations, like race and gender, interact in not only one's knowledge production, but also influences perceptions of reality.

Moreover, the participant plays an active role in defining the interview process (Padfield and Procter 1996). As such, the ways in which they perceive the researcher's identities will shape the interview experience.

Therefore, when turning to the researcher's roles, it is unreasonable to dichotomize insider/outsider status and think of them as exclusive since they are based on our numerous intersecting identities, which are inherently complex. Moreover, to be defined and positioned as a complete insider or outsider is unrealistic because "in the real world of data collection, there is a good bit of slippage and fluidity between these two states" (Merriam et al. 2001:405). This is further evident in Merton's argument that "we cannot permanently locate individuals according to a single social status. Rather they occupy a set of social statuses such that one individual can occupy an insider status at one moment and an outsider in another" (as cited in Kusow 2003:592). Accordingly, it becomes necessary to reconsider, reconstruct, and negotiate or even reject insider/outsider status as a dichotomy. Thus, as Dowling so eloquently puts it, the researcher is "never simply an insider or an outsider" (2000 as cited in O'Connor 2004:33).

CONTEXT: CULTURALLY AND RELIGIOUSLY SENSITIVE RESEARCH

Our reflexive accounts presented in this paper are drawn from our experiences as a South Asian female (Arshia Zaidi) and a Caucasian female (Amanda Couture) conducting 57 semi-

structured qualitative interviews with South Asian students from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and Durham Region for a project funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council. The study explored cross-gender relationships (i.e., male-female interactions, such as dating and sexual encounters) amongst second generation South Asian youth. More specifically, the goal of the research was to not only uncover how second generation South Asians view and develop cross-gender relationships, but also to understand the sexual scripting that takes place within these relations. This involved asking very sensitive and personal questions about the participants' sexual experiences including what specific activities they engage in, where they engage in these activities, if they use protection, and so on.

According to Lee, a subject area is sensitive if it "poses a threat to those involved in it" (1993 as cited in Platzer and James 1997:627). This threat can result when there are "issues of social control over activities, which are stigmatizing or incriminating" (Lee 1993 as cited in Platzer and James 1997:627). This is applicable to issues of sexuality among South Asians. It is arguable that this research is sensitive as cultural and religious norms strongly discourage sexual intimacy prior to marriage and it is often considered a threat to their family honor and is shameful (Varghese and Jenkins 2009). Since it is considered a threat to the entire family's honor, the community and family, in particular, attempt to control and restrict it (Haddad, Smith and Moore 2006). Often daughters, especially Muslim daughters, are forbidden from dating

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(Haddad, Smith and Moore 2006). As such, research regarding South Asian youths' sexuality is sensitive.

There are numerous challenges to conducting sensitive research, such as gaining access and establishing rapport (Platzer and James 1997; Dickson-Swift et al. 2007). Platzer and James (1997) suggest that their insider status, however, alleviated some of these challenges. This implies that the researcher's status plays a pivotal role in influencing the research process. In our study, due to the sensitive nature of sexuality for South Asian youth, establishing rapport and comfort were two critical challenges in particular that we had to manage. We recognized that it was very likely that our identities would influence the participants' perceptions of us, which would in turn impact their comfort as well as the data we would be able to collect. Taking an intersectional perspective, and recognizing that a researcher is never solely an insider or outsider, we determined it to be necessary for us to consider how our multiple identities, including our insider/outsider status may have shaped our data collection.

Prior to the data collection phase of this project, the research team had concerns, given the nature of the topic being studied, about how participants would respond to various interviewers. Thus, we decided to "test" multiple interviewers. Once the data collection began, it became seemingly obvious that our membership roles helped shape our research experience and define our status of being insider, outsider, or both simultaneously. We argue that this is

because of our intersecting identities. Arshia is not just a South Asian person and Amanda is not just a Caucasian person, nor are we perceived just that way by our participants. This will become evident in the reflexive accounts that follow.

INSIDER/OUTSIDER ACCOUNTS OF DATA COLLECTION

To uncover how our intersecting identities led us to be both insiders and outsiders simultaneously, which then shaped the data collection experience, we will first begin with a brief overview of our intersecting identities (primarily the ones that are observable to others) and how those identities translated into our insider/outsider status. Then we will explore how we perceive those identities and the resulting insider/outsider status may have affected the interviewee/interviewer dynamics, including the researchers' interview style. While we are not able to concretely compare the interviews conducted by Arshia or Amanda since they are qualitative and we are unable to measure differences or discomfort, we use reflexive accounts to discuss how we perceived the overall encounter and our perceptions of the interviewees' discomfort, or our sense of their discomfort.

Arshia

Intersecting Identities and Insider/Outsider Status

I am a second generation Canadian South Asian female professor. Although being South

Asian in general is a source of insider status, my family name can indicate to some that I am Pakistani. Since we interviewed a diverse group, participants or their families were from varying countries (e.g., Sri Lanka, Nepal, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh). Being of Pakistani origin and having ties to Pakistan gave me insider status with other Pakistanis and outsider status with participants with other origins. My identity as a female was a source of both insider and outsider status depending on the sex of the participant being interviewed. My identity as a professor was solely a source of outsider status. Being labelled or seen as a "Dr." or "Professor" was in direct contrast to the undergraduate student status of most of the participants. This specific outsider status, at times, created a power differential from their perspective. This was especially true when they were in my classes as this heightened the power differential and added yet another layer to my outsider status. I was older than the students whom I was interviewing as well, making my age a source of outsider status. My identity as a Muslim was not necessarily known at the outset of an interview; however, as an interview would progress, the participant would become aware of it either by my religion coming up in discussion or based on the questions I asked or did not ask. For example, when I would ask Hindu participants about the particulars of their religion, they would realize that I am not Hindu as I would not need to ask such questions if I were. My religious identity would lead to me being an insider when interviewing other Muslims and

an outsider when interviewing Hindus and Christians.

Interviewee/Interviewer Dynamics

Perceived Participants' Comfort Levels

In the beginning, being a visible minority South Asian caused the members of our research team to primarily consider me as an insider to our participants. Given this, we assumed that data collection would come easy for me. Early on in the interview phase, however, it became quite evident that it was not that simple. Being an insider in terms of my ethnicity and gender did have some advantages. However, it also led to some unexpected challenges or disadvantages due to the culturally and religiously sensitive data that was being collected.

Some of my experiences as an insider paralleled past research of others on insider status. For example, my insider identities made it easier for me to recruit participants (those who would feel more comfortable with someone from their ethnic community) as well as connect easily with some and establish rapport. With some participants there was a natural sense of empathy, belonging, and knowing that eased the conversation. In an interview with a female participant, I was able to build rapport by talking about things we both experienced growing up. For instance, I explained, "I was raised and born in Canada and assimilation was always a problem…I hated high school… My whole high school experience, I hated it because to fit in you had to do certain things that weren't

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Islamically allowed…" While discussing this, the female participant kept responding "exactly" indicating an immediate understanding of shared experiences, which was used to build comfort. When I asked a female participant about specific sexual activities and prompted her by listing kissing, holding hands, and hugging, she responded, "OK, well I guess if you consider that…it's like the Brown version [of sexual activities]." Together we laughed as this was a mutual understanding; I knew exactly what she meant. Later, when describing her sexual experiences she said, "it wasn't like Caucasian, like White serious." This was not likely a description she would have used with a Caucasian interviewer, but she felt that I would understand what she meant.

Participants also expressed their comfort more directly. For example, one female participant said, "I feel so comfortable talking with you; I feel you are able to understand where I am coming from." Another female participant said, "it is so cool you are South Asian and fit well with our generation." Yet, another said, "you are South Asian and all and just perfect to be interviewed by…I got no reservations." One female participant in particular mentioned feeling at ease during the interview and stated, "it is very cool that you are doing this research and it makes it so so much easier to discuss the matter with you."

There were, however, notable disadvantages to being an insider in terms of ethnicity. At times I felt this acted as a deterrent. It seemed as though participants would answer in a socially desirable manner, especially regarding issues of sexuality. There appeared to be some fear or shame in telling me, a fellow South Asian, their stories. There were also times when they seemed suspicious of me. Consistent with Kusow's observations, there were some moments of awkwardness or silent moments that made me feel like a "suspicious insider" (2003:594). At times it felt as if there was a gap left in the interview and I was not, despite my persistence and efforts, able to capture the "real" story. In some interviews I yearned for more information, but was met with shallow answers. For instance, when I would ask participants about their sexual experiences, some would respond indirectly or vaguely by calling it "being physical." When I asked one female participant in particular about the details of her sexual activities (e.g., what specific activities and where), she responded, "do I have to answer that?" She also kept mentioning, without prompting, that her relationship was not all about sex, that it was a balanced relationship and it was "mostly like kissing." This gave the impression that it was important for her to let me know that sex was not a priority in her relationship, perhaps because she feared my judgment as a fellow South Asian and possibly assuming I share a similar belief system regarding sexuality as other South Asians. Another female participant started off being open about her sexual activities, but once we started discussing her pregnancy scare, she commented, "this is awkward." Moreover, none of the participants went into detail by naming the sexual activities, such as oral sex or touching. As a researcher, this was a major setback for the study and it became understood that sameness of ethnicity or shared community ties does not always work in one's favor as there may be traces of participants answering in a socially desirable manner. Other times, potential Muslim participants would ask me "how this study makes any positive contribution" to specifically Islam, or they had concerns of me writing about Islam in a negative manner. There were also times when very conservative potential male participants would shun my research and say it is "haram," or completely forbidden by Allah (God), and the result would be no interview. Thus, the challenges of being an insider were greater than expected.

While the majority of participants I interviewed did express some discomfort in discussing their sexual experiences and required additional prompting to get more details, there was one male participant in particular who seemed very comfortable. When I asked this participant what kinds of sexual activities he engaged in, he responded, "like positions? (laughter) I'm just joking." Then, without prompting, he explained how in class that very day he had a conversation with a girl that turned him on "so much."

My insider status as a woman also created a few challenges. There were some female participants who would not provide detailed accounts and/or explanations, as they would assume that certain things are just understood because of my gender and South Asian identities. Many times female participants would respond with "you know how it is" and not provide the thick description that a qualitative researcher thrives for. For example, one female participant was using a "Brown" soap opera to describe her father's behavior and she did not offer a detailed explanation of this because she knew that I would know what type of television show she was referring to. Also, when interviewing male participants there were, at times, a sense of awkwardness and silent moments, especially when issues of sexuality would come up. This lack of comfort was most evident with religiously conservative participants.

Although it was assumed that I was primarily an insider, as the interviews progressed we realized that some of my identities also simultaneously made me an outsider, which also had its difficulties. As a professor and a person older than the participants, I was an outsider and I was able to sense this during my interviews. My academic identity was one that I felt especially inhibited the interview process and this was specifically mentioned by some participants. I sensed that my academic status led to a power differential during some of the interviews and, at times, there would be continuous negotiation of power. Some people clearly stated that they were not comfortable being interviewed by me given my professorial identity and others said they would like to be interviewed by someone else. For instance, a male participant stated his discomfort and said, "I am not really comfortable in discussing my dating experiences with you being a professor… you know…can we move to the next questions please." A female participant also expressed her uneasiness with a professor conducting the

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interview on such a personal issue and stated, "it's just hard 'cause you're a professor."

Interviewer Comfort Levels

In addition to the participants' comfort levels, we also had to manage our own comfort issues. Within South Asian cultures, including mine, issues regarding intimacy and male-female relationships are never discussed directly. Intimacy is viewed as a private matter that is not meant to be openly discussed. For instance, when parents and children watch television shows, if an intimate scene appears, the channel is changed immediately and there is no discussion of what took place. Although many of us are rarely specifically told that sex is bad, it is just "known." This coupled with South Asian cultures' shame-orientation along with my own gendered and racial socialization has shaped my own comfort with the subject matter. As a South Asian woman, the participants will have their own expectations of me and I also need to be respectful of the culture, since I am considered a member of their cultural community. To maintain my comfort and to be respectful, I did not directly ask about especially sensitive sexual activities, such as oral sex. I would limit myself to asking about kissing, hugging, and holding hands. I also used colloquialisms, such as asking them details about "the bed thing" rather than saying "sex" specifically to improve the participant's comfort as well as my own. When it came to issues of familial conflict, however, I was comfortable asking them directly if their parents hit them. For me, this was not a sensitive issue because there are dif-

ferent disciplinary styles of parenting, and generally within South Asian cultures, the family is more authoritative and patriarchal, with hitting often being an accepted form of discipline. As a fellow South Asian, there was not a fear of stigmatization.

Amanda

Intersecting Identities and Insider/Outsider Status

I am a relatively young Canadian-born Caucasian female graduate student. Being Canadian-born is an identity that I shared with some of the participants, which could have been a source of insider status. However, my Caucasian identity was something that made me an outsider. Similar to Arshia, being female made me both an insider and an outsider depending on the sex of the participant I was interviewing. My age and student status were two identities that I shared with the participants and, therefore, were sources of insider status. While my religious identity as a Christian was not something that could be determined solely by looking at me, the participants likely assumed that I was not Muslim or Hindu given my ethnic identity. As such, my religious identity made me an outsider with the Hindu and Muslim participants, but an insider with the Christian participants.

Interviewee/Interviewer Dynamics

Perceived Participants' Comfort Levels

My ethnicity, or my "whiteness," was something we originally assumed made me solely

an outsider with our participants. Being an outsider in terms of my ethnicity had both advantages and disadvantages. I am not nearly as knowledgeable of the South Asian culture as Arshia is because I have never lived the experience of it. Since it was assumed that I was not well versed in the culture or religions, participants often provided great detail when explaining norms, customs, and experiences. For instance, a male participant went into an elaborate description of the arranged marriage process, which he likely would not have done had Arshia conducted the interview. He stated:

> ...there's a common belief that, you know, just blindly jump into it…but contrary to that, uh, it's actually both sides get equal say believe it or not, like a lot of people have this, uh, idea that the woman doesn't get to say anything; they just have to do it…it's not like that at all actually. The female actually does…have some say…first, what they'll do is they'll meet up, the families will meet up, they'll talk and then they'll give the male and female some time.

He then goes into even more detail about the role of Hinduism, including palm readings and astrology. It seemed that he felt the need to clarify the arranged marriage process to me because he thought I might hold that common belief. If Arshia interviewed him, he may have left it unsaid since she is South Asian and would likely be aware of the realities of arranged marriages.

There were times, however, especially with a few female participants, when the intervie-

wees did not seem to be completely comfortable talking with me. It felt as if there was something separating us. While this was not something always verbally expressed, it was the impression I was given during the interview. Some were very brief in their responses and seemed like they were not at ease. A female participant who did specifically mention her discomfort said, "yeah, sorry. This is really embarrassing." It is difficult, however, to establish if this discomfort was because of my ethnicity or for other reasons such as the general personal nature of the topic.

On the other hand, there were also participants who did not show this discomfort. For example, when only asked generally what types of sexual activities she engages in, a female participant responded, "um, I would say oral." Unlike some other participants, she volunteered this information without specifically being asked if she engaged in oral sex. Another female participant, who is a lesbian, went into great detail about not only the specific activities, but also how she felt during those experiences without being specifically prompted. She said:

> ...oral sex is a big thing. Oral sex is probably the biggest… It's like kissing a female it's a lot more passionate…just having sex with a female it can get to that real deep level…I've been sexually active with a girl who…I hardly knew…we just really had this huge attraction…and just kind of let it happen and it was really, really passionate strong sex… It's all about the intimacy, it's really romantic being with a girl…like with a guy it's, a kind of like, in and out like with his penis.

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Some participants specifically mentioned that me being an outsider in terms of my ethnicity was a comforting factor. One participant said that me being "white" could make it easier for South Asians to talk to about sexuality because, he joked, "the white girl has probably seen it all." This implies that some perceived that nothing about their sexual experiences would surprise me or, more importantly, cause me to judge them. A participant specifically mentioned this after an interview as well. He said:

> South Asians might be more comfortable talking to you because they won't feel like you're judging them because you don't really understand the significance of this. A South Asian, however, could be thinking "Well, I grew up here and didn't do those things."

When I tried to make another male participant feel more at ease, I explained that I had probably heard it before and he responded, "oh, I know."

Similar to Arshia, my identity as a female was another source of insider/outsider status. Although my identity as a female contributed to my outsider status when I interviewed the male participants, I rarely felt that it was an inhibiting factor. Although, technically an outsider in this regard, it did not appear to have a negative impact during the interviews. For instance, one male participant was so open with me that when I asked what sexual activities he engages in, he responded, "there's not much we don't engage in…everything, but anal sex I guess." Another male participant was somewhat explicit when he explained to me what he meant by "almost

having sex." He was the only male participant who stated something so directly and said that it is "just not actually putting it in I guess." While there were some male participants who did express some embarrassment and awkwardness when starting to discuss their sexual experiences, they would still continue and often become more comfortable. Others, however, specifically stated they did not feel uncomfortable with me. For instance, a male participant hesitated slightly when asked if he was a virgin and said, "no one's ever asked me that before… oh no, no, no, I'm not uncomfortable. I've just never had anyone ask me that and then I just admitted it right away (laughter)." When asked if he was uncomfortable with answering a question about his sexual experiences, another male participant stated, "it's OK. I'm fine with anything." There were two male participants who actually enjoyed the interview and went so far as to tell me that it felt like a kind of therapy. For example, one said, "God it's like a therapy session…it's amazing." Interestingly, although the research team considered that my gender identity could lead to men exaggerating their sexual experiences, it was not something that I ever perceived during the interviews.

My age and student status were both identities that contributed to my insider status with the participants. However, since we possess multiple inseparable identities, it is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish whether someone felt more comfortable with me because I was an outsider in terms of ethnicity, making them less fearful of me judging them or breaching confidentiality to their community, or if they

were more comfortable because I was an insider based on my age and student status, which may have made me more relatable.

Interviewer Comfort Levels

During my early interviews, I was a little hesitant when asking about sexual experiences. I knew that within South Asian cultures sexual intimacy is a very private matter. As a result, I was unsure of how the participants would receive me and I wanted to be sure that I was approaching the topic in a sensitive way. I was concerned with potentially disrespecting someone or making them feel uncomfortable. Moreover, I was also a little uneasy about how the participants would perceive me in general. I worried that they would question my motives and be thinking "Why is this «white» girl interested in my sexual experiences?" I soon discovered, however, that this was more in my head rather than how the participants actually felt. Nobody questioned my motives and sometimes when I would discuss the project as well as my own Master of Art's thesis on dating abuse from the perspective of South Asian Muslims, some would explicitly state that they were glad that I took an interest and was conducting research in the area. As I continued with the interviews, my uneasiness subsided. Furthermore, in mainstream Western society sex is not generally a taboo. For example, on primetime television it is easy to come across individuals engaging in sexual relationships; on magazine covers in the grocery store we see "101 ways to please your partner;" our public education system offers sex education; and so on. Within my own

family, I recall my mother always telling me, "if you ever think about having sex, please come talk to me first." While she did not encourage it, she did not forbid it outright either or suggest that I would make the family look bad. She was more concerned with my own emotional well-being as well as my physical safety. As a result, I do not generally feel uncomfortable discussing sexual intimacy and thus, was not overly uncomfortable asking participants about their sexual activities in a blunt manner. Being respectful, I would directly ask them if they engaged in oral sex or touching, or if they were virgins. However, I was not comfortable asking specifically about anal sex. This could be because this sexual activity is still fairly taboo in Western culture.

While I generally did not feel uncomfortable asking questions about sexual experiences, I was more hesitant to ask about issues of familial conflict, and more specifically physical discipline or abuse. Within mainstream Western society, physical forms of punishment have become stigmatized. I personally perceive experiences with parental abuse to be a sensitive topic. During my interviews with participants, I was not at ease asking participants about such issues directly. While Arshia was able to ask questions about this directly and bluntly, I did not typically feel comfortable addressing the issue if the participant did not discuss it voluntarily, especially because it was not the main research purpose. I felt by asking such questions I would be intruding into a sensitive area without a reason. Due to stigmatization surrounding corporal punishment within main-

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stream Western culture, I was unsure of how the participants would react to me asking such questions. I was also concerned that they might think that I am assuming that South Asian parents are all abusive. In both the areas of sexual experiences and familial conflict/abuse, my own comfort levels also shaped the interview experience. While Arshia and I, as well as many other researchers, try to remain as objective as possible and simply ask the interview questions and elicit in-depth responses, we are still human and our comfort levels and the expectations we believe others have of us impact how we communicate with participants, especially how or if we ask particular questions.

CONCLUSION

Our reflexive accounts as insiders and outsiders forces one to think beyond the insider/outsider dichotomy. Our insider and outsider statuses were fluid as they shifted depending on how we were perceived by the participants. Moreover, it is evident that our identities played a role in the participants' comfort with us when discussing the sensitive topic of sexual intimacy. Our identities also influenced our own comfort during the interviews. This level of comfort directly speaks to how we, the researchers, have been socialized. Ethnic, racial, and gender socialization affect the outcomes of these discussions (Brown, Linver and Evans 2010). Thus, the intersections of our ethnicity, race, gender, and so on and our socialization experiences all influence the nature of our discussions with participants, our analyses of the data, and even our own reflexive accounts.

This work demonstrates that one is never just an insider or an outsider. It speaks to our inseparable intersecting identities and insider/outsider statuses as it was impossible to determine which identities or statuses changed the dynamics of the interview. Thus, it is the unique combinations of our identities and how those identities are perceived and brought to the forefront by the participants, which influence not only the collection of sensitive data, but also the quality of data received from each participant. Overall, taking an intersectional approach recognizes that we never just have one identity and thus allows us to appreciate how our identities make it possible for us to be an insider and outsider simultaneously.

While it is impossible to fully tease out the ways in which our multiple intersecting identities impact data collection, the value of taking a reflexive, intersectional approach lies in helping to better approximate the ways in which our various identities combine to influence the process. To involve the participants more directly in this reflexive process, by having them comment on the impact of our identities and perceived insiderness/outsiderness, would further help to shed light on the ways in which the characteristics attributed to the researcher impact data collection. In this regard, a limitation of the current study is that we did not specifically elicit the participants' thoughts on the interview process or how they felt about us conducting the interviews. It would be useful for future work regarding sensitive issues to have a follow-up component to explore the participants' perception of the experience including how they feel about who interviewed them.

This article establishes that it is valuable to consider how certain statuses shape interactions, experiences, and conversations with participants, especially regarding culturally and religiously sensitive topics linked to dating and sexuality. We have attempted to show the implications of intersecting identities on insider/outsider status and in turn the implications of insider/outsider status on the data collection process. This supports the "critical importance of a researcher's cultural and sociological position" (Gadamer 1975 as cited in Hamdan 2009:380). Moreover, we argue that it is necessary to think beyond the single identities we assume to be most important in determining insider/outsider status

and the assumption that insider/outsider status is a distinct binary. This is evident in our assumption that Amanda was more of an outsider because more weight was assigned to her ethnicity and that this status may cause problems in the interviews. The data would have been limited had this dissuaded the research team from allowing her to do the interviews. Therefore, it is important to recognize the merits and demerits of our varying intersecting identities and with related insider/outsider status to maximize its utility to benefit the quality of the qualitative research process.

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