THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTHAMPTON

Article

Title: Reflections on doing insider research on institutional racism

Creator: Pilkington, A.

Example citation: Pilkington, A. (2011) Reflections on doing insider research on institutional racism. *Social Science Teacher.* **40**(2), pp. 10-13. 2043-8931.

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work.

Version: Accepted version

http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/3713/

Reflections on doing insider research on institutional racism

Andrew Pilkington

School teachers and college lecturers are often keen to do research but are hard pressed to find the time. The most feasible place to research is of course ones own institution. In this article, I reflect on some research I undertook in my own institution. I argue that on balance insider research has more advantages than disadvantages and that it's worth having a try.

There is not a hard and fast distinction between occupying an insider status and an outsider status as a researcher. What is more 'one is already indelibly grounded in a particular outsider kind of status; that of being an individual who enters a social setting not simply to engage it like other participants might, but to analyse and document something about if for audiences often far removed from it' (Young, 2004: 200-201). Nonetheless there is something distinctive about researching ones own institution. For in research projects of this kind, the analysis and documentation is 'undertaken by people who, before they begin to research, already have an attachment to, or involvement with, the institutions...in which their investigations are based' (Sikes & Potts, 2008a: 3). Such projects can be considered examples of insider research and my study of Midshire University clearly is an example (Pilkington, 2011).

Insider research has traditionally been associated with anthropologists and sociologists who adopt an ethnographic approach. Ethnography entails 'intensive fieldwork involving participant observation' (Alexander, 2006: 399). It 'is conducted on-site and the ethnographer is, as much as possible, a subjective participant in the lives of those under study, as well as an objective observer of those lives' (Flick, 2007:15). The fieldwork on-site normally takes place over an extended period and is concerned with 'capturing and re-presenting the subjects' own understanding of their world' (Alexander, 2006: 400). It entails three main forms of data collection: 'observation, interviewing and archival research' (Flick, 2007: 37). The research on Midshire University adopted such a broadly ethnographic approach, but with two main differences. Firstly, the research did not entail a focus on Others, an aspect of ethnographic research that has been criticised as 'voyeuristic at best and part of a process of neo-colonial control at worst' (Alexander, 2006: 401). Secondly, the research did not entail going into the field since I was already 'established' in the field (the institution) that I wished to investigate (Sikes & Potts, 2008a: 6).

The advantages of insider research Insider research has some tremendous 'practical advantages' (Smyth and Holian, 2008: 37-40). These are well summed up by Sikes and Potts: ' Insider researchers readily know the language of those being studied along with its particular jargon and meanings, are more likely to empathise with those they study because of in-depth understanding of them, are less likely to foster distrust and hostility amongst those they study, are often more willing to discuss private knowledge with those who are part of their world, are often more likely to understand the events under investigation and are less likely to be afflicted by outsiders' arrogance where researchers fail to understand what they observe' (Sikes and Potts, 2008b: 177).

As an insider researcher, I was in an advantageous position in 'negotiating access' because I was 'familiar with the cultural, organisational and political terrain' (Lavia, 2007: 112). In some ways, being white was an advantage given the focus of this research on institutional racism. In an organisation dominated by white people, where 'the white/majority researcher is assumed to

concur with the dominant ethos of an institution', the white insider researcher is 'more likely to be privy to the sorts of data which may otherwise be concealed' (Radcliffe, 2001: 12). Like Potts (2008), my anticipation that I would face few problems of access was borne out in practice. This was not least because of my positionality in the institution. I have been an academic at the university for over 25 years, am well known across the institution and have held positions which entail teaching, research and (senior) management responsibilities. The Vice Chancellor (VC) gave permission to me to conduct the research and the equal opportunities working group (EOWG) welcomed my offer to investigate the perceptions of different groups on the prevalence of racism in the university since it recognised that we just did not know how serious participants believed it to be.

Tensions in insider research While insider research has tremendous advantages, there are some 'inherent tensions between the role of researcher and organisational role…that the researcher occupies as an organisational member' (Smyth & Holian, 2008: 39). I found two to be particularly important: working relationships and ethical issues. My concern with the former led me to change my original plans. Although I did conduct interviews with three senior staff (2 Heads of School and the Director of Widening Participation), I planned initially to conduct interviews with the Vice Chancellor and Pro Vice Chancellors and other senior staff including the Director of Human Resources. I chose in the end not to do this for two reasons. Firstly, I thought this might potentially damage the working relationships that I had with these staff and, secondly, my privileged access meant that I heard their views at meetings and in passing conversations. I considered it not worth taking the risk of damaging working relationships since the likely benefits were not worth this cost. As one writer has put it, '"you can't just un-hear it" (Drakes & Heath, 2008: 137) and I realised that in a formal interview all I was likely to hear was the university's public face.

My second concern related to ethical issues which are writ large in insider research. I started this research at a time when I did not have to submit my proposal for ethical approval. While, as noted above, I gained the VC's permission to do the research and received approval from the EOWG, I neither publicised what I was doing as a researcher nor for a long time made serious efforts to influence policy. I wanted to be as unobtrusive as possible and 'needed the cooperation of as many groups as possible, and not offend or neglect or become identified with any particular one in order to maximise my chances of gaining full co-operation' (Potts, 2008: 160). While a few members of staff (especially from minority ethnic communities) and some students knew where my sympathies lay, I did not really break cover till 2003 when I took a key role in developing the institution's race equality policy. Even then, however, I did not publicise widely the fact that I was conducting research in this area. This meant that I was effectively doing covert participant observation. This was arguably unethical, since it entailed writing up informal conversations and analysing institutional documents, some of which were not in the public domain. I pretended initially that these activities stemmed from the original mandate that I had been given by the VC and EOWG and that in this sense all participants had given their informed consent. Eventually, I faced up the moral dilemma, which I articulated as one between loyalty and justice, my responsibilities to my senior colleagues versus my responsibilities to other colleagues. I thus justified the use of covert methods in terms of the ends justifying the means. Aware that the findings do not always present the university in the most desirable light, I have taken steps to anonymise the university in my book, but I am aware that it would not be difficult to break my cover.

Some of the tensions identified as potentially significant in insider research did not seem to me to be very evident. Two writers have argued that 'adopting a distanced approach may, in some cases, be inimical to doing ones job in the way in which one has been hired to do it' (Sikes & Potts, 2008a: 7), while another two have pointed to the difficulty of maintaining 'objectivity, given… previous and present close contact with the institution and…colleagues' (Smyth & Holian, 2008: 38). It seems to me that the contrasts between the job that I have been hired to do and being a researcher are overdrawn in the above, albeit heavily qualified, quotations. I am a sociologist who considers verstehen to be integral to the discipline. Verstehen in turn entails some detachment in order to understand how different individuals and groups see the world. Over the course of my career, I have moved from being an academic to a senior manager and back again, and at times have held cross institutional roles which have entailed liaising with groups across the institution. This experience has entailed a level of detachment and reinforced my awareness that different individuals and groups perceive things in markedly different ways. What is more, managing an audit and major institutional review effectively entailed not believing ones own spin but carefully assessing the evidence. Objectivity is an ideal that we strive for but may not attain, but there is nothing inherent in insider research that in my view presents a unique threat to objectivity. As a sociologist, I am concerned with maintaining a critical distance so that evidence can be weighed and this feature is characteristic in the effective fulfilment of much of the work that I have been engaged to do such as investigations of grievances. And such critical distance is also crucial to insider research.

There are of course practical difficulties in being both a practitioner and researcher. While I did not find the movement from one identity to another particularly problematic, 'managing time' was sometimes difficult (Drake & Heath, 2008: 138). Being a senior member of staff was very helpful in facilitating access, but there were periods when the research had to take a back seat to the day job. The research subsequently took much longer than envisaged and indeed took 8 years from start to finish.

Grounded theory Prior to the start of my data gathering I had not formulated any specific hypotheses which I was seeking to test. Instead I intended to search for patterns in the systematically collected data, formulate hypotheses on the basis of the data and in this way produce a 'grounded theory'. I recognised that I did not of course start from a position of tabula rasa. My questions determined the nature of the data which I collected and analysed and I clearly already had some hunches as to what I was likely to find. Nonetheless, I tried as much as possible to ensure that my theoretical conclusions did flow from the data and at the very least were consistent with it. It is in this sense that I tried to produce a grounded theory. And there were indeed some surprises. Initially I was sceptical as to whether the concept of institutional racism had any analytic utility. It seemed me to gloss over critical distinctions (Pilkington, 2003). My journey led me, however, to recognise the overwhelming whiteness of academia. The Parekh report's identification of components of institutional racism proved useful here (Parekh, 2000). Using data from my case study university I was able empirically to establish remarkable continuities in racial disadvantage in higher education and an extraordinary reluctance to take effective action to redress the situation. At the same time, I was able to identify the causal processes involved in the generation of changes.

Neutrality or commitment? I cannot pretend to be neutral when it comes to racial disadvantage and ethnic diversity, and indeed have a longstanding academic and community involvement in the area, which has been underpinned by deeply held ethical beliefs. In principle I agree with those who

argue that research should be 'committed to values' and that we have 'important ethical responsibilities to those being researched- researching *with* them' (Ashcroft et al, 1996: 60). It has to be admitted, however, that in practice research is often committed to some values and not others, and that research is with some but on others. Thus in this thesis, I have done research with (some) colleagues from minority ethnic backgrounds but done research on senior White staff. And I have defended my lack of transparency with senior colleagues in terms of a commitment to social justice.

A commitment to particular values does not gainsay the significance of empirical research and the importance of conducting such research in a rigorous way. In stressing the critical nature of systematic research, I may seem to be at odds with the stress in much of the recent literature which enjoins us 'to explore the consequences of our own subjectivity: to accept that knowledge is socially situated and to take responsibility for our own position in relation to those about whom we write' (Jackson, 2000:55). Indeed, for some writers, 'reflexive autobiographical accounts' are invaluable not least because they enable us better 'to assess the validity, reliability and generalisability of...particular research' (Walford, 1991: 5). Much of this emphasis on the need for reflexivity I accept and the outpouring of work describing the realities of research a useful corrective to the rather anodyne technicist view found in some textbooks. Research is not merely a technical activity, but is also a social activity with ethical implications. And our positionality and biases do make a difference to the process and outcome of research.

In the light of these points, it is indeed critical for researchers to be reflexive. Having said this, I am sceptical of the value of autobiographical accounts (however interesting they may be intrinsically) in helping us to judge the value of particular research. Subjectivity cannot be avoided, but there is a danger in wallowing in subjectivity. We need instead, as Ball (1990) has argued, to engage in 'disciplined subjectivity'. The debate among sociologists of education about the role schools play in reproducing racial inequality is revealing here (Pilkington, 1999). Those who are characterised as 'methodological purists' see the purpose of research as the production of knowledge relevant to public debates, not the eradication of inequality, while those who adopt a partisan position see the purpose of research as that of documenting what is going on in order to challenge injustices. And yet despite fundamental disagreement about the purpose of research, and a continuing debate about the role of schooling in educational inequality, both are in fact opposed to falsifying data and suppressing unhelpful findings and both recognise the need for assessment of factual claims in terms of logical consistency and empirical adequacy (Blair, 1998; Gillborn, 1998). At the end of the day these remain the fundamental principles in terms of which research, including insider research, needs to be conducted and evaluated. Hence it is that I have used a variety of methods to validate statements and interpretations. Sometimes this has meant rejecting claims by staff and students that they have been subject to racism, while at other times this has meant finding corroborating evidence.

Case study research Finally, the question arises as to what claim to knowledge is being made in my book. I have tried to make a circumscribed claim to knowledge on a topic which is under-researched and acknowledged by key policy makers to be significant. The claim to knowledge ultimately rests on the 'trustworthiness' of my account - the appropriateness of data collection and analysis, interpretation of analytical statements and reporting of the research (Bassey, 1999:75). The claim to knowledge is, however, circumscribed because I adopted a case study approach on a particular institution and my findings are not necessarily generalisable to other institutions. I have, like many

educational researchers, studied a singularity. This is not to imply 'rejection of generalisation as a worthwhile ambition for the study of singularities' (Bassey, 1999:11). Indeed I hope to have produced findings which are relatable to other contexts and in this way produced what Bassey (1999:12) calls 'fuzzy generalisations' ie qualified general statements. While the claim to knowledge rests on the trustworthiness of the account and its relatability to other contexts, the significance of this research lies in the fact that it focuses on an under-researched area central to racial equality. I hope in this way to have made a modest contribution to 'educational research for social justice' (Griffiths, 1998).

Bibliography

Alexander, C. (2006) 'Introduction: Mapping the Issues', *Ethnic and Racial Studies,* Vol.29, No.3.

Ashcroft, K., Bigger, S. & Coates, D. (1996) *Researching into Equal opportunities in Colleges and Universities,* London, Kogan Page.

Ball, S. (1990) *Politics and Policy Making in Education,* London, Routledge.

Bassey, M. (1999) *Case Study Research in Educational Settings*, Buckingham, Open University Press.

Blair, M. (1998) 'The Myth of Neutrality in Educational research' in P. Connolly and B. Troyna (eds) *Researching Racism in Education,* Buckingham, Open University Press.

Drake, P. & Heath, L. (2008) 'Insider Research in School and Universities: The Case of the Professional Doctorate' in P. Sikes and A. Potts (eds) *Researching Education from the Inside,* London, Routledge.

Gillborn, D. (1998) 'Racism and the Politics of Qualitative Research: Learning from Controversy and Critique' in P. Connolly and B. Troyna (eds) *Researching Racism in Education,* Buckingham, Open University Press.

Griffiths, M. (1998) *Educational Research for Social Justice,* Buckingham, Open University Press.

Jackson, P. (2000) 'Race and Racism' in D. Burton (ed) *Research Training for Social Scientists,* London, Sage.

Lavia, J. (2007) 'Reflections on Doing Educational Research in a Post-Colonial Setting' in M. Reiss, R DePalma & E. Atkinson (eds) *Marginality and Difference in Education and Beyond,* Stoke on Trent, Trentham Books.

Parekh, B. (2000) *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain,* London, Profile Books.

Pilkington, A. (1999) 'Racism in Schools and Ethnic Differentials in Educational Achievement', *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* Vol. 20, No. 3

Pilkington, A. (2003) *Racial Disadvantage and Ethnic Diversity in Britain,* Basingstoke, Palgrave.

Pilkington, A (2011) *Institutional Racism in the Academy,* Stoke on Trent, Trentham books

Potts, A. (2008) 'Researching Academic Staff: The Case of Colleges and Universities' in P. Sikes and A. Potts (eds) *Researching Education from the Inside,* London, Routledge.

Radcliffe, P. (2001) 'Sociology, the State and Social Change: Theoretical Considerations' in P. Radcliffe (ed) *Race, Ethnicity and Social Change,* Basingstoke, Palgrave.

Sikes, P. & Potts, A. (2008a) 'Introduction' in P. Sikes and A. Potts (eds) *Researching Education from the Inside,* London, Routledge.

Sikes, P. & Potts, A. (2008b) 'Closing Thoughts' in P. Sikes and A. Potts (eds) *Researching Education from the Inside,* London, Routledge.

Smyth, A. & Holian, R. (2008) 'Credibility Issues in Research from Within Organisations' in P. Sikes and A. Potts (eds) *Researching Education from the Inside,* London, Routledge.

Walford, G (1991) (ed) *Doing Educational Research,* London, Routledge

Young, A. (2004) 'Experiences of Ethnographic Interviewing About Race: The Inside and Outside of It' in M. Bulmer and J. Solomos (eds) *Researching race and Racism,* London, Routledge.