

CHAPTER 10

‘NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US’: THE ETHICS OF OUTSIDER RESEARCH

If we have learned one thing from the civil rights movement in the US, it's that when others speak for you, you lose. (Ed Roberts, a leading figure in the Disability Rights Movement, quoted in Driedger 1989: 28.)

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between researcher and researched has become a matter of intense controversy in a number of apparently very different contexts. These have, nevertheless, certain key features in common: they are all contexts in which groups of people who define themselves ‘disempowered’⁵⁹ resist the ‘intrusions’ of researchers from outside their own community or at least the current terms of such intrusion. In the recent literature these groups have included: women, people with disabilities, gays and lesbians and indigenous people in societies dominated by white former colonialists⁶⁰. Cases have been made out of, and on behalf of, each of these communities that are critical of research into their experience conducted by people from outside their communities. It is argued, *a fortiori*, that research into this experience should be conducted by people from within the community. ‘Nothing about us without us’ is, for example, the striking slogan that has emerged from the disability camp (see Charlton 1998), while in New Zealand there is a growing body of Maori educational researchers whose motto might be encapsulated as ‘by Maori, in Maori, for Maori’ (Marshall and Martin 2000 – see also on this Marshall and Peters 1989, Peters, Para and Marshall 1989 and Marshall and Peters 1995). In this chapter I shall explore more closely the nature of these arguments and the ethical and epistemological costs of sustaining them. I shall argue for the importance of retaining a role for outsider research in such communities, though one which must operate under appropriate ethical constraints and on the basis of proper human respect and care.

⁵⁹ More accurately, some of their members define them as disempowered; not all would necessarily agree. Dangerously perhaps, I shall take this self-designation as given for the purpose of this discussion. I shall even resist the temptation to examine the notions of empowerment and disempowerment. These are usefully discussed in relation to educational research in Morwenna Griffiths’ book *Educational research for social justice* (1998).

⁶⁰ In treating these together I fall into something close to what one writer describes as ‘the new feminist mantra (of) integrated analysis of race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality’ (Patai 1994: 61). This arises simply from the observation that the issues are defined and discussed in very much the same terms across these different spheres of activism and enquiry.

I shall from the start, however, observe that the distinction, the polarity, which I am sustaining here between the insider and the outsider researcher should itself be challenged. Even with generalised identities like 'disabled', 'blacks' or 'working class' it is not always very obvious who is inside and who outside the group. However, as we add more descriptors to define the identity of any given community (for example, black, middle class, female, graduate) we are more likely to create people who stand in relation to it in some respects as an insider and in some as an outsider (for example, they are black, middle class and female but not graduates or they are female graduates but not middle class or black). Griffiths refers to Kay Haw's (1998, 1996) research on Muslim girls as an illustration of the 'different set of ways in which researchers have to negotiate a complex set of insider-outsider identifications,' (Griffiths 1998: 138). In this instance Haw was partly an outsider in her research setting (white, non-believing, but of Christian heritage) and partly an insider (female, ex-teacher, British). Besides, as Razavi (1992) acknowledges, the insider researcher will always be something of an outsider in his or her own community by virtue of becoming a researcher, *a fortiori* in any community which is itself culturally remote from the world of academe. 'By virtue of being a researcher, one is rarely a complete insider anywhere...' (Razavi 1992: 161)⁶¹. With this acknowledgement, I will nevertheless fall back on the crude distinction, because even in the individual experience of 'a complex set of insider-outsider identifications' we are pulled by the demands and expectations of these different roles.

The arguments in support of the exclusion of outsider researchers from disempowered communities seem to me to be of three kinds:

- (i) epistemological arguments that an outsider cannot understand or represent accurately a particular kind of experience and about the inappropriate explanatory frameworks which outsiders bring with them to their research and which provide the grounding for the argument that they should not attempt to do so;
- (ii) more directly ethical arguments to do with exploitative or disrespectful behaviour of researchers;
- (iii) ethico-political arguments about the disempowering effects of having others articulate your views for you.

In the following sections I shall represent and comment on each of these in turn.

ONLY INSIDERS CAN PROPERLY REPRESENT THE EXPERIENCE OF A COMMUNITY

First, it is argued that only those who have shared in and have been part of a particular experience can understand or can properly understand (and perhaps

⁶¹ See also Collin Phurutse's 2000 account of his reflections on his experience as a member of a scholarly community conducting an ethnographic study of the experiences of children at school in his own village in the Northern Province of South Africa, which is the subject of interesting discussion in Pendlebury and Enslin 2001.