

# **Researching from the inside — does it compromise validity?**

## **A discussion**

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## 1. Introduction

The concept of validity in social research is the subject of much debate. It is a complex and problematic issue, especially because it is difficult to define validity.

In traditional studies, validity usually referred to the degree to which the study accurately reflected the issue or topic that the research was attempting to measure (Feldman 2003). More specifically, this type of validity also referred to the role of research instruments and their appropriateness for collecting data that answers the research questions (Black and Champion 1976). Such positivist accounts assumed that science could produce objective knowledge and thus the researcher's goal was to accurately capture an objective reality or 'truth' (Hammersley 2000). However, with changing ontological and epistemological frameworks, criteria for validity changed. It was no longer deemed possible to produce objective knowledge through research — instead criteria for validity changed to include factors such as credibility, believability and reliability (Guba quoted in Cohen *et al.* 2000).

With changes in the philosophical foundations of social research, the role of the researcher also changed. While positivists viewed validity as being dependent on the researcher's objectivity, neopositivists, acknowledging the impossibility of complete objectivity, espoused the importance of eliminating researcher biases. At the other extreme, postmodernists argued that researcher's subjectivities were central to the research process and must be recognized as such.

Considering these complexities, it is not surprising that insider research — where the researcher has a direct involvement or connection with the research setting (Robson 2002) — has been the cause of much debate and scrutiny. Questions that frequently arise include: What effect does the researcher's insider status have on the research process? Is the validity of the research compromised? Can a researcher maintain objectivity? Is objectivity necessary for validity?

This paper aims to cast light upon these problematic and complex issues. While it is recognized that insider researchers, and the issues that surround them, are also the subject of debate in quantitative research, this paper focuses primarily on qualitative research. It is not the aim of this paper to provide definitive answers — indeed, many would argue that this is an impossible task. Instead this paper aims to raise awareness of the issues involved when considering the validity of qualitative research, particularly when the researcher is an insider to this process.

The paper begins with an introduction to concepts of validity and the role of the qualitative researcher. It continues with an overview of the expanding field of 'insider research', describing what constitutes insider research and outlining notions of validity within this area. To illustrate some of the complexities involved, three case studies from qualitative research will be provided. Each study will be analysed from various perspectives, examining how the researcher's position impacts on the research process, and thus on the validity of that process. Finally, a range of arguments for and against the validity of each study will be considered with questions for further thought posed.

## 2. Concepts of validity and the role of the researcher

Validity is an important factor in successful and effective research. If research is not valid, then it is judged worthless (Cohen *et al.* 2000). The researcher's role is crucial to ensuring the validity of research. But what constitutes valid research and how can the researcher ensure validity?

The concept of validity itself is open to debate and scrutiny. It is problematic because of philosophical questions underlying the validity concept. Ontological and epistemological questions such as 'What is reality and truth?' and 'How do we perceive and understand social reality?' are complex. However such questions are critical to an understanding of the validity concept and to the role of the researcher. The section that follows provides an overview of contrasting ontologies and epistemologies and their relationship to the concept of validity and researcher roles.

### **2.1. Positivism and the objective researcher**

In the first half of the twentieth century, objectivist epistemologies dominated social research. Asserting that objective truths and meanings exist independently of human consciousness, objectivism encapsulates the spirit of the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason in seventeenth-century England (Crotty 1998). Objectivist epistemologies are associated with realist ontologies which view reality as an external objective phenomenon, existing independently of human consciousness (Guba and Lincoln 2000). Objectivism also underpins the positivist stance that dominated social research in the early twentieth century.

Key to the positivist model was that science could produce objective knowledge. Thus the purpose of research was to uncover objective truths (Crotty 1998). To capture and accurately represent an objective truth or reality, it was argued that the researcher must remain objective (Hammersley 2000). Essentially the researcher was viewed as an 'outsider', an independent observer, rigorously gathering data and reporting objectively on this data. The researcher's subjectivities were not allowed to impact on the research process as it was believed that this would lead to a distorted, invalid picture of reality.

Much quantitative research exemplifies the positivist model of validity. However some qualitative research also demonstrates these assumptions.<sup>1</sup>

### **2.2. New epistemologies, validity and the changing role of the researcher**

In recent decades, changes in philosophical conceptions of reality, knowledge and truth have taken place. New ontological and epistemological models have emerged which fundamentally challenge previous positivist models. These include critical approaches such as constructivism, postmodernism and poststructuralism. Although they have various individual claims and beliefs, they rest on the common epistemological premise that truths or meanings do not exist independently, but are created by the human mind on an individual/personal level. Instead of uncovering an 'objective truth', we create

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<sup>1</sup> An example is Denzin and Lincoln's (2000) description of classic ethnographic accounts where the researcher travelled to distant lands such as America to study the 'other', in this case Native Americans. In such cases, the researcher 'observed' as an outsider, compiled notes, and wrote up objective accounts of the social community in question. The researcher was seen as a 'distanced expert' (Edwards *et al* 1997) retaining 'the power to represent the subject's story' (Denzin and Lincoln quoted in Gamson 2000).

truth or meaning through engaging with realities in our world (Crotty 1998). These challenging models fundamentally changed the purpose of research, the researcher's role and concepts of objectivity and validity.

With the emergence of new methodologies and an increase in qualitative research, the purposes of research diversified. Many followed the belief that research should 'participate in emancipatory and democratising social transformation, not simply the 'neutral' collection, analysis and reportage of data' (Apple quoted in Hammersley 2000: 8) Thus this period saw an increase in genres such as anti-racism (Wright 1993; Neal 1998), feminism (Fine 1994; Riddell 1989), action research (McNiff 1988; Holian 1999) and 'queer' research (Gamson 2000; Leck 1994). Other genres such as autoethnography and life history also emerged, whose main purpose was usually to 'understand a self or some aspect of a life lived in a cultural context' (Ellis and Bochner 2000, p.742).

Within such a context, the researcher's role changed considerably. One of the most significant changes occurred in the role of the researcher and the notion of objectivity. Many challenged the ideal of objectivity, arguing that it was impossible (Hammersley 2000). According to this view, when carrying out research we inevitably draw from our social, cultural and historical background at all stages of the research process.<sup>2</sup> Within this framework, achieving validity in the positivist sense is impossible. Thus new interpretations of validity emerged.

Some adopted a neopositivist stance arguing that, although complete objectivity is impossible, it forms an essential framework for the research process. (Hammersley and Gomm 1997). From this point of view, validity should be strived for by conducting research in a rigorous and systematic manner and by minimizing the impact of researchers' biases (Hammersley and Gomm 1997).

Postmodernists rejected traditional notions of validity, arguing that objective truth or reality does not exist (Ellis and Bochner 2000). They argued that because reality is the product of individual consciousness, multiple realities may exist.<sup>3</sup>

If truth and reality exist only as the product of individual consciousness, what constitutes validity? Accuracy? Truth? Credibility? Understanding? Maxwell (quoted in Cohen *et al.* 2000: 106) and Mishler (quoted in Cohen *et al.* 2000: 106) suggest that 'understanding' is a more suitable term in qualitative research. Guba *et al.* (quoted in Cohen *et al.* 2000: 106) argue for the need to replace positivist notions of validity in qualitative research with the notion of 'authenticity'. Denzin and Lincoln (2000: 21) suggest that positivist terms should be replaced by notions of 'credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability'.

Considering the complex issues surrounding notions of validity, researchers -- particularly those working in the area of qualitative research -- face a considerable challenge. If it is acknowledged that their research will always be coloured by their

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<sup>2</sup> As Becker states, sociological analysis is always from someone's point of view, and is therefore partisan (Becker quoted in Hammersley and Gomm 1997).

<sup>3</sup> As Eisner states, 'there is no single, legitimate way to make sense of the world. Different ways of seeing give us different worlds. Different ways of saying allow us to represent different worlds' (1993: 54).

subjectivities, how can they produce 'trustworthy' research? The validity dilemma is particularly salient when the researcher is an insider to the research context.

### 3. An introduction to insider research and validity

The term 'insider research' is used to describe projects where the researcher has a direct involvement or connection with the research setting (Robson 2002). Such research contrasts with traditional notions of scientifically sound research in which the researcher is an 'objective outsider' studying subjects external to his/herself (Denzin and Lincoln 2000).

There are various ways in which a researcher can be categorised as an insider. For example, professionals may carry out a study in their work setting — also called practitioner research (Robson 2002: 382).<sup>4</sup> Researchers may be a member of the community they are studying or they may become an accepted member after a period with the community.<sup>5</sup> Collaborative research — where researcher and subject are both actively involved in carrying out research (Titchen quoted in Jarvis 1999) — exemplifies the 'blurring of boundaries' between researcher and researched which causes allegations of invalidity. Such boundaries are obliterated when the researcher becomes the subject of study, as in personal narrative. Insider research could also be extended to include cases where the researcher is partisan to the emotional/political/sexual affiliations of the 'subject(s)'. Examples include feminist research carried out by feminists (Devault 2004) and gay research carried out by homosexuals/lesbians (Leck 1994).

With insider research, the concept of validity becomes increasingly problematic because of the researcher's involvement with the subject of study. Positivists may argue that, because of this involvement, the researcher is no longer 'objective' and their results may be distorted. Thus, from this essentially correspondence view of validity — whereby 'valid' or 'true' knowledge corresponds to an objective world — the validity of insider research is threatened (Kvale 1995). On the other hand, neopositivists and anti-positivists claim that, because complete objectivity is impossible, the researcher's biases threaten validity or trustworthiness. This raises questions such as:

- Will the researcher's relationships with subjects have a negative impact on the subject's behaviour such that they behave in a way that they would not normally?
- Will the researcher's tacit knowledge lead them to misinterpret data or make false assumptions?
- Will the researcher's insider knowledge lead them to make assumptions and miss potentially important information?
- Will the researcher's politics, loyalties, or hidden agendas lead to misrepresentations?
- Will the researcher's moral/political/cultural standpoints lead them to subconsciously distort data?

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<sup>4</sup> Some examples include Smith's (1995) investigation into social work support for parents of children with a serious illness. (Smith at the time was a social worker, whose 'clients' formed part of her study.) Another example is Holian's (1999) study of human resource management/ethical decision making in her own organization.

<sup>5</sup> For example in ethnographic research, the researcher may be a native of the community they are studying (also called 'native ethnography' (Tedlock 2000: 466)). For example, Yang's native ethnography titled 'A Chinese Village' (quoted in Tedlock 2000).

There are also many cited advantages of insider research. Some argue that insiders have a wealth of knowledge which the outsider is not privy to (Jones quoted in Tedlock 2000). It is argued that interviewees may feel more comfortable and freer to talk openly if familiar with the researcher (Tierney 1994).<sup>6</sup> From an anti-positivist perspective therefore, insider research has the potential to increase validity due to the added richness, honesty, fidelity and authenticity of the information acquired.

Promoters of anti-positivism and anti-positivist qualitative research claim that arguments against insider research are applicable to all research. For example, one can never guarantee the honesty and openness of subjects, and our research is always coloured by our subjectivities. Complete objectivity is thus impossible. The task is to minimise the impact of biases on the research process, to carry out research in consciousness of its socially situated character and to make the researcher's position vis-à-vis the research process transparent (Hammersley 2000). By making the research process transparent and honest, it is argued that readers can construct their own perspectives which 'are equally as valid as our own' (Cohen *et al.* 2000: 106).

Thus the arguments surrounding insider research and concepts of validity are complex. To illustrate how these issues arise in practice, the following sections provide three case studies of insider research.

## 4. Case studies

### 4.1. Practitioner action research

Practitioner action researchers carry out studies in their field, often with the aim of improving practice (Jarvis 1999). Thus ethical and practical dilemmas arise. These dilemmas and the ways in which they are managed also raises questions concerning the validity of research. Fraser's (1997) study illustrates this.

At the time of the study, Fraser was Head of the Midwifery Department at the University of Nottingham. A new midwifery course had been validated, and the first intake of students was embarking on the programme. As Head of Department and Chairperson of the Course Management Team, Fraser was responsible for programme quality and wanted graduates to meet requirements for midwife registration. Thus she was an integral part of the research context.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum, Fraser undertook action research which 'case-studied' students on placement in a general hospital. She collected all data and, in collaboration with colleagues, used these to consider if alternative strategies were needed for the course.

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<sup>6</sup> An interesting example of such advantages is Naples's (2004) account of her ethnographic study of a rural Iowan community. Although she identifies herself as an outsider to the community (because she has only recently moved there), during interviews she discovers that many others also feel like outsiders to the community for various other reasons (for example, racial differences, economic and social inequalities and so on). Naples describes how the commonality between herself and her subject(s) — which could classify her as an insider to their emotional perspective — became a resource through which she gained a more in-depth understanding of subjects' descriptions and feelings.

According to Cohen *et al*, case studies strive to portray 'the close-up reality and 'thick description' of participants' lived experiences' (2000: 182). To capture this 'subjective reality', honesty, trust and openness between researcher and researched is essential.<sup>7</sup> Fraser identifies various issues that arose because of her insider status which made this process difficult.

Although most participants could choose whether or not to participate in the study, Fraser acknowledges that, because she was their superior, they may have felt under pressure to take part. In fact, hospital staff were not given a choice but were directed to participate by senior managers! Thus it is possible that Fraser's 'subjects' were not willing participants — which may have impacted on their honesty and thus on the quality of data.

Fraser recognizes that her professional role may have prevented participants from being honest. She asks were students/staff afraid that she would use information given, for other purposes? Insider status and accompanying internal politics means that such suspicions may arise.<sup>8</sup>

Fraser acknowledges that internal politics may have prevented staff from revealing important information. Although she was concerned to build up trust and to 'help the staff ... feel that they were participating, as equals, in a conversation' (Fraser 1997: 166) she asks, were they giving her answers that she wanted to hear?

The issue of confidentiality may also have impacted on the quality of data. Were participants afraid that information given would be made public to colleagues? Would participants be identifiable in the report? Fraser describes her attempts to counteract such fears by assuring participants of the confidentiality of any information given.<sup>9</sup>

Another potential threat to the reliability of Fraser's study is her tacit insider knowledge. Does she make assumptions and fail to address or probe important issues as a result? Fraser's familiarity with staff may also have reduced her willingness to ask uncomfortable but important questions.

Thus Fraser's insider status may have had a considerable impact on the honesty and depth of conversations with participants. Although she documents strategies used to counteract the potentially negative effects of her insider role, it is difficult to judge if she was successful. Only participants know how reliable and truthful their accounts were.

A common criticism of qualitative research is that it is particularly prone to bias and invalidity because 'the researcher' is 'the research instrument' (Hammersley and Gomm

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<sup>7</sup> As Eliot states, the insider researcher should consider 'dismantling the value structure of privacy, territory and hierarchy, and substituting the values of openness' (Eliot quoted in Fraser 1997).

<sup>8</sup> For example, Ramiraz and Bartunek (quoted in Coghlan 2001) describe a situation where one insider researcher was informed that there were rumours among staff that she was engaging in the research to set up a position for herself.

<sup>9</sup> For example, in order to build up trust, Fraser assured students and practitioners on the wards that they would not be identifiable in the final reports. She also told practitioners that the information given to her would be used only for the purposes of the study and would not be reported to their managers.



1997: 3). With insider research, the issue of bias becomes more salient because of the researcher's involvement with the research context. Fraser acknowledges that some may accuse her of being 'biased towards establishing the effectiveness of a programme for which she is responsible'. There was a danger that her interest in the programme's success may have prompted her to probe for information that she wanted to hear, or gloss over information that did not suit her agenda.

Fraser defends her study, claiming that her 'professional responsibilities' offset the potential for bias.<sup>10</sup> The reader must take her word for it. One practical step that she took to minimise the impact of biases was to enlist the help of an external academic supervisor. Although useful, this strategy does not ensure the elimination of biases. Another useful technique is respondent validation — asking participants to review the reported information to check that it corresponds to their own 'subjective reality'. Although Fraser mentions this technique, she does not confirm whether she used it. A useful method of evaluating the reliability of qualitative data is obtaining different researcher perspectives on the same situation.<sup>11</sup> Again, Fraser does not state whether she used this technique.

When conducting research in one's professional context, ethical dilemmas arise which threaten the collation and reporting of data. Fraser mentions some dilemmas and describes her attempts to overcome them. She acknowledges that, like all action research, individuals and institutions stood to gain or lose by the transmission and utilisation of knowledge acquired. Thus she was aware of the consequences of her research on colleagues. Did loyalties to colleagues force her to omit hurtful, but important, data? In defence of editing data, Fraser suggests that it is ethical to do so, if 'they could have significantly adverse consequences' (Fraser 1997: 165). But what does Fraser consider to be an adverse consequence? Could it be something that impacts on herself? Although she states that House's basic values of 'moral equality, moral autonomy, impartiality and reciprocity' guided her, it is possible that what she might consider an 'adverse consequence' might not be considered so by another working in the same context (House quoted in Fraser 1997: 165).

One final, practical issue which Fraser identifies as a potential insider threat to her research was lack of time. Carrying out detailed research is a time-consuming task which can be difficult to balance with full-time employment. As Eliot says, 'insider research tends to be viewed as a teaching versus research dilemma which gets resolved in favour of the former' (quoted in Fraser 1997: 169).

#### **4.1.1. Conclusions**

We return to the original question: did Fraser's insider status compromise the validity of her action research study?

Before answering this, it is useful to consider the meaning of validity in this study. Fraser attempted to capture participants' subjective construction of reality within

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<sup>10</sup> Fraser (1997) refers to her professional responsibilities as her responsibility to see that the needs of child-bearing women are met.

<sup>11</sup> Smith calls this 'investigator triangulation' and describes how 'investigators with differing perspectives or paradigmatic biases may be used to check out the extent of divergence in the data each collects' (quoted in Cohen *et al.* 2000: 114).

hospital wards. Through her depiction of these realities, she was exercising her subjective interpretations of participants' responses. Thus in this case we might use criteria of authenticity (Guba in Cohen *et al.* 2000) and credibility (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). In such interpretive research, Radnor states that 'consciousness that there is evidence to support the interpretation generates confidence in the bases of the researcher's interpretation' (Radnor 2001: 40). From such a perspective, Fraser's insider position could be viewed as potentially enhancing validity for various reasons. She has valuable knowledge and experience of the research context which outsiders will not have — for example, she is aware of internal jargon, legitimate/taboo subjects, internal politics and so on. When conducting her enquiries she can use this knowledge to obtain richer data (Coghlan 2003).

However, as outlined, there are many factors which may have compromised the validity of her research. Although she tried to minimize the effect of these factors, it is difficult, if not impossible, to fully evaluate the success of her attempts.

#### **4.2. Life history (as an insider ethnographer)**

This case study looks at Foster's (1994) ethnographic research into the life history of black American teachers. Before detailing Foster's project, it may help to uncover characteristics of the life history genre.

Life history is a form of biographical research in which the researcher tells the story of a person's life. Plummer (quoted in Cohen *et al.* 2000: 165) describes how it is often gathered over a number of years with the researcher encouraging the subject to write down or tape-record episodes of their life. This is backed up by intensive observation, interviews and scrutiny of relevant documents such as diaries and letters. Essentially it is an 'interactive and co-operative technique directly involving the researcher' (Plummer quoted in Cohen *et al.* 2000: 165).

Foster identified herself as an insider to the community of black American teachers on various levels. She too is a black American and has been a teacher for most of her professional life. Foster also refers to the common political and social background in which researcher and researched grew up.<sup>12</sup>

Foster describes how her insider position facilitated and enriched the collection of data. It is likely that her insider status was a major factor in enabling the project to be carried out. Practical issues such as gaining access to subjects were easier because she had direct access to black communities. The subjects were unknown to her and were approached to participate via letters and telephone calls. Throughout this initial contact, Foster emphasized their shared characteristics, hoping that this would encourage participation. All those approached agreed to participate. Although it cannot be confirmed, Foster suggests that her professional affiliation with subjects minimized social distances and may have influenced their decision.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> 'The period when separate but equal was a controlling principle of American society' (Foster 1994: 133).

<sup>13</sup> This is backed up by Gwaltney, (Gwaltney quoted in Foster 1994) who describes how willing his narrators were to help with his life history project when they realized he was a native himself.

The teachers' acceptance of Foster as an insider was reinforced by the fact that many invited her to their homes for interviews.<sup>14</sup> In this intimate setting, Foster observed participants interacting with families and friends, and took part in community activities with them.<sup>15</sup>

Several suggestions regarding validity could be made at this stage. By conducting interviews in an informal setting where participants are likely to feel comfortable and 'in control', subjects may have been more open. Thus, data would be richer and more authentic. Observing participants interacting with family and friends and taking part in community activities with participants is also valuable. Such interaction can create a more personal relationship between researcher and researched which, in life history, is important for collecting rich, honest data. However these suggestions cannot be confirmed. One can never be sure if data is reliable and honest. It depends on the building of trust and confidence between researcher and researched. From this account we cannot be sure about the depth of the relationship between Foster and her subjects.

Foster gathered data using methods commonly implemented when compiling life histories — face-to-face interviews and observation. But are accounts authentic and honest? How detailed are they? Do they provide a faithful portrayal of the subject's life history? Foster is convinced that her insider status as a black person shaped her subjects' expectations and responses during the interview process. She notes that when participants discovered she was black, their behaviour and expectations altered. She describes how one participant presumed that the interview would be longer — 'White folks want to interview you, but they don't really want to hear what you have to say' (Foster 1994: 142). Does this mean that her responses were more detailed? Does it mean that the data was richer? Perhaps, although Foster does not confirm this. However, even if the interview is longer, it does not ensure authentic accounts. But the comment above does seem to indicate that the participant is willing to 'tell her story'.

Foster notes the delight of one participant on realizing that she was black. 'I've been waiting a long time for somebody Black to come and hear my story' (Foster 1994: 142). Does this suggest an expectation that a black person is more willing to listen? Does this mean that they will share more information about their life? It is possible that the common political and social backgrounds of researcher and researched will lead to a more authentic and richer account. Although possible, this cannot be confirmed.

Foster's accounts of interviews indicate that 'insider' status does not guarantee that subjects will feel at ease and free to express themselves. She notes how participants' use of language changed during the course of the interview — from Standard English to the use of more colloquialisms and black markers of English as the interview progressed.<sup>16</sup> Thus Foster's insider status as a black American teacher did not automatically give her a privileged 'insight' into the teacher's lives. Her insider status was negotiated during the course of the interview. However, it suggests that, as participants became comfortable

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<sup>14</sup> Two thirds to be exact.

<sup>15</sup> However Foster also notes that while an invitation into the subject's home could be viewed as an acceptance as an insider, it could also be interpreted as tipping the power balance in favour of the subject. She notes how the subjects scrutinized her behaviour.

<sup>16</sup> This demonstrates what Naples (2004: .373) refers to as 'the fluidity of insiderness/outsiderness' —that is the idea that 'insiderness and outsidership are not fixed or static positions' but are 'ever-shifting and permeable social locations.'

with Foster (accepting her as an insider?), they became more open. Again this may have enriched the data collected.

#### 4.2.1. Conclusions

Cohen *at al.* describe validity in life history as 'its ability to represent the informant's subjective reality, that is to say, his or her definition of the situation' (2000: 133). Does Foster's insider status compromise the validity of her life histories?

A survey of life histories shows that it is an interactive and co-operative technique where the roles of researcher and researched overlap (Edwards 1993; Errante 2004). Thus the researcher is automatically an insider, regardless of their ethnic/professional/political background. In fact one could argue that such a relationship is necessary for the researcher to adequately capture and represent the informant's subjective reality.

Thus the nature and depth of the relationship between researcher and researched determines the nature and quality of the data acquired. As Tierney states in his account of conducting a life history of a friend suffering from AIDS: 'who I was and my relationship with Robert unalterably set the terms of the text ... I entered the situation as Robert's friend ... I also became a confidante' (1994: 102).

In Foster's case, she started as a stranger to participants — a difficult position to be in considering the nature of the project. The common ground she shared with participants was a starting point. It may have made participants feel more comfortable and more receptive. They may have felt more comfortable talking about 'black issues' with a black researcher.<sup>17</sup> From this perspective Foster's insider status is likely to have enhanced the validity of her research.

However, although shared experiences can be important, many factors including personality, familial circumstances and sexual orientation, will inevitably impact on relationships, and thus on data acquired. For example, did Foster become personal friends with any of the teachers? Did she remain in contact with them outside the assigned 'interview time'? Such factors are not described by Foster and therefore raise questions for the reader.

To conclude, it is clear that in this case, and in the life history genre in general, the researcher's insider status in itself does not compromise validity. As this case demonstrates, it could be argued that it is an important factor in aspiring to validity. However as Foster states, 'Research conducted by insiders cannot capture the total experience of an entire community. But neither can research conducted by outsiders.... No one commands the power to know all things' (Foster 1994: 144).

#### 4.3. Personal narrative/autoethnography

A number of terms are used to refer to personal narrative including 'autobiography' and 'reflexive ethnography'.<sup>18</sup> In this genre, the researcher assumes the dual role of

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<sup>17</sup> As a homosexual male, Tierney notes this tendency in his research into the life history of 'Robert' who says 'If you weren't gay, I don't know if I would even bring it up, or want to talk about it' (1994: 102).

<sup>18</sup> For an overview of further terms, refer to Ellis and Bochner 2000.

academic researcher and personal self, to tell autobiographical stories about some aspect or experience of their life (Ellis and Bochner 2000).

This case study examines Convery's (1999) personal narrative created to form the background to his PhD. Convery writes about his personal and educational background, describing how experiences and events in his life led him to enter teaching and influenced his behaviour as a teacher. Convery states that the aim of his narrative was to contribute an insider perspective on 'teacher-thinking' (Convery 1999: 132).

In his account, Convery identifies a series of 'critical incidents' in his life including his consequent feelings and emotional development. 'At 16 I was at grammar school ... and took my first summer job as a petrol pump attendant in a very quiet garage. The boredom was excruciating and unmitigated' (Convery 1999: 132).

Convery theorises about how particular events in his life influenced the development of his teaching values and practice.

On teaching practice ... I sat next to a Deputy Head of a primary school who called a nine-year-old out of line and humiliated him in front of me and other staff to demonstrate how he had managed to tame the badly behaved pupil. I felt embarrassed and somewhat sickened by this episode. I think this was quite important in smothering my desire to teach at that time.

(Convery 1999: 133)

From these extracts it is clear that Convery's study, like any personal narrative, is inherently subjective. Coffey (2002) states that it is a genre in which the subject and author merge. But does this compromise validity?

It is difficult, if not impossible, to establish the validity or truth of Convery's narrative for several reasons. The reliability and truth of his account are dependent on his honesty and integrity. This is an ethical issue which arises in all qualitative research and for which the researcher must take responsibility. Will he tell the truth? Will he distort events? It is not possible to confirm events with others who appear in his account, because we only have Convery's perspective.

Convery acknowledges that 'identity is created rather than revealed through narrative' (Convery 1999: 139). He admits that he constructs an attractive moral identity through his selection, organization and presentation of events and emotions. He selects incidents that illustrate his evolving moral development and maturity.

It was there that I learnt about ideological hegemony — the process whereby the powerless in society consent to their subordination ... as being in their own best interests... I felt strongly that I had to use my privileged position to try to improve their expectations from life.

(Convery 1999: 133)

His readings of events in his life depict him as someone who overcame the odds to succeed. 'I went to evening classes, gained better grades, and spent three very enjoyable years which were academically and personally successful...' (Convery 1999: 133).

It is interesting to note that Convery does not portray himself as being in the wrong. His initial failure at school is blamed on bad teaching rather than on his lack of work and self-discipline. His use of the active and passive voice reinforces this. When he is doing something positive he uses an active voice — ('I went to evening classes, gained better grades' (Convery 1999: 133)). When something negative happens, he switches to the passive voice — ('Having initially failed to gain grades to enter university' (Convery 1999: 133)).<sup>19</sup>

Thus it could be argued that Convery's narrative reinforces Atkinson's claim that personal narratives are used to create a 'romantic construction of the self' (Atkinson quoted in Ellis and Bochner 2000: 745). Eliot reinforces this, describing teacher's personal narratives as springing from 'the need of academics to construct research identities that they could live with' (Eliot quoted in Convery 1999: 143).

Another factor which may impact on the validity and reliability of Convery's account is its reliance on the narrator's memory, which is fallible. As Shotter states, narrative is always a story about the past and not the past itself (Shotter quoted in Ellis and Bochner 2000). In addition, the narrator may prefer to forget certain events. 'Memory is not simply an exercise of recalling; there are many ways of remembering and different reasons why we may (or may not) want to remember' (Errante 2004: 412).

There are also arguments, however, to defend the validity of Convery's account. Feldman (2003) argues that to ensure the validity of self-study we should demonstrate how we constructed the representations and provide reasons why others should trust our findings. Convery demonstrates these strategies. By using historical reference points throughout his narrative, he allows readers to confirm if he is telling truth.

Swidler (2000) describes how direct quotation can be used to affirm validity in personal narrative. Through this, Swidler argues that one can claim narrative authority and impress upon the reader that a conversation like this did take place. Convery uses this strategy in his account of a conversation with a teacher who refuses to be videotaped in class. 'I suggested that I might video her teaching and see if she found that similarly helpful. She declined my offer: "that's different" she said' (Convery 1999: 133).

Although these strategies may invite the reader to believe the narrator's account, it is still impossible for the reader to ultimately determine if Convery's account is reliable and trustworthy.

#### **4.3.1. Conclusions**

We return to our original question — does Convery's insider status compromise the validity of his study? Because Convery is the subject of his own research, traditional and neo-positivist notions of validity and corresponding methods of respondent validation, triangulation and so on, are inappropriate. From these perspectives, it is impossible to confirm the validity of personal narratives as they are an inherently subjective genre.

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<sup>19</sup> This self-serving strategy is also described by Schutz (1999) who, in his research into the autobiographical accounts of married couples, describes how subjects emphasized their partners' negative behaviour and created favourable self-presentations.

However, from a postmodernist perspective, Convery's account may be seen as a valuable and valid piece of research. This perspective argues that because researcher's subjectivities are inevitably embedded in their studies, either quantitative or qualitative, exposing these subjectivities openly in the text can potentially increase validity and allow the reader to construct their own interpretations. As Coffey (2002: 327) argues, the value of personal narrative lies in the fact that it makes visible that which is often dismissed or rendered invisible in research.

From a postmodern perspective therefore, it could be argued that personal narratives are valid because they represent an individual's thoughts, interpretations and perspective on events in their life. Ellis and Bochner (2000) argue if reality and knowledge are created through the human mind, then why not focus on the mind? If the researcher is always implicated in the product of knowledge, then why not investigate the researcher? As such, personal narratives can be a useful source for insightful analysis. However, there is also the danger of a personal narrative being a 'mono-vocal and self-indulgent text' (Coffey 2002: 327).

Convery's aim in writing his narrative was to contribute an insider perspective on 'teacher-thinking' (Convery 1999: 132). To that end, it can be argued that he achieved this. He provides the reader with an insight into how he developed into the teacher that he is today. Thus, it could be argued that his personal narrative is valid as it represents his own 'teacher-thinking', a useful insight into how he has developed personally and professionally. However as is evident from this analysis, the nature of personal narratives ensures that validity from such a postmodern perspective is extremely difficult, if impossible, to ascertain.

## **5. Conclusions**

Concepts of validity in any research are complex and are dependent on various ontological and epistemological assumptions about the nature of reality and truth. The validity of insider research, particularly in qualitative studies, is subjected to endless debate and scrutiny and it presents numerous unanswered questions.

With the case studies presented here, positivists may argue against their validity because, from their perspective, the researcher's subjectivities have inevitably distorted their findings (Kvale 1995). Their research cannot be taken as 'fact' or 'truth' because it does not correspond to an objective reality. Their results are not reliable or generalisable. Triangulation will not present the same results. Neopositivists and antipositivists may argue that because complete objectivity is impossible, it is the insider researcher's biases and assumptions that threaten validity or 'trustworthiness'.

Does the researcher's relationships with subjects have a negative impact on the subject's behaviour such that they behave in a way that they would not normally? The case studies presented here demonstrate that this is possible. Because she was a senior staff member, Fraser's students may have told her what she wanted to hear, and colleagues may have feared that she would use information for other purposes. On the other hand, because they were familiar with her they may have felt more comfortable and freer to talk openly and honestly. Foster's insider status as a black woman may have made

participants feel more comfortable talking about 'black' issues and thus may have enhanced the validity of her study.

Did the researcher's prior, tacit knowledge distort results by leading to misinterpretations or false assumptions? Possibly. Did Fraser fail to probe important issues on the wards? Did Foster falsely assume the existence of commonalities between herself and her subjects because of their similar ethnic and professional backgrounds? On the other hand, insider knowledge may have enabled the researcher to probe pertinent and relevant issues.

Did hidden politics, loyalties and other agendas lead the researcher to misrepresent or disregard important data? Fraser defends editing data if it 'avoid(s) any adverse consequences' (Fraser 1997: 165). But what is an adverse consequence? Did Foster have a subconscious anti-racist/feminist agenda which influenced her direction of the interviews? Convery acknowledges that he 'created' an attractive moral identity for himself through his narrative. Does this mean that it is invalid? Such questions, while important to ask, are extremely difficult, if not impossible, to resolve.

While these issues are important to consider with insider research, it is argued that they should be considered in all research regardless of the researcher's position. As May states, 'the knower (researcher) is now implicated in the construction of the known' (2002: 2). If, as Hammersley (2000) argues, our research is inevitably coloured (consciously and unconsciously) by our subjectivities and our social, historical and cultural backgrounds, what constitutes validity? If, as postmodernists argue, our research is just one representation of a multiplicity of realities, how can we guarantee that it is valid and trustworthy?

This paper has attempted to illustrate that there are no definitive answers to these inherently difficult questions. However, many researchers will agree that it is important to be aware of them and to realise our own limitations — and potentials — as researchers (Hammersley 2000). Taking these issues into account, can we only aspire to an ever-elusive concept of validity in qualitative research? For the moment, Deem and Brehony's suggestion seems a useful guideline for this difficult period: 'Perhaps then, validity is best regarded as something which is to be worked towards rather than fully achieved' (1994: 165).



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