

A TALE OF TWO HATS: TRANSFORMING FROM THE RESEARCHED TO THE RESEARCHER

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ABSTRACT

In this collaborative essay, three PhD students working in disciplines across the social sciences share their personal reflections on transforming from ‘researched’ to ‘researcher’, with reference to ‘insider’ perspectives. This position departs from traditional post-positivist assumptions of researchers as unbiased and detached from their work, and instead embraces the inherent impact their lived experiences will have. Decades of scholarship within the social sciences have highlighted the advantages afforded by insider positionality, particularly in terms of knowledge production and participant recruitment. Such a position challenges and even transforms the research relationship; still, despite the potentiality it holds, there are many challenges faced by insider researchers, and personal reflections on how this position is navigated are few and far between, particularly from a student perspective. In this essay, we share candid accounts of our experiences in this unique position and reflect on how we have navigated the challenges that have occurred. We conclude by highlighting commonalities between our experiences and identify three key messages we wish for other early-career academics in similar positions to hear.

I. INTRODUCTION

A common issue within the social sciences is that we are hesitant to identify ourselves within our work. This discomfort manifests from post-positivist ideals of knowledge as objective and researchers as neutral (Berger, 2015; Kanuha, 2000); the concepts of personal

identification, of emotional investment, seem at odds with this position. And yet, for decades this epistemology has been challenged, most notably by scholars within the fields of anthropology, sociology, critical race studies, and feminism (Wilkinson, 1988; Okely, 1996; Faria & Mollett, 2016; Fernández, Hisatake, & Nguyen, 2020). Reflexivity – the process of critically reflecting on how the researcher’s positionality may affect research being conducted, both in terms of process and

outcome (Berger, 2015) – has developed as a response. Reflexivity rejects the notion that the researcher can be unbiased and separate from the work, and instead actively acknowledges that the identity of the researcher inherently and instrumentally shapes the research conducted and knowledge produced (McCorkel & Myers, 2003). As Gayle Letherby writes, “all texts bear traces of the author and are to some extent personal statements” (2015: 128). It is thus the responsibility of the researcher to think critically about what the effect of this is – not to try and neutralise it, but to provide an account of how their identity has fundamentally influenced the research.

Whilst self-reflexivity is increasingly used across the social sciences, we – the authors of this piece, and three PhD students – have found it particularly beneficial in our transformation from ‘researched’ to ‘researcher’. By this, we refer to our transition from the more passive state of belonging to researched communities, to becoming active members of researcher communities undertaking and producing research within groups we identify with – also known as ‘insider’ researchers (Griffith, 1998; Gair, 2012). This contrasts with ‘outsider’ perspectives, where researchers do not identify with the population they are studying (Griffith, 1998). We acknowledge that insider/outsider perspectives are not a straightforward dichotomy, with researchers often holding dual positions as insiders and outsiders (Breen, 2007). However, this binary is important to consider because it can have a significant impact on the research, the researched, and the researcher, both practically and theoretically.

From a practical perspective, being an insider may afford easier access to the community being researched (Berger, 2015; Chavez, 2008), aiding recruitment and enabling a wider range of voices to be heard. Equally, it may mean there is a higher level of trust between participants and the researcher (Chavez, 2008), which may facilitate rapport and allow access to perspectives and opinions which would otherwise remain unexplored. However, in contrast to outsiders, data generated between insider researchers and participants may be less in-depth, due to implicit shared understandings and taken-for-granted knowledge (Berger, 2015; Kanuha, 2000). Ethical difficulties may also arise, as the boundaries between researched and researcher can be broken down, and the researcher may come to be viewed as a friend or confidant rather than a professional (Taylor, 2011). These factors, combined with the inherent ‘epistemological privilege’ of being an insider researcher, which refers to the shared experiences affording the researcher access to the researched’s subjective realities (Stanley & Wise, 1993, cited by Shah, 2006), subsequently influence how a piece of research is designed, conducted, and analysed. In turn, this impacts the knowledge produced; for example, lived experience in an area of research could prompt the development of specific questions that may not be obvious to outsiders. Such questions could

be more salient with participants’ own experiences and priorities, resulting in more nuanced and rich responses, which results in a fundamentally different dataset to be analysed. Similarly, the interpretation of this data and how it is communicated will be impacted by an insider researcher’s unique perspective.

For these reasons, alongside many others, reflexivity is a vital practice, and one we will utilise in this collaborative piece. As mentioned, we are three PhD students who have experienced this transformation from ‘researched’ to ‘researcher’. We describe this process as transformative because it necessitated a marked change in our ways of thinking, working, and interacting with others, alongside a shift in how we view ourselves. Although comprehensive examinations of reflexivity and insider/outsider positionality exist (Wilkinson, 1988; Harding, 1992; Alcoff, 1994; Griffith, 1998), we struggled to find articles written by fellow students exploring these topics from a personal perspective. Thus, we felt it necessary to contribute towards addressing this gap, as undertaking doctoral studies can be a challenging and isolating process (Janata, Lugosi, & Brown, 2014); perhaps even more so if you are coming from a position which has traditionally been discouraged.

Therefore, this essay aims to provide insight into what it is like to navigate a PhD while wearing the two hats of ‘researched’ and ‘researcher’. The following piece comprises three individual reflections, each of which address this process of transformation in the context of different academic disciplines. I (Nina) share how my experiences of depression as a teenager have influenced my subsequent work in adolescent depression; I (Alanah) reflect on being a mixed-race, racially ambiguous woman studying transracialism and racial ambiguity; and I (Florence) consider my experiences of researching autism as an autistic individual. We then end the piece collectively, with three key take-home messages for other early-career academics navigating this transformation. We hope that by writing this piece and sharing our personal stories, we can contribute to the discourse surrounding insider positionality in the social sciences, and encourage other students facing similar transformations to consider how their experiences can contribute to – and, in fact, benefit – their own research.

II. PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Nina

When I think about the theme of ‘transformation’, I think about some of the changes I have undergone over the past year, one of the starkest being my transformation into a PhD student. However, I am not only a PhD student exploring adolescent depression; I am also an individual living with depression, who was diagnosed as a teenager.

Being diagnosed with depression is what led me to this career path, as it kick-started my interest in clinical health psychology. As my diagnosis is intrinsically linked with my pursuit of this career, I have always been upfront in applications about my lived experience. I would be lying if I said I have never doubted my decision to do this. Whilst I predominantly consider my lived experience as positive, as something that broadens my worldview and enhances my ability to help others, the stigma attached to having a mental illness hovers at the back of my mind. I want to own who I am, but at the same time I question whether sharing this information will influence how others act towards me. Will I be viewed as less capable? As less reliable? As a less competitive candidate? Despite working and studying in this field and knowing rationally that this is not the case, it is hard to convince my subconscious self that I will not be viewed as “less”.

Self-stigma – my internationalisation of public attitudes towards mental illness – is one of the things I struggle with most as an insider researcher. It may feel hypocritical to identify as a fierce mental health advocate, whilst also battling with feelings of stigma and shame myself. But the reality is that these two positions are not mutually exclusive, and thinking they are feeds into this all-or-nothing narrative of what mental illness is; that you are either well or unwell, coping or not coping. This oversimplified understanding of mental health does not leave room for a middle ground, which is where I often find myself. From reading comments on social media and talking with other insider researchers, I know I am not alone in feeling like this.

As a result, I find self-disclosure a tricky area to navigate as a PhD student. This is not just in relation to disclosing to colleagues, but also encompasses disclosing to participants, which is complex and must be handled with care. When considering sharing my personal experiences with participants, one of the main questions I ask myself is: Will this be helpful for them? If the answer is no, this indicates that a potential disclosure is more about me – that it may make me feel more comfortable in an interview, or more qualified to be conducting the study. If this is the case, I will not disclose. However, if I think sharing some information might be beneficial for the participant – if it helps to validate their experiences, to make them feel more comfortable and less likely to receive judgement – then I will consider it. Deciding whether to disclose is not as easy as a yes-or-no question, but I find that this is a good starting point.

In the past when working with adults I have been quite open about my lived experience and position as an insider, and have found that it has encouraged engagement in research, facilitated trust and rapport, and has allowed me to gain insight into areas that would otherwise not have been discussed. However, now that I am working with adolescents, additional ethical considerations have emerged, and I am having to re-evaluate my professional boundaries and how I handle

self-disclosure. Again, there is no straightforward answer for how I manage this, and it is something I will probably continue to question throughout the rest of my PhD (and career). The next step I plan to take is to consult with the advisory group I developed for my PhD, which is comprised of young people and researchers with depression. Despite my own experience, I still have blind spots; this group helps me to identify and address them.

Overall, being a PhD student researching an area I identify with is complex and evokes mixed emotions. There are some definite benefits to being an insider, and I feel proud to be in a position where I can advocate for young people’s mental health. However, it is also important to acknowledge the challenges of this position and the conflicts that can emerge. I hope that by writing this piece and contributing to this essay, I can help to normalise these feelings and enable other PhD students in similar situations to feel more comfortable in opening up and embracing their unique perspectives.

Alanah

Research is a relationship of transformation; it is a process by which an individual, a person like any other, can pose a question and, in pursuing an answer to that question, be transformed into something new: a researcher. Simultaneously, another ‘thing’ – in the case of social sciences research, more often than not a person or a group of people – in having a question asked about them is transformed into the ‘researched’. I call this a process of transformation because it is a change that imbues each with new qualities: the transformation from subject to ‘researcher’ brings with it authority, expertise, and the ability to produce knowledge; the parallel transformation in many cases removes the ‘researched’ from their position as ‘subject’ and marks them instead as an object, a site at which knowledge is found or excavated, and which does not (and is thought unable to) produce anything of its own. There is also a transformation of the relationship between the two: before, there might have any sort of relationship; after, there is a subject and an object who exist in a rigidly structured and power-imbalanced relationship, in which one speaks and the other is spoken of.

When imagined as a binary, the pairing of ‘researcher’ and ‘researched’ gestures almost subliminally to other assumed dualisms, such as ‘mind’ and ‘body’, ‘active’ and ‘passive’, or ‘rational’ and ‘emotional’. The work of French feminist deconstructionists has argued language – and, resultantly, culture – is structured through such binaries, a system referred to as phallogocentrism, which are used also to naturalise certain characteristics (such as ‘active’) as belonging to certain groups (such as ‘men’) (Cixous, 1975). Thus, if we understand the transformative power of the research relationship as dividing groups of people into this ‘researcher’ / ‘researched’ binary, which is coreferential with the phallogocentric system

of binaries, we see how the power-imbued position of 'researcher' is easily attributable only to certain groups of people.

Except that in my work, and indeed in much work in my field – interdisciplinary gender studies and Black studies – the line between 'researcher' and 'researched' is somewhat blurred. This blurring hails possibilities for further transformations, of 'researched' to 'researcher' or vice versa, and perhaps even a transformation of the research relationship in itself.

When I think of my own work, the first transformation I think of is actually 'researcher' to 'researched'. I am a mixed-race (Black Caribbean and white English), racially ambiguous woman writing a PhD about transracialism and racial ambiguity as they stand in relation to theorisations of Blackness. I was first motivated to pursue this topic by the anger the concept of transracialism caused in me, and I attempted to write a somewhat detached analysis of such identity claims. In these attempts, I found that my own feelings would get in the way: emotions, memories, and stories would bubble up as I was writing and somehow found themselves expressed on the page. With the support of my supervisor, it became apparent that it would be necessary for me to address the ever-present spectre of my identity, my relation to racial ambiguity, and the rage these things cause in response to transracialism within my analysis. My transformation into the researcher was interrupted, the illusion of the distance between myself and my object was shattered, and I found myself transforming again into something new, something in-between.

Still, it would be naïve to think that my interest in questions of racial ambiguity did not predate the concept of transracialism, given my own ambiguous appearance. Since beginning to work more closely with my own feelings and experiences as sites of analysis, I have come to more fully appreciate the tenet of feminist epistemology that teaches us the identity of the researcher is always inseparable from the research questions (McCorkel and Myers, 2003); I was compelled to transform myself into this researcher because I was already the object of research. This newly realised relation speaks to transformation because it reimagines and reverses the paradigm in which the researcher generates the research object; the researcher/researched relationship is itself transformed.

This has been a somewhat abstract exploration of my lived reality of embracing in my research an epistemological tenet with which I have long claimed to work: there is no impermeable line between the researcher and the researched. This brings me to the final transformation I want to think about, that in which the figure of the 'researcher' is transformed. The 'researcher' / 'researched' binary is contextualised by a system of co-defined binaries, in which the figure of 'researcher'

becomes associated with certain characteristics which are themselves associated with certain groups. By breaking free of the assumption that good research is predicated on contained and separated 'researcher' and 'researched' positions, it may be possible to transform the figure of the researcher such that it becomes more accessible to people from groups and identities that are currently under-represented in academia.

Florence

In 2021, a universal conceptual understanding of autism still proves elusive. Behavioural, biological and cognitive explanations do not consistently overlap; *emic* (observed from within the culture) and *etic* (observed by an outsider) perspectives appear mutually exclusive; and ever-changing definitions affect support, interventions and even human rights. Yet autism researchers are rarely called upon to reflect on their positionality or their claims to knowledge. Knowledge production relies on some shared basis of understanding and currently most autism research is based on the shared understanding that autism is a collection of deficits. After all, a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder requires evidence of persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction, and restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviours. With this 'othering' language, it is perhaps of little surprise that much autism research appears to look for new and inventive ways to further distance the concept of autism from the concept of what it is to be human. One such influential approach has been to deny that autistic people have Theory of Mind, the ability to detect, interpret or understand the mental states of others or to understand that others may hold a different perspective from their own (Baron-Cohen, Leslie & Frith, 1985). Another has been to hypothesise that autistic people possess an extreme male brain which compensates a lack of empathy with strengths in systemising (Baron-Cohen, 2002). This deficit-based research paradigm is based on non-autistic researchers asking the question "how does the world experience autistic people?" and it is not a comfortable space for an autistic autism researcher.

Until I found out that I was autistic at the age of 43 I had never linked the difficulties I had in life with autism. But a chance reading of an autistic woman's blog challenged my few preconceptions and gave me the context I had spent my life searching for. Within a few short months of a positive and life-affirming assessment I had found online communities of other autistic adults. Empathetic, warm, funny, creative people representing all genders, colours, nationalities and income brackets. Individuals far from the stereotype created by researchers and popularised by the media. People with whom I felt understood, welcomed and appreciated. People who introduced me to a whole new and neutral vocabulary: accessible needs, autistic burnout, meltdown, neurodiversity, scripting, shutdown, special interests and stimming.

People with whom I felt transformed from *different* and *other* to, simply, *normal*.

While coaching other autistic women at my health and nutrition practice I noticed that many of my clients had already developed strategies for managing their health and wellbeing. And yet, in my overflowing ring-binder of research papers on autistic health and wellbeing issues, not one was focussed on how autistic adults self-manage their own physiological and psychological challenges. Confident that my lived experience of autism and work with other autistic people had value, I decided to return to university after a 20-year hiatus to join, or at least listen to, academic conversations around autism. But the conversations were not designed with people like me in mind. They were designed for people to discuss autistic deficits, cures and treatments and dismiss the few autistic researchers and their allies who were brave enough to challenge the status quo. The conversations were full of those who saw themselves as scientifically objective and free of bias, and who did not dream that autistic people would read, let alone question their papers.

Recently, the field has been changing. Researchers who replace the question “how does the world experience autistic people?” with “how do autistic people experience the world?” are gaining traction in the autism research world. Autistic scholars are forging academic spaces where academic knowledge is blended with embodied knowledge. Autistic-led and co-designed studies, papers and anthologies describe diverse autistic experiences, chart the growth of the neurodiversity movement, discuss new theories and concepts of autism, and inform future practice. This year has even seen the first Interdisciplinary Autism Research Festival, led by neurodivergent researchers and designed with inclusivity and accessibility in mind (Stenning, 2021). And so, eighty years after autism was first described by a few non-autistic, white, cis-male clinicians, the body of autism knowledge - that base of shared understanding - is being transformed by autistic contributions from varied backgrounds, and the conversation is gradually being transformed into one in which the researched are finally welcomed as researchers.

III. TAKE-HOME MESSAGES

In this essay, we have shared our experiences as PhD students making the transformation from the ‘researched’ to the ‘researcher’. As we are from different backgrounds and disciplines, each piece is distinct and explores different facets of positionality, ranging from battling self-stigma, to acknowledging and embracing the impact of our lived realities, to finding relief in emancipatory studies. However, from the commonalities between our accounts, we have identified three key

take-home messages for other early-career academics navigating this path.

1) **Embrace emotional investment.** Post-positivist assumptions of scientific researchers as neutral and detached (Kanuha, 2000) are clearly not positions that we hold in our respective disciplines. Rather, our lived experiences have shaped our respective epistemological positions, and we are emotionally invested in the research we are conducting. Each of our accounts touch on some of the emotions we experienced when first engaging with our research: Nina’s uncertainty; Alanah’s anger; Florence’s frustration. It can be difficult at times to acknowledge this emotionality, when there is a prevailing assumption that this will impact our ability to be a ‘good’ researcher or that the work produced will be somehow less rigorous or scientific. However, attempting to remain detached caused blocks in how we connected with our fields. Ross (2017) sees emotional connection and investment in one’s work as an opportunity for professional and personal growth; similarly, we believe that our research is stronger for emotional investment and would encourage others to embrace this.

2) **Learn to live in the middle.** Although this essay has been built on the concept of transforming from the ‘researched’ to the ‘researcher’, our lived realities are much more complex. Whilst we have undergone a transformation, it is not so simple or as binary. Instead, we are learning to occupy this middle ground; to live as both the researched and the researcher. As these two identities are classically positioned as opposites, it can be difficult to know how to balance the two - but it is not impossible. An integral part of our reflective work is learning to unpick our understanding of what it means to identify with researched communities through lived experience, and what it means to simultaneously identify as scientific researchers creating knowledge about those same communities. We have found that by drawing on both identities and seeing them as complementary rather than conflicting - by ‘learning to live in the middle’ - we have begun to produce research that benefits from the advantages of both positions and is even richer for it.

3) **Find your community.** In studying those with whom we share key experiences, we have access to ‘epistemological privilege’ (Shah, 2006). This privilege allows for deep understandings of the individuals we study, and wide contextual lenses from which to juggle and integrate concepts, such as theories on race, feminism, and disability. But we also juggle and integrate our participation within communities, ranging from multidisciplinary academic communities to communities with which we share lived experience. Through supervisory teams, workshops, and peer support, academic communities question our viewpoints, giving us the impetus to better define and justify our arguments. Meanwhile, those we meet through social spaces, participatory groups, as well as participants themselves -

the researched people that share facets of our own lived experience - remind us that our subjective narratives, forged through embodied experiences, have unique and necessary value. These are the people that remind us that we need to inhabit these research spaces, as our

unique perspectives can help to bring about change. Finding and embracing both communities is key when attempting to wear – and, importantly, balance - both hats.

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BIOGRAPHIES

Nina is a second year Psychology PhD student at the University of Bath, funded by the South West Doctoral Training Partnership. Her research uses mixed methods to explore the symptom of fatigue within adolescent depression. Prior to her PhD, Nina attended UWE Bristol to complete her BSc (Hons) in Psychology and MSc in Health Psychology, undertaking a year-long placement at the University of Bath in 2017 which introduced her to the world of research. You can keep up to date with Nina's work by following her on Twitter: [@n_higsonsweeney](https://twitter.com/n_higsonsweeney)

Alanah Mortlock is a Doctoral Candidate at the Department of Gender Studies, London School of Economics and Political Sciences. Her thesis looks at how academic and popular discourses of “transracialism” interact with theorisations of Blackness, engaging a critical lens invested in Black feminist and trans scholarship and politics. Her research interests include Black feminisms; theorisations of Blackness; mixed-raceness and racial ambiguity; trans theory; theories of identity; and the intersections of gender, race, and sexuality. You can follow Alanah and her work on Twitter: [@AlanahMortlock](https://twitter.com/AlanahMortlock)

Florence Neville is an autistic researcher interested in the wellbeing strategies that autistic people develop and practice for themselves. Her research sits within critical autism studies and is concerned with acknowledging who owns the stories of and the knowledge about those who are studied. Her PhD at UWE Bristol, using a mixed-methods design to explore how autistic people use time and space alone to improve and maintain wellbeing, is currently in its initial qualitative phase. Twitter: [@FloNevilleNAT](https://twitter.com/FloNevilleNAT)