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Researching others: epistemology, experience, standpoints and participation

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This article examines the possibility and challenges of carrying out research, especially qualitative and ethnographically-orientated research, into areas such as gender, disability, ethnicity and racialization, without the researcher having direct experience of those specific social divisions and oppressions. Discussion of these questions is framed by four differential understandings of the concept of 'otherness' and linked with debates in the areas of research methodology, epistemology, ontology and research practices. Issues of experience, 'standpoint' and participation are specifically focused on. The resulting discussion leads to the conclusion that in 'researching others' attention has to be paid to historical context and to the maintenance of a critical relation to the research topic. A sustaining focus on the self-reflexivity of the researcher as author and the continual interrogation of the social bases of knowledge, together with a detail understanding of political agendas, are also important. In paying attention to these aspects of research, materialism and critical discourse analysis are to be seen as part of the same broad socio-political project rather than as opposing and mutually exclusive perspectives.

Introduction

Is it possible to research 'others'? If so, how is this to be done? And how does this aspiration and this activity relate to more general questions in social science methodology? Is it possible, and how is it possible, for an able-bodied researcher to carry out non-exploitative, participative, qualitative research with people with disabilities? Or can men research women, white people, people of colour, or visa versa?

These questions have arisen directly from research practice. They have been an ongoing concern in our own research, mainly separately, but to some extent together. Our recent research has focused particularly on disability, ethnicity, gender, mental illness and violence, but also on

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children and generation. This article examines the challenges posed by and some of the limitations on researching 'others' and focuses on whether it is possible to carry out research, especially qualitative and ethnographically-orientated research, into areas such as gender, disability, ethnicity and racialization without the researcher having immediate points of identification or direct experience of associated social divisions and oppressions. These questions are placed within the context of debates on methodology, epistemology and emancipatory research practices.

When one does research, one is not, at least not usually, in only one social relation with the researched. There is not only one existent, dominant or possible form of 'otherness'. People with disabilities are not only that; they are black, middle class, Jewish, and so on. There are, at least in most researches, multiple forms of social relation involved between researchers and researched. And furthermore, for some research there may be relatively few researchers available who are socially similar to the researched, for example, refugees of certain ethnic groups or those who have suffered ritual abuse. Furthermore, one can clearly be a member of a dominant group in one situation or society, and be an 'other' in a different situation or society. This is apparent in relation to ethnic, linguistic or cultural groups (indeed one of us lives and works most of the time as such a 'foreigner' with the frequent experiences of 'othering' that this involves) but it can of course also apply to other social divisions. So the picture in research practice is a complex one. Before proceeding any further, it may be useful to discuss what is indeed meant by 'otherness', and how this may relate to research practice.

On 'otherness'

The notion of 'otherness' is complex and has a complex history. Celia Kitzinger and Sue Wilkinson (1996) have provided an exemplary review of the question of 'otherness' within feminism, especially feminist psychology and social psychology, following and sometimes critiquing Simone de Beauvoir's (1949/1953) use of the other in *The Second Sex*. They also point to the relative attention that has been given to some 'others' and the relative neglect of some other 'others', in terms of age, class, 'race' and so on. The recognition of some such 'others' has been a major focus of critical concern in feminist, postcolonialist, critical anthropological, anti-racist, radical multicultural, disability and other critical researches that may be broadly defined as anti-oppressive. This applies particularly to areas of and around colour, ethnicity, 'race', and 'non-Westernness', and moreover the problematization of those concepts. These complex constructions of 'otherness' and the associated difficulties engendered in researching them have been explored at some length in recent years.

More attention has been paid to some forms of 'otherness' than others and economic class serves as an example here. Indeed in one sense contemporary debates on 'otherness' can be seen as a means of broadening the analysis and politics of oppression to more than class, with its strong, sometimes reductionist Marxist and neo-Marxist traditions. 'Other' has in

practice often referred to 'other than class-defined'. This diversification has, not surprisingly, meant that theoretical approaches to 'otherness' are various. They range across feminist existential philosophy, critical anthropology, Lacanian psychoanalysis, along with further interconnections with feminism and postcolonialism. Broad contrasts can be made between a de Beauvoirian approach which prioritizes the place of existential negativity attributed to woman/women in patriarchal culture, and otherness which goes beyond the speaking subject or, more generally, the conceptual system in hand. Alternatively, Cixous and Irigaray have, in different ways, shown how 'otherness', defined as the feminine, can open up possibilities for women through the celebration of difference. Debates on 'otherness' are thus far from fixed. Accordingly, in their review Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1996) discuss several key issues in 'Negotiating the problems of otherness' that illustrate this lack of fixity, specifically what they call 'Speaking only for ourselves', 'Celebrating otherness', 'Destabilizing otherness', and 'Interrupting otherness'. Debates on 'otherness' are ongoing, unfinished and probably unfinishable.

While various forms of 'otherness' can be identified in relation to social power relations and discursive constructions (whether in specific social sites or in society more generally), for our purposes it is important to recognize that they can also be identified in relation to the conduct of research. Indeed answering our original questions depends on both what is meant by 'otherness' and how that 'otherness' is engaged with. Different epistemologies, methodologies and politics have different approaches to these two issues, emphasizing different forms of 'otherness' as significant. Our specific concerns are with the place of 'otherness' in the doing of research, and the relation of those practices to social constructions of 'otherness' more generally. And in both these social arenas there are both general and specific instances or forms of 'otherness'. In some senses all those who are the subject (or object) of research are 'others', at least from the perspective of the researchers, in that they are different in relation to the speaking subject (Otherness #1). This 'General research otherness' will be referred to as 'epistemological otherness'. In this sense all or almost all research engages with some notion of other(s), even if it does not actively seek to construct them. However, we also use 'others' here in a rather different way, that is, in the double sense of: first, those who are defined as 'other' in relation to the dominant social power relations and discursive constructions by and of the 'one', such as people with disabilities, women, people of colour and others societally defined as 'other' ('General social otherness' #2); and, second, those who are defined in the context of specific researches as occupying less powerful social locations and as significantly 'different' from 'us' as researchers, such as particular groups of people, regardless of disability, gender or ethnicity, researched by researchers ('Specific research otherness' #3). These two further forms are referred to as 'societal otherness' and 'practical otherness' respectively. There is at least a fourth kind of otherness, namely the 'specific social otherness' or 'local otherness', that can occur in any social context including those that are not part of dominant social power relations and discursive constructions by and of the 'one', such as (Otherness #4) (see table 1).

Table 1. Four forms of otherness

	General	Specific
Research Context	General Research Otherness #1 (Epistemological Otherness)	Specific Research Otherness #3 (Practical Otherness)
Social Context	General Social Otherness #2 (Societal Otherness)	Specific Social Otherness #4 (Local Otherness)

These four usages of 'otherness' are clearly interrelated. They are clearly highly contextualized, in terms of general societal relations, and the social relations of specific local situations and research sites. In some cases 'societal otherness' and 'local otherness' will reinforce each other; in others they may be in contradiction. Within specific research sites, all four forms of 'otherness' identified may be relevant. This may particularly apply in research on members of subordinated social categories. We are especially interested in the challenges posed by research on those defined as 'others' in specific researches by virtue of occupying less powerful social locations in terms of both specific research sites and more general societal social relations. Examples include people with disabilities being researched by able-bodied researchers, women by men, black people by white people, and so on. These questions around researching 'others' inevitably link closely with many 'general questions' of social research, in methodology, epistemology and ontology. Different research approaches tend to focus on different forms of 'otherness'.

Such questions may preoccupy researchers, though typically, in our experience, not as abstract questions of textbook methodology but as matters of immediate research practice. The answers that are negotiated to them range from positivistic responses to those based in standpoint research. Approaching these 'general' questions from the perspective of what we might call 'other-directed research' highlights connections between epistemology, methodology, research practice and politics. The basic problem of how to research 'others' persists in much, perhaps most, research. With these concerns in mind, we consider that it is necessary to place research, especially qualitative research, on 'others' in the wider context of epistemology and the politics of the researcher-researched relationship. In so doing, we address issues of experience, standpoint and participation.

Epistemology and experience

Let us consider how the questions posed are addressed regarding 'otherness', and to some extent answered, within broad social science traditions. In many ways these represent different ways of studying what is labelled as 'epistemological otherness', that is different in relation to the speaking subject from the perspective of the researchers. Different social science traditions make quite different assumptions about the degree of separation of the researcher as a speaking subject and the 'other' of research, and how this separation is to be bridged. According to realist perspectives,

objects have an independent, separate existence from the human mind. Knowledge is associated with the development of different, but equivalent, conceptual schemes with each focusing on a different aspect of reality. Here 'epistemological otherness' and 'societal otherness' can be seen to predominate, but also link into 'practical otherness' and 'local otherness'.

Within positivist traditions, a general rule is that approaches to 'epistemological otherness' can be extended to the other three forms of 'otherness' noted: 'societal otherness', 'practical otherness', and 'local otherness'. The assumed separation and technical 'neutrality' of the analyst and their analysis can be re-applied to all these three other forms. The impact of the specific social features and characteristics of the 'social othernesses' and the specific research context are muted, possibly ignored. There is a neat technical symmetry in the absence of these social and research presences.

Both positivism and realism have been subjected to various epistemological challenges. Phenomenology, for example, emphasizes the fundamental place of consciousness, interpretation, meaning, hermeneutics, communication, subjectivity and relativity with each of these aspects suggesting both a foci of attention in research and an imperative for methodology. In different ways, in most phenomenological approaches, prevailing worldviews or ontological positions are questioned. This necessitates researchers' values, prejudices, beliefs and attitudes being stated and interrogated, and their likely influence on the research being appraised. These considerations also problematize the researching of 'others'. This may be interpreted as partly because the 'other', in both social and the research senses, 'comes alive' as, in addition to the self-interrogation of the researcher's consciousness, 'others' may participate in the research, talk back, disagree on research interpretations. Indeed it seems reasonable that, in this view, the assumptions of phenomenology apply to both researchers and researched 'others'.

Such perspectives open up a social space for the experience of both researchers and researched, and communication between them, even if it is assumed to be in part ontologically unbridgeable. The complexity of the construction of 'epistemological otherness' characteristic of phenomenological approaches carries over to a large extent into the other forms: 'practical otherness', 'societal otherness', and 'local otherness'. Indeed the specificity of both 'practical otherness' and 'local otherness' is likely to be further emphasized, and subject to variable interpretations. The analysis of 'societal otherness' is also likely to be understood in terms of social constructions. At a fundamental level the notion of 'others', both socially and in the context of the research, are no longer so fixed, and can be understood as the product of social constructions.

Epistemological and experiential complexities: the case of feminist theories

The broad range of positions outlined thus far is, however, only the beginning of the story. Although phenomenological approaches are often

associated with qualitative orientations, and positivist positionings with quantitative techniques, this is by no means always the case. It is becoming increasingly acknowledged that in carrying out research both qualitative and quantitative orientations can be used at different stages or at the same time (Bryman 1992, Brannen 1993, Barbour 1999). As an example of such complexities, we take the case of feminist theories, as these provide insights on the use of multiple methods, the combining of quantitative and qualitative approaches, and the place of experience and standpoint in research. In considering whether it is possible to carry out research without the researcher having immediate points of identification or direct experience of the focus area, it is useful to consider feminist research perspectives, and specifically standpoint theories of knowledge.

Although it has to be emphasized that there are many versions of feminism and many varieties of feminist research, almost all have some common features. Many, for example, challenge the ontological and epistemological base of positivist research and all include the view that mainstream research practice (positivist but also phenomenological) has marginalized women, as both researchers and researched. There is also the belief that much research is gender-absent (Hanmer and Hearn 1999), and represents male/men's dominant values disguised as 'objectivity'. Many feminist researchers have rejected notions of rational objectivity implied in the separation of researcher and researched, and instead emphasize reflexivity and the positioning of the researcher in the research process (Maynard 1994, Mason 1996, May 1997).

However, while there are commonalities, there are also differences, and these are highly relevant to whether a researcher has to have experience of something in order to research it. Feminist empiricism (see Eichler 1988), according to Harding (1991: 111), focuses on 'following more rigorously the existing rules and principles of science'. Notions of objectivity are critiqued as representing malestream norms. However, emphasis is placed on feminist practice in research rather than upon critiquing prevailing norms of scientific inquiry. Once sexist and other biases have been removed, it is assumed to be possible to produce value-neutral work.

Feminist relativist epistemologies (Stanley and Wise 1983) take the view that there are many different and valid versions of social reality, in which women's experiences can be regarded as both a starting and a finishing point. There is an emphasis on qualitative orientations and a focus on the specific experiences of women. Later, Stanley and Wise (1993) revised this view to emphasize a 'feminist fractured foundationalist epistemology'. In this work the validity and plurality of accounts produced in particular contexts, with each being able to claim authenticity in a social world understood as materially real (Stanley and Wise 1993, Maynard 1994) are emphasized.

A more conventionally foundationalist, and arguably more materialist, epistemology that has been very influential within feminist theory is standpoint theory or theories. Feminist standpoint epistemologies are women-centred, just as Marxist standpoint epistemologies are class-centred. The experiences of women form a key focus for research although experiences of the researched ('others?') are located within the wider context

of women's lives. The researcher operates reflexively and as a research participant rather than expert. By placing women centre stage and focusing on the female researcher's experience and biography, it is considered possible to produce accounts of the social which are unbiased or less biased. It is understood that by listening to the voices of women and others oppressed and made 'other', and taking full account of their experiences in their struggles against oppression, the 'truth', or at least a form of truth, can be revealed and action taken. In this, there is often emphasis on the quality of the researcher-researched relationship, and qualitative orientations and methods more generally, both representing ways of seeking to overcome the 'othering' processes of research and researching.

Postmodern feminist perspectives on research (Opie 1992, Fawcett 2000) broadly argue that 'truth' and 'objectivity' are unachievable myths and that essentialist accounts of experience are not a transparent guide to the 'truth' of a situation, but are one historically specific version of events. Postmodern feminist research emphasizes reading of texts and the identification of the varying operative discourses. Thus different feminist theories may have quite different relations to correspondence or coherence theories of truth. In many senses it could be argued that such theories of truth are critiqued and threatened by feminist theory in general, and postmodern feminism in particular.

It can now be seen that the construction of the four forms of 'otherness' is more complex and open to further epistemological and political contestation (Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1996). 'Epistemological otherness', 'societal otherness', 'practical otherness', and 'local otherness' are all open to interrogation, in this case through feminist and related lenses. Within the broad range of feminist methodologies there is no necessary reason why there should be an exact correspondence between the answers to our original questions, and especially so within the framework of postmodern feminism. It may be that there is a relatively firm adherence to the societal construction of woman/women as 'others' in terms of standpoint positions on 'societal otherness', but a much more socially constructed position in relation to the complexities of 'practical otherness' or 'local otherness'. There are also possible apparent tensions between and within particular feminist positions; these should not be dismissed as 'inconsistencies' but interrogated as lived contradictions and dilemmas (Wolf 1996a, Ribbens and Edwards 1998b). Standpoint feminism engages particularly with contradictions between the socially structured construction of knowledge and the experience of knowers (and knowing/knowledgeable 'others') within social structures. Standpoint approaches are both complex, even contradictory; they are also multiple, and for these reasons they deserve closer examination. The move to postmodern multiplicity, within and beyond feminism, has parallels with debates around standpoints, and it is to this latter issue we now turn.

From standpoint to standpoints

The idea of standpoint is not just an epistemological perspective; it is a social source of knowledge in the context of social power. Cain and Finch

(1981: 113) comment that the 'concept of a standpoint is intended to grasp a unity between a structure and its bearers'. Social location and the production and reproduction of knowledge are thus inextricably connected. Standpoint theory centres on relations of power and knowledge, albeit in a different way to that understood in Foucaultian power/knowledge couplets. Standpoint theory highlights the importance of the politics of location and positioning, and how this might intersect with the complexities of more or less conscious social identifications. This is particularly crucial in terms of the second meaning of 'otherness', 'societal otherness', that refers to those who are defined as 'other' in relation to dominant social power relations and discursive constructions by and of the 'one'. So, what are the value and limitations of standpoint positions? Standpoint theories of knowledge provide one set of political and epistemological answers to the questions raised, from a feminist standpoint or some other standpoint position(s). So how are we to assess the value of standpoint positions, and specifically the movements to multiple standpoints?

Some of the connections between Marxist standpoint theory and feminist standpoint theory have been drawn by Harding (1991), Calhoun (1995) and Potter (2000). The (supposedly) superior knowledge of the (male) proletariat, argued by Lukács (1971) and kindred Marxists has been displaced by the superiority of the knowledge of women. This is clear and explicit in the work of Dorothy Smith (1990). Feminist standpoint theory, like Marxist standpoint theory, attempts to transcend the bifurcation of subject and the object, the objective and the subjective. In Smith's terms, the feminist researcher seeks to go beyond the abstracted, conceptual and dominant/dominating 'relations of ruling', to the world known directly through the bodily mode. Feminist standpoint theory both recognizes the exclusion of women from the relations of ruling and the power of the experience of concretely situated women so excluded. These versions of Marxism and feminism are dialogical, and simultaneously descriptive and critical.

Debates on feminist and other anti-oppressive standpoint epistemologies are particularly relevant to the questions under discussion and we now appraise these in more detail. Standpoint epistemology and standpoint research have an explicitly emancipatory emphasis with issues of power, oppression and empowerment as major focal points. However, in relation to standpoint epistemology, problems emerge when the possibility of different standpoints are admitted. Rather than there being one feminist standpoint, there could be many, including Black feminist, lesbian, standpoints related to feminism and class, and a plethora of different divisions, all resulting in distinctive standpoints. This returns us to some of the questions surrounding which 'others' are to be prioritized (Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1996). Harding (1991) argued that feminist standpoint, by revealing underlying values and power frameworks ignored in malestream research, could lay greater claims to objectivity. In such claims to objectivity, as Maynard (1994) points out, she appeared to gloss over the implications of plural contested standpoint truth claims and the relativism that this produces or that is difficult to avoid (Harding 1998, Harding and Narayan 1998a, b, Narayan and Hardin 2000).

Trinder (2000), drawing from Flax (1992), highlights how the three key claims of standpoint approaches—that certain kinds of knowledge are generated by gender-based power relations; more objective knowledge is produced by feminist standpoint epistemologies; such knowledge is straightforwardly emancipatory and does not generate its own power relations—are contradictory. She argues that if gendered social relations produce women's experiences, then how can such shaped experiences provide objective knowledge about social relations and the social sphere and how can such knowledge be perceived as value-free. Putting this another way, if social relations are constructed and related to differential power relations, how can women's voices and experiences be seen as producing 'innocent' rather than positioned knowledge.

These discussions have a key bearing on whether one needs experience of an area to research it. A standpoint position would generally be that experiences produce knowledge and knowledge divorced from experience is colonizing, appropriating and oppressive. Knowledge is not only about the construction of 'others' in society that happen to be beyond the gaze of researchers, but is very much concerned with overcoming dominant constructions of 'others' within the research process itself. This highlights the importance of countering 'othering' within the research process, that is with regard to not only 'practical otherness' but also to 'epistemological otherness'.

Emancipatory research

The notion that research can have an empowering agenda and an emancipatory brief warrants further critical discussion. Emancipation and empowerment can be regarded as contested and politically charged concepts which can be used to constrain as well as facilitate (Baistow 1994, Beresford and Trevillion 1995, Humphries 1996). Different agendas can jostle together under an emancipatory heading. Standpoint research within feminism and anti-racism, for example, has focused on both understanding oppression and tackling it. However, this can carry the danger of leading in some instances to rather rigid fixed definitions of empowerment, albeit within broad emancipatory expositions.

Within disability rights movements it has been argued that non-disabled researchers cannot research with authenticity and that they cannot share the emancipatory agenda of the social model of disability (Oliver 1996, Barnes and Mercer 1997, Morris 1997). Some critics of this view from within the social model of disability perspective highlight the possibilities of marginalization if only those with direct experience of an area can research it (Moore *et al*. 1998). The problems with the argument that struggles against oppression produce voices that can in a united fashion speak 'the truth' about disability and formulate one standpoint only, have to be noted.

Stone and Priestley (1996) emphasize the methodological difficulties associated with tying 'emancipatory' ideals into pragmatic research activity. They identify the problem of assumed homogeneity and argue that failure

to transform individual lives in the context of a research project should not be the sole criterion of 'good' research, provided a real contribution is made in a wider context. They draw attention to potential conflict between collectivizing experience within a social model of disability and collectivizing analysis where participants' understanding of disablement is not informed by the social model. They distinguish between accepting the expertise of researchers and accepting disabled people's expertise as knowers. However, they clearly state that the priorities for disabled researchers must be to adopt a social model with a clear political commitment, and use non-exploitative research methods and findings to counter oppression.

More generally, standpoint positionings, such as those adopted within feminisms and social models of disability, have the potential to unintentionally create or reproduce the forms of 'otherness' that they seek to counter. A focus on plural 'standpoints' can be regarded as a useful way of avoiding the potential pitfalls of 'standpoint' and of reincorporating experience in a non-fixed, non-essentialist way into researching particular areas. Hartsock (1996), rather than focusing on a particular feminist standpoint that is seen as representative of the oppression that women experience, acknowledges that there are multiple realities linked to plural perspectives of knowledge and truth (Hartsock 1998). Maynard (1994) argues that a view which regards all standpoints as equally valid and real becomes problematic when power relations between women differ. Wendell (1996), Hartsock (1996) and Pease (2000) have explored ways of developing epistemologies that accentuate the plurality of standpoints. In the work of such researchers the distinction between insider and outsider ('other') is far from clearcut, hence the development of such terms as 'double consciousness', 'outsiders within' and 'double vision' (Hill Collins in Harding 1991, Wolf 1996b).

Wendell (1996) uses the work of Patricia Hill Collins (1989, 1991) and the production of a pluralizing standpoint amenable to Black feminism to suggest a similar form of standpoint for disabled people. She maintains that having a disability does not in itself give a person a particular point of view or a less distorted and more complete perspective on certain issues. However, she asserts that collectively disabled people have accumulated a significant body of knowledge with different standpoints from those without disabilities and that this knowledge, ignored and repressed in non-disabled cultures, should be further developed and articulated. It cannot be assumed that disabled people identify with other disabled people, that a single perspective on disability (or anything else) is shared, or that disability constitutes the most important aspect of a person's identity or social position. She charges medical models with instituting a false universalizing about disability, noting that although it is necessary, when undertaking social analysis to choose some categories to work with, all categories mask differences. The standpoint(s) for disabled people which Wendell seeks to develop theorizes from characteristic core themes, recognizing the diversity of experiences produced in encountering these core themes. The varying expressions of consciousness regarding these themes would be acknowledged, along with the interdependence of

experiences, consciousness and actions. With such perspectives, the 'othernesses' that are being confronted are rendered more complex, with the primacy of 'practical otherness' and 'local otherness' emphasized over less negotiable general othernesses.

These tensions are examined creatively by Pease (2000), through postmodern conceptualizations of standpoint. He argues that the association of masculinity with objectivity and science denotes a 'false universalism' based solely on biology, applying to all men regardless of the positions that they hold. He rejects suggestions that men and women have intrinsically different ways of knowing. While maintaining that early formulations of standpoint theory did have an essentializing tendency, he argues that more recent interpretations have placed women's experience in differential concrete historical and discursive contexts. He points to how postmodern influences have worked for the acceptance of a plurality of female standpoints. In developing a pro-feminist men's standpoint, Pease (2000) suggests that the advantage of the notion of standpoint is that it relates both to structural location and to the discursive construction of subjectivity. This allows the distinction to be made between 'men's standpoint' and 'pro-feminist men's standpoint'. Citing Harding (1987), he argues that ability or willingness to contribute to understandings are not sex-linked traits, and that some men are able to break free of biological and structural determinism. A postmodern frame, viewing masculinities as discursive phenomena, competing with other discourses for individual men's allegiances, provides more potential for provoking inner change in men than humanist notions of masculinity as essence. Internal conflicts and contradictions are produced by the multiplicity of discourses, opening up possibilities for change. This form of standpoint(s) emphasizes 'practical otherness' and 'local otherness'. It underlines the importance of structural location and subjective positioning, and how interplays of different contexts affect the positions from which it is possible to operate.

In discussing 'standpoints', Wendell (1996), Pease (2000) and Hartsock (1996) highlight the importance of fully acknowledging plurality and the intersections of ethnicity, class, age, economic position, impairment and sexuality, in informing a range of standpoints. Simultaneously, emphasis is placed on recognizing commonalities that can be theorized and used to inform standpoint positionings. Whilst standpoint theory is beset by contradictions, the development of standpoints has much potential to address diverse experiences and ideologically and pragmatically engage with forms of 'otherness'. Pease (2000) stresses how a pro-feminist men's standpoint can support feminist standpoints. This is relevant to the original question of whether it is possible to research areas such as gender and disability without the researcher having immediate points of identification or direct experience of them. He comments that while men can develop a pro-feminist men's standpoint, they cannot be feminists because they cannot share women's experiences. On one level this statement seems self-evident; however on another, it returns us to earlier arguments privileging experience. Undoubtedly, experiences are important, but they can be problematic as different experiences jostle for dominance, even hegemony. To give primacy to one set of experiences, political or research-related, can

lead to loss of allies. Experience is important, but theorizing from experience and making links with the experiences of others and other groupings carries most weight and has greatest impact (Maynard 1994, Rattansi 1995, Williams 1996, Fawcett 2000). Theorizing from a variety of experiences, that explore the operation of oppressions and participative ways of challenge and change, can inform discussion and action and facilitate political agendas.

Having said this, many would read the above and reply that 'it is not that simple'. Tom Shakespeare (1994), writing in relation to disability, notes that while impairment is experienced by many, disability is the specific social identity of a minority. 'Normality' or 'wholeness' are striven for so much that wherever possible impairment and disability are divorced and close associations made with the able-bodied rather than the disable-bodied part of the divide. Some disabled people, women, people of colour, might argue that it is only their direct experiences of oppression that generate the most fundamental challenges, and that 'others', even supporters of their organizations, are not affected or not affected enough to be long-term allies. There is also the issue of appropriation to consider, as supposed allies, bolstered by the historical legacy of privileged positionings may take over and change the nature of the campaigning movements.

These are all legitimate points to make: points which it is neither possible nor appropriate to seek to directly refute. Appropriation, for example, of the researched by the researcher is always possible and something that researchers have to ameliorate. However, it can be argued that it is how research is carried out, how ethical issues are attended to, and how participants are involved in the research process, rather than pre-occupations with forms of experience, that need to be addressed (Williams and May 1996, Shakespeare 1997, Moore *et al*. 1998, Hood *et al*. 1999).

Other analysts, such as Shakespeare (1997), differentiate between research accountability and personal commitment to the social model of disability. He maintains that in research he aims to equalize the research relationship; this involves giving participants some control over the process, their participation and their words. In relation to disability movements, he says that it is not so much accountability but rather his commitment which has to be emphasized. He highlights differences between research which has to have a notional independence and balance and 'emancipatory research' which has a specific agenda and which could be dismissed by Government and policy makers as 'being contaminated by ideological prejudice' (p. 252).

Such grounded, practical approaches make many avenues possible for research. The move to multiple standpoints intersects with the various forms of 'otherness' in multiple ways. Researching various 'others' and 'deconstructing' various 'otherness' is simultaneously possible provided this is related to the terms of research practice, rather than automatic rules to be read off from general societal or even research position(ing)s. The focus therefore shifts to multiple possible forms of participatory, anti-oppressive politically engaged agendas around research practice rather than more generalizable research methodology. If not overcoming then at least

engaging critically with all four kinds of 'otherness', especially those associated with the specificities of the research site, is stressed. 'Practical otherness' and 'local otherness' are addressed and negotiated within a non-exploitative and socially challenging frame of reference, even if more general forms of 'otherness' are much less negotiable and much more structurally fixed.

Thus it is important to be conscious about how research presented as emancipatory within feminism, anti-racism or anti-disablism, for example, can create a variety of problems. These include the questions of whose view of emancipatory and radical change should be paramount and in what ways should dissention be handled. This is clearly not to say that feminist, anti-racist or anti-disablist emancipatory research has not achieved gains. Its oppression-focused agenda, its concerns with hearing marginalized voices and rectifying, in a participative way the deficiencies and omissions of positivist research, has proved invaluable. However, a negative side could also be identified. All too easily an action-orientated emancipatory project could become a straightjacket with dissention being ignored, dismissed, reformulated or 'recolonized'. The apparently positive political messages and possibilities of participatory, emancipatory research for 'solving' the problem of researching 'others' can now be understood as somewhat muted. Thus we now examine the participatory research mode and the prospects it offers in a little more detail.

Collaborative and participatory researching

In addressing the original questions posed, possible ways forward may emphasize practical, political, methodological or epistemological considerations. One set of responses to the question of whether one should have experience of something to research it, is that which promotes participatory, collaborative research with those defined as 'others'. This involves working inductively in 'answering' these questions, as in action research traditions. Other links can be recognized with liberatory politics and epistemology, as in critical theory and conscientization. In reviewing participatory approaches in research, Pease (1996) (drawing on Kelly *et al.* 1994, Maynard 1994) has examined three 'participatory' or potentially participatory methods: sociological intervention (Touraine 1977), consciousness-raising (MacKinnon 1982) and collective memory-work (Haug 1987). These all foreground the self in ways that challenge much mainstream, especially positivist, social science. Recently, Davis (2000), using an ethnographic orientation, has examined how reflexive, deconstructive, context-specific, transparent fieldwork can contribute to the conditions promoting self-emancipation.

Priestley (1997) has explored the collectivizing of the research process through a collaborative research process, in which effective collaboration involves all parties in a series of negotiations and trade offs. While compromises are inevitable, all parties can obtain benefits provided attention is paid throughout to the goal of equalizing power. Equalizing power and pragmatically and ideologically working towards addressing

forms of 'otherness' through participatory research can serve as far from straightforward, but important, ongoing process for participative research projects.

As with 'empowerment' and 'emancipatory' frames, 'participation' can mean different things to different groupings of people. It can mean that only those with direct experience of a particular area can carry out research into that area and that such research has to fully involve all participants; that only those with direct experience of an area can carry out research with other aspects of the research process, such as those relating to participation, being left open; that researchers, with or without direct experience of an area, can interpret participatory research in terms of shared agendas and operating procedures; that a researcher has an initial agenda which is then influenced and changed by the involvement of participants; that a researcher's agenda is followed but with participants being engaged as fully as possible in the research process; or even to a researcher's agenda being dressed up as participative research but with participation being nominally consultative rather than collaborative. There are also further issues to address relating to whether all the participants are fully involved, whether some are involved more than others or whether there is a steering group comprising those participants who have experience of a certain area who also have or want to acquire research skills. All of this is not to dismiss participatory research, but to highlight the groundwork that has to be carried out and the close attention that has to be paid to process issues throughout. In this context, decisions on the form, extent and process of participation in research have to be recurring questions facing researchers. Attention paid to these areas has resulted in practical ways forward in terms of researching with those who are defined in the context of specific researches as occupying less powerful social locations and as significantly 'different' from the researchers ('practical otherness').

Whilst bearing in mind these challenges, this kind of research represents a major tradition for engaging with, confronting and sometimes transforming 'otherness'. This applies especially in addressing the 'otherness' created and constructed in the research process: 'practical otherness', and to an extent 'epistemological otherness'. Through these possible transformations, there may be possible change in the power relations and social constructions of 'local otherness(es)'. Changing 'societal otherness' through participatory and collaborative research is a much more difficult ambition.

Three connections

Finally, before concluding, some links are made between the issues discussed and three further debates. First, in considering if and how it is possible to research 'others', the interrogation of relations between 'social otherness(es)' and 'research otherness(es)' remains a key matter for researchers. This involves clarifying the relationship of the accounts and texts produced in research, both by researched and researchers, and the broader social structuring of power/knowledge. There are many complex-

ities around connections between the societal structuring of power/knowledge and the structuring of power/knowledge in specific research projects, including local, situated knowledges. Thus, we might contrast the different possibilities for knowledge formation for those positioned and societally constructed as members of a dominant category (such as 'white people') and those positioned and societally constructed as members of a subordinated category. In specific researches, members of each category may study those similar to and/or different from themselves.

Second, there are clear links with current debates on the intersection of endogenous reflexivity ('. . . the ways in which the actions of members of a given community are seen to contribute to the constitution of social reality itself') and referential reflexivity in the research process ('. . . the consequences that arise from a meeting between the reflexivity exhibited by actors as part of a lifeworld and that exhibited by the researcher as part of a social scientific community') (May 1998: 8). For men to research men, or women to research women, or men to research women, or women men, there are distinct and different ways in which 'societal otherness' and 'research otherness' may coincide or contradict. The same arguments apply for other social divisions, and combinations of social divisions. This approach to research methodology may assist the process of keeping the researcher firmly in the social and political world, rather than descending into self-referential calls to mentalist forms of reflexivity (May 1999). The relationship of social life and sociological practice (or life) is central to researching others and understanding the social limitations and constraints of that project (May 2000). Without these kind of contextualizations, researcher reflexivity 'in isolation' may even bring the dangers of 'making ourselves visible' in research in a manner that risks muting the voices of researched further still (Ribbens and Edwards 1998a: 204).

Third, in seeking to make sense of the accounts and explanations of others' experience in contrasting research situations, researchers need to develop practical and theoretical understandings of both the material and discursive construction of accounts, as signposted in the notion of material discourse (Hearn 1998a, b).

Conclusion

The question as to whether it is possible to carry out qualitative research into areas such as gender, disability and ethnicity without the researcher having immediate points of identification or direct experience of those areas cannot have one simple or straightforward answer. Obviously it would be unacceptable for a male researcher, a non-disabled researcher and a white researcher to use their research to speak for women, disabled people and Black people respectively. It would also be unacceptable for a female researcher, a disabled researcher, a Black researcher, a researcher of colour to speak on behalf of all women, disabled people, Black people or people of colour. Such groupings cannot be seen as homogenous wholes and as numerous authors have pointed out gender, ethnicity, age, class position, sexuality, locality,

belief systems, education and many other factors, both specific and general, produce diversity and division within projected homogenized groupings. There are commonalities, but these can never be completely assumed, but rather need interrogation.

In most research projects issues related to the ontological and epistemological position and value base of those engaged in the research have to be fully explored and incorporated into the research. Details relating to research design, process issues and the findings have to be subject to the same critically reflective process. The worth of the findings and their applicability and impact cannot be taken as given but are open to discussion, interpretation and critical interrogation. Particular political and policy agendas, whether more or less anti-oppressive and anti-exploitative will undoubtedly have a bearing on how the research is viewed. There are clearly no simple solutions to the dilemmas posed. Research carried out into disability by a disabled researcher cannot on the basis of experience alone be seen to be more legitimate than research carried out into disability by a non-disabled researcher. It is how the research project is conducted, how the participants are involved, how attention is paid to ethical issues and the extent of critical reflexivity, that have to be regarded as key factors. These aspects in turn need to be subject to ongoing critical appraisal at each stage of the research.

In negotiating these various questions, our own preference is for working within the critical tradition, with an open-mindedness on the specificities of particular research and socio-political situations. This entails strong attention to historical context, a critical relation to the topic of research, a self-reflexivity of the researcher as author, an awareness of the social location of the author and the topic, consideration of the social bases of knowledge, commitment to political emancipation, and, where appropriate, empirical inquiry not just assertion and speculation. In this sense, materialism and critical discourse analysis can be part of the same broad socio-political project that makes researching 'others' necessary, however much it is fraught with difficulties, even dangers.

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