

## Interviewers' identity and reflexivity in qualitative research: Lessons from a Master's thesis

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Understanding the position, perspective, beliefs and values of the researcher is an issue in all research: it's bound to affect what they choose to investigate, how they investigate it, which findings are most important and even how conclusions are framed and communicated. This is particularly true in qualitative research where the researcher is often construed as the 'human research instrument.' So it's important to have a reflexive approach to research, as this will allow us to own up to our problems and the tensions in our position.

One way in which a researcher can reflect on their research process can be to keep a reflexive journal, where the researcher records methodological decisions and the reasons for them, as well as reflections on what is happening in terms of one's values and interests. This was really useful for me whilst carrying out research for my dissertation, which was focused on analysing the role of ethnicity in the 2014 presidential elections in Afghanistan. Some of the reflections I made are listed below:

For a start, my gender and role as the researcher and the person in charge of this project proved to be challenging in interviewing male respondents: often they're not used to being addressed by a young female in a very political and direct way, as the political system in Afghanistan continues to be male dominated. However, because I live outside Afghanistan, I found the male respondents more responsive: the physical distance helped balance the social distance. Paradoxically, being 'British' has made it easier for me and for them.

Secondly, carrying out the interviews in Farsi (Dari), one of the languages spoken in Afghanistan, may have brought about feelings of 'otherness' as those who are not native Farsi speakers may feel as though I am not one of them and therefore unable to fully understand them. Language isn't a neutral medium and it can define difference and commonality, excluding some and including others. However, it's worth mentioning that being able to speak one native language was helpful to the research, as it allowed me to speak to those who didn't understand English and I got a much more comprehensive take of the situation there.

Thirdly, ethnicity is another factor that could have shaped research interactions. The interviewees who weren't from my ethnicity may not have felt particularly inclined to be open and might have felt that they were being judged. To counter this, I made sure I didn't mention my own ethnicity, or theirs, until the very end of the interview.

These examples suggest how forms of identity like gender, ethnicity and language – as well as identity markers, such as age – can impact on our ability as qualitative researchers to build relationships and uncover data that's valid, truthful and useful, whilst also being aware of power dynamics. Different researchers will approach a study situation from different positions or perspectives; this may lead to the development of different understandings of a particular situation being studied, although just as valid. Some may acknowledge these differences as a reliability problem but others feel that these different ways of seeing provide a richer, more developed understanding of a complex phenomenon, as long as the researcher acknowledges them. If you feel as though your identity has impacted on your study, don't forget to mention it in your methodology.

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