Dilemmas in researching lifelong learning, race and gender

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Introduction
Older black Caribbean people share a great deal in common with their UK white counterparts. In later years however, cultural differences become apparent and lifestyles may not be one of continued learning but limited to social and physical decline (MacNair, 2007). Assimilation however, may be apparent, but the reality is that in the UK, poorer health and growing poverty is still disproportionately represented within black minority ethnic groups (Rowntree Foundation, 2007). In order to develop effective policy and practice to address unmet needs, the views, and perceptions and experiences of the older black minority ethnic community is vital in meeting needs in later life.

My research specifically explores the lifelong learning experiences of first generation African Caribbean women, who came to Britain in large numbers from the early to mid 1950s (the major stage of migration from the British dependent colonies). The social experience of this community is surrounded in a history of colonialism and imperialism and compared to their white counterparts, are likely to approach social support and lifelong learning opportunities in very different ways as a result of such cultural historical differences (Owusu, 2000). Conducting focus groups and one to one interviews with women of my mother’s generation presented some challenging methodological issues for me as I strived to cope with the many innuendos and nuances associated with the unavoidable ‘Caribbean to Caribbean familiarity’ involved in the research process. I realized as early as my pilot that carefully constructed research questions can present some very surprising responses depending on who might be asking the questions. This was in stark contrast to my recent role as a fieldwork interviewer on a similar lifelong learning study (Lifelong Learning, Community and the Women’s Institute) involving older white female respondents. In a UK society where meeting the needs of a diverse population is at a sensitive stage because of significant numbers of older black communities now over the age of 65 - which of the responses to my type of research questions are more useful I asked myself - those asked by the white researcher or those asked by the black researcher? What are the barriers for the researcher in any given situation? How really useful is such (same racial background) research practice? How much more value does this practice add to research, in a
country where such communities have largely assimilated to the point where voting patterns are similar and lifestyles are similar?

Background
Lifelong learning in the BME communities has a base in community action as well as in education activities, cultural activities and engagement as members of local networks of community support is often a vital necessity for older African Caribbean women to obtain access to lifelong learning and the benefits it offers. In his study into ‘Demography and Adult learning’ MacNair (2007), states that people will need to learn to live in more diverse communities, maintaining their old values and cultures at the same time as coming to terms with new ones, and learning to manage the tensions which come with cultural diversity. To add to this, in his paper entitled: ‘Has lifelong learning had its day?’ Field (2006) points out: ‘Research so far has told us little about the experiences of different ethnic groupings’. Such is the challenge for UK policy makers. Social Policy research indicate that there is likely to be a great deal of lifelong learning practices occurring in the older BME community yet to be acknowledged examined or promoted as lifelong learning by the lifelong learning sector. Lifelong learning has important benefits to all sections of society (Schuller et al, 2004) therefore it should be tackled by multi-ethnic communities and here, area regeneration programmes have a role to play. Placing myself as a black researcher in the heart of the community’ was an important consideration. I hoped this might make a difference to the quality of the vocal responses I received from respondents.

Poverty is a particular barrier to lifelong learning – preventing active and imaginative participation. Recent research (Joseph Rowntree report: 2007) uncover high levels of poverty amongst Britain’s black and minority ethnic communities and Moriarty’s earlier ESRC funded empirical research (2004) exposed a challenge pertaining to the growing numbers (350,000) of people from minority ethnic communities aged 65 and over – more than twice the number in 1991. To add to this, Maynard’s 2003 research into women from different ethnic and economic backgrounds revealed a growing number of women, ‘more positive’ and clearly wishing to play an important role in developing the world around them. Such background provides the settings for my research and a challenge for really useful research that sensitively interprets the needs of an important section of the UK ageing population.

The challenges for the black researcher
As a black researcher, working with mainly black research participants (Mackay and Etienne, 2006), I have previously given thought to how my own race and gender might influence the nature of my interactions (Bulmer and Solomos: 2004: 31) with individuals who were of my mother’s generation and of the same racial origin. Would participants raise a particular point if I was of a different race from them? What might they reveal otherwise? Could gender,
race or ethnicity make a difference in the face to face interview process? Can ‘shared cultural understanding’ support or hinder the research process? Olser (1997) suggest that black interviewees may have greater credibility in the eyes of black participants but notes associated problems:

The degree of comfort in the interview and the assumed shared understandings between the interviewer and interviewee may pose some difficulties when presenting the results to a wider audience. Some things may be expressed in a more explicit way because the participants are speaking to a black researcher. Others are implicit because of the shared meanings which have been assumed (Olser: 1997:65)

Daley (2001) on the other hand suggests that black interviewers would be better able to communicate to black respondents. This appears to be supported by black feminist academic and researcher, Ann Phoenix (2001) in her study of mothers, where she notes a particular comment from one black female respondent:

If -------- (white interviewer) had been doing the interview I would have had to tell her that the questions were too nosey because white people don’t understand what a typical black family is like…
(Phoenix: 2001:216)

In my own case I also believe that first generation African Caribbean women may be less inclined to provide me with detail because they assume there is a shared cultural knowledge that I already have and, so I already know. However, growing up in Britain as a second generation African Caribbean woman, made my experience that very different from them. My planned interview questions therefore required a ‘flexible structure’ in order to ensure the women provided as full examples as possible.

The problem for white interviewers interviewing black respondents may be the reverse but I found that women of the same ethnic group as myself are more likely to ask me to elaborate if they did not understand a question whereas they may not have asked if I was a white interviewer. I acknowledge also that as a black researcher researching black women I too bring assumptions to the research process. I may, for example presume I know the women far better than a white female researcher would in a similar position. Being of the same racial background implies that I already have a view of first generation African women, gained from knowledge of my mother and my aunts who come from one particular island in the Caribbean. First generation African women are not a homogeneous group, they come from a wide variety of islands in the Caribbean with many different historical, colonial and cultural influences which impacts on the way they feel, the things they do, the choices they make and in particular their choice of informal socialising networks. Being located in community centres was not sufficient and I found myself resorting to Caribbean front rooms filled with images, which revealed further insights into the informal learning lives of first generation African Caribbean
women. In particular, I have always wrongly assumed that first generation African Caribbean women were typically of my mother’s generation and of a particular age, when in fact large numbers of first generation African Caribbean women came to the UK as very young children with their parents and many are in fact in their early fifties. This brought an interesting dimension to my research.

Similar to Ann Phoenix whilst I was previously interviewing white women (in my case in middle class rural locations) the interviewees have invariably appeared ‘visibly shocked to see me (Phoenix, 2001: 205)’ but thankfully whilst there may have been discomfort at the start of the interview process, ‘people recover themselves fairly quickly and it is generally easy to establish rapport (Phoenix, 2001:205) as the interview progresses’. As a black researcher, researching white female respondents and members of the National Federation of Women’s Institutes research project (WI) I found interviewees making a very special effort to accommodate me by being very forthcoming and ‘open’ to questions. It has not always been easy to ascertain whether this has been because of nervousness about a need to make certain that I feel comfortable; whether it is to do with uncertainty relating to a stereotypical view that a black researcher must always be researching (or investigating) ‘racism’ or a genuine desire to be inclusive. In such situations information has come forward very readily, enthusiastically and at times I have even found the women to appear to be in competition with each other as to who can give me the best and most illuminating insights. This may however be more to do with the nature of the individual WI as traditionally efficient and accommodating organisations of women and less to do with myself as a black researcher.

At other times, however as a black researcher researching white women I have felt that I have been the subject of the research rather than the other way round. Whilst this has not been evident in the interview process, at the end of interviews I have often found women gathering around me, eager to ask me questions about myself and my background and my views on how they can recruit more women like me. Such curiosity and willingness to talk can also be about the nature of the WI and about me being black and female and they (the WI) not having many (if any) opportunities to get close to someone like me in this particular role. In all such situations I have willingly reciprocated and bemused myself with the additional research insights that I have been able to gain. I have found such interactions, thoroughly a unique learning experience for me.

On the other hand, in the case of myself interviewing fellow black research participants, the question of appropriate behaviour and distraction in the interview process is something that I have found challenging at times. Whilst white female interviewees have waited until the end of the interview to ask me evidently non related research questions which have probably been mulling
around in their heads during the interview process, black female interviewees are less inclined to wait until the interview is over. In such circumstances at whatever time they have felt the need to ask a non related question or make a particular point they have spoken out:

- Where in St Lucia do your family come from?
- Why do you keep your nails so long?
- Are you related to X from Dominica?
- Do you speak patois?
- Is that a weave you have on there?

Whilst these questions may be interesting and some I would like to engage with, they are in fact a distraction to the interview process and have often frustrated the flow of the interview focus. Such seemingly inappropriate distractions are difficult to keep out of the frame and laying down ground rules (requests) at the start of the interview process does not often help to lessen them in future. Despite this I found that capturing such nuances are important elements of the research process allowing the women to feel comfortable and unrestricted in their ability to communicate with me. I am also mindful that direct responses to questions are not the only things to consider and every interaction will be important to consider. In such situations, I also feel that I am researching in a less patronising environment and this is possibly because I am of the same racial background as the interviewees. This perception however may be very misplaced. Where I have previously been involved in researching white women in rural areas I recall women coming to me at the end of an interview to ask questions about my research methods and also about my choice of research questions. The respondent said: ‘You know I really feel you should not be asking a question on class in this day and age’. In another area I was told: ‘I have conducted research myself and these questions need looking at again’; and ‘Who is your research fellow?’ Whilst at the time I have taken these questions and thoughts to be supportive on reflection they may be highly patronising. Would this have occurred if I was the same racial origin as the women? In turn I have felt mindful not to patronise women that I am interviewing (whether black or white) as my own role as a researcher does not mean that the contribution of the women are in any way less important in the research process. I acknowledge that regardless of ‘appropriateness’, conduct or behaviour, all interactions are valid and the valuable contributions that the women are making to the research study, places them at a highly important position in the research process. I am reliant on them to be as genuine in the relationship and as forthcoming as they possible can.

**My research: focus groups and one to one interviews**

The UK *Third Sector Regeneration* Policy document (DfES 2007) points to ways in which the voluntary sector can play a key role in shaping learning. Older women learners connected with Third sector organisations are likely to have the greatest chance to make an impact on local communities. In her
action research study with women, Bierema (2003) asserts that ‘connected learning is most effective when members of a group meet over long periods of time and know each other well (Voluntary sector organisations have a role to play in maintaining space to enable members of the community to maintain contact with each other). Connected learning in this context is defined as learning that is grounded in relationship, reciprocity and conversation (2003:3)’. Such were the ‘grounded in relationship’ groups I wanted to work with in focus group gatherings where I was able to interact with first generation African Caribbean women who shared the same racial origin to myself and each other.

My case study areas included: London, Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool. These areas were selected because they are areas where Caribbean immigrants first settled, following their arrival to the UK in the 1950s (Jones: 1985). My responses to face to face responses from interviewees were at times, clearly subjective but I concluded that these were negotiated socially and historically and were not imprinted on the individuals but were formed through interactions with others in focus groups. Creswell acknowledges:

The basic tenet of this worldview is that research should contain an action agenda for reform that may change the lives of participants……the issues facing these marginalized groups are of paramount importance to study, issues such as oppression (Creswell: 2007: 21)

I would argue that the goal of research here may be to rely as much as possible on the participant’s view of the situation but it is not always possible for participants to view the totality of their own situation and draw conclusions. For example issues of double discrimination facing first generation African Caribbean women perceived by others may not be regularly expressed or noted by the women themselves (they may in fact not choose to publicly acknowledge this). Commentators such as Carby (1997) have been more blatant in stating that ‘wives and mothers were granted entry into paid work only so long as this did not harm the family’. Yet women from Britain’s reserve army of labour in the colonies were recruited into the labour force far beyond any such considerations (Carby, 1997:49). Can a researcher of the same ethnic or racial origin be better equipped to examine ‘difference’ as a concept and compare such additional factors which may provide wider insights into particular forms of oppression as a result of shared cultural and racial identity?

Researchers of whatever racial origin have the potential to uncover a range of factors provided there is an appreciation of the value of the contribution to be gleamed from the participants as a result of the uniqueness of their experience and their difference. Avtar Brah presents four ways in which difference may be conceptualized: difference as experience; difference as
social relation; difference as subjectivity and difference as identity (Brah: 2001: 465). My view is, there is a further difference and that is ‘difference as oppression’ which is often hidden and the voice given to first generation African Caribbean women can only be expressed within the interactions occurring as a result of shared cultural experiences based on a common racial identity. But where does this leave me – as a second generation African Caribbean woman?

There are different ways of knowing and different conceptions of what is ‘real’ as Burke and Jackson acknowledge:

> Almost entirely located in urban areas, there are huge gender issues for older learners from Black and minority ethnic communities, as well as a lack of awareness of religious and cultural differences for both women and men (Burke and Jackson, 2007:43).

In order to explore the particular lifelong learning issues experienced by first generation African Caribbean, the appropriateness of my own racial background may be significant. I decided to explore lifelong learning occurring in informal learning settings in order to examine our common racial identity in the attitudes of first generation African Caribbean women in surroundings which were familiar to them. What was their view of the significance of lifelong learning? As Field notes, informal learning is still often undervalued and disregarded’ (Field: 2006:166) but I argue that the value of learning is already acknowledged by first generation African Caribbean women and can be seen in the attitude of the women towards the lives of their own children. First generation African Caribbean women came to Britain to work and improve their lives and that of their children and many women worked in hospitals as auxiliary nurses and faced racism but saw work as a priority. However, the motivation for ensuring that their children achieved success through learning was an even bigger priority for them. Such a legacy has been paramount in shaping second generation Black women as Heidi Mirza (2000) acknowledges:

> Black female success must be understood as a process of transcendence, resistance and survival. It must be understood in the context of racism, discrimination and poor conditions. It was not that they wanted to become a nurse and clean bedpans like their mums (first generation African Caribbean women) but they found a way to success (Mirza:2000.295).

What value does this shared knowledge (interviewer to interviewee) when working with participants of the same racial origin? First generation African Caribbean women have an important role to play in determining how policy maker’s work with ageing ethnic populations. Conducting research using researchers from the same racial background as the research subjects in the context described in this paper can be equally useful as collective analysis conducted by both black and white researchers can ultimately go a long way
towards accommodating the distinct and diverse needs of Britain’s growing older population. Is this the solution for really useful research?

References
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