

Negotiating Constructions of Insider and Outsider Status in Research with Veiled Muslim Women Victims of Islamophobic Hate Crime

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Abstract

This article presents a reflexive discussion of insider and outsider positions in a qualitative study researching Islamophobic hate crime with Muslim women who wear the niqab (face veil) in public in the United Kingdom (UK). As a non-Muslim woman, some aspects of my identity can be linked to insider positions while other aspects of my identity can be linked to outsider positions, with implications for the documentation of participants' lived experiences. Within the framework of 'critical reflexivity', this article considers the impact of my insider/outsider status at each stage of the research process, from deciding on the research topic, the research design, accessing participants through to data collection and analysis. This article re-articulates the importance of researcher reflexivity, particularly when both researchers and participants exhibit multiculturalism (for example, in the context of having multicultural backgrounds), which has become more common in the globalised world. It will be concluded that engaging in critical reflexivity is important for producing reliable and ethical research as it enables researchers to be aware of their position in the 'space between' and be transparent how their positionality impacts on the entire research process.

Keywords: *Insider/outsider, Qualitative Research, Critical Reflexivity, Veiled Muslim Women, Islamophobic Hate Crime*

Introduction

- 1.1 The positionality of the researcher as an insider or outsider in relation to the participants inevitably influences all aspects of the research process including research design, access, data collection and data interpretation. Positionality is determined "by where one stands in relation to 'the other'" (Merriam et al. 2001: 411). Feminist scholars and those researching oppressed, marginalised and 'other' communities have highlighted the potential benefits of having researchers who are 'similar' to their participants (Lee 2008). An 'insider' is a researcher who belongs to the group to which their participants also belong based on characteristics such as religion, ethnicity, gender and sexual identity, while an 'outsider' is not a member of that group (Gair 2012). These polarised positions place researchers as either subjective, biased and generating questionable research outcomes or objective, accurate and credible, respectively (Savvides, Al-Youssef, Colin and Garrido 2014).
- 1.2 The influence of modern philosophical paradigms such as post-modernism and post-structuralism means that traditional dichotomies, for example, self/other and insider/outsider, have been challenged as scholars have recognised the limitations of this approach (Savvides et al. 2014). Post-modernism highlights the importance of recognising the researcher's positionality as part of the narrative interpretation (Angrosino 2005). The researcher's positionality in relation to the participants is an epistemological matter because it influences the knowledge that is co-constructed between them (Griffith 1998). Post-structuralism argues that the researcher-researched dichotomy is flawed because their roles are neither fixed nor at opposite ends of the spectrum (Savvides et al. 2014). From this perspective, the simplistic insider/outsider binary is flawed because it does not take into account the multiple identities that both researchers and participants have. Rather, it is important to

adopt a reflexive methodological approach that considers how similarities and differences between the researcher and the researched shape the research process and the knowledge produced.

1.3 Critical reflexivity emphasises the need for researchers to be open, accountable and ethical in the research process (Hellawell 2006). It stresses that the researcher must not only acknowledge how their beliefs, values and personal interests influence methodological decisions and knowledge claims, but should also challenge these continuously, particularly as these change as a result of interactions with the participants and the context within which they operate (Savvides et al. 2014). An understanding of the theoretical, conceptual and methodological opportunities and dilemmas of insider/outsider positions can enable qualitative researchers to better prepare for and tackle the challenges of producing reliable and ethical research findings (Savvides et al. 2014). Critical reflexivity impacts knowledge production as it demonstrates how different aspects of the researcher's identity influence the research process. Critical reflexivity is an integral part of this process as it enables researchers to be constantly aware of their position in 'the space between' (Corbin-Dwyer and Buckle 2009). The notion of the 'space between' considers qualitative researchers as 'multiple insiders and outsiders' (Labaree 2002: 102). By being both insiders and outsiders, qualitative researchers operate in a fluid space somewhere between the two.

1.4 This paper begins with a review of the existing research and theory on conducting qualitative research from an etic or emic perspective. I then reflect on my own positionality in a study examining the lived experiences of veiled Muslim women who have been victims of Islamophobic hate crime. Within the framework of critical reflexivity, I consider the impact of my outsider/insider status at each stage of the research process, from gaining access to participants, the establishment of trust and rapport between researchers and participants to knowledge production. As we shall see, I oscillate between being an outsider because of my religious identity as an Orthodox Christian and being a 'partial' insider because of my gender identity as a heterosexual woman, whilst other aspects of my identity such as race, ethnicity and occupational identity also seem to influence the research process. This topic cuts across multiple categories of difference and thus it is important to recognise how these differences influence knowledge production, particularly in relation to a marginalised and under studied group – Muslim women who wear the niqab (face veil) in the UK. Thus, it is necessary to understand insider/outsider journeys and their influence on the research project in order to produce research that is reliable and ethical.

Mapping the insider/outsider debate

2.1 A common argument in the research literature is that insiders have unique methodological advantages in the research process, for example, in relation to developing research questions, designing interview schedules, accessing and recruiting participants, and during data collection and analysis (Labaree 2002). From this perspective, insider researchers are more likely to be able to understand and represent participants' experiences. This can be particularly important in research with groups that have been under-represented and socially or culturally marginalised. Similarly, participants might be more willing to share their experiences because there is an assumption of understanding and of shared distinctiveness; it is as if they feel, "You are one of us and it is us versus them (those on the outside who don't understand)" (Corbin-Dwyer and Buckle 2009: 58). In comparison to outsiders, insider researchers are in a stronger position to conduct ethical research that keeps marginalised communities at the top of the research agenda and represents their voices (Corbin-Dwyer and Buckle 2009).

2.2 At the same time though, insider researchers may face a number of challenges. A degree of commonality does not guarantee that an insider researcher will understand participants' views and experiences any more than an outsider researcher, because their lives are as different as they are similar through other personal, social, and situational characteristics which outweigh the shared positions (Bridges 2001). Researchers and participants might find themselves in non-shared social and cultural spaces including religion, ethnicity, age, gender, social class, language, education, marital status, customs, beliefs, to name but some examples. Also, there is a risk that the researcher might take for granted the participants' perspectives due to their shared positions and as a result overlook parts of the data during data analysis (Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1997). Some issues might not be mentioned by the participants because assumptions of shared knowledge (Turnbull 2000). According to Asselin (2003), the dual role can also result in role confusion when the researcher responds to the participants or analyses the data from a perspective other than that of researcher. This might result in an interview that is shaped and guided by the core aspects of the researcher's experience and not the participant's (Corbin-Dwyer and Buckle 2009).

2.3 Some of the perceived benefits for the outsider researcher include the apparent objectivity that being detached provides, and the ability to stand back and find meanings not evident to the insider (Savvides et al. 2014). Outsiders may be able to make observations and draw independent conclusions that insiders might not,

for example, by asking 'naive questions' to explore topics in depth (Hellawell 2006). However, outsider researchers are accused of lacking understanding (Savvides et al. 2014). As such, outsiders cannot understand or represent accurately the experiences of their participants. This is a particularly salient topic when research is conducted with oppressed, marginalised and 'other' communities (Hayfield and Huxley 2015). Thus it is important that the outsider researcher addresses the psychological and social distance between themselves and the participants in an ethical way in order to gain valuable insights into their lived experiences (Sixsmith, Boneham and Goldring 2003).

- 2.4 This discussion shows that there are costs and benefits to be weighed regarding the insider versus outsider status of the researcher. However, the distinction, the polarity, between the insider and the outsider researcher should itself be challenged (Bridges 2001). Groups or collectivities that claim insider status are not themselves homogeneous groups (Griffith 1998). For example, the collectivity 'Muslim women' is striated by a plurality of identities – such as race, ethnicity, age, language, class, education, sexual orientation and degree of practising Islam, to name but some examples. The different social, personal and situational characteristics that constitute their individuality may well outweigh the shared characteristics; and there may indeed be 'greater barriers to mutual understanding than there are gateways' (Bridges 2001: 373). It is important to acknowledge that identities are complex and multifaceted. It is not always easy or indeed possible to predict how one will be placed by the participants – how commonality or difference will be constructed, interpreted or experienced (Ryan and Golden 2006). The position both of the researcher and researched are not fixed but can be understood as 'potentially unstable and shifting' relationships within the research process (Song and Parker 1995: 244). Before reflecting on the impact of my insider/outsider status on the research process, it is first important to contextualise this discussion by offering a brief overview of the research study.

The research study

- 3.1 The study examined veiled Muslim women's experiences of Islamophobic hate crime in public in the UK. Islamophobic hate crime is defined as any criminal offence which is perceived, by the victim or any other person, to be motivated by a hostility or prejudice based upon a person's religion or perceived religion, that is, their Muslim faith (College of Policing 2014). Following terrorist attacks such as 9/11 in the USA and 7/7 in the UK, the vulnerability of perceived and actual Muslims to Islamophobic hate crime in the UK and elsewhere in the West is well documented (see, for example, Allen 2010; Esposito and Kalin 2011; Githens-Mazer and Lambert 2010; Poynting and Mason 2007). Islamophobic hostility towards Muslim women who are 'visible' due to their Muslim dress has also been empirically researched (Allen, Isakjee and Young 2013; Open Society Foundations 2011; Zempi 2014).
- 3.2 This was a qualitative study, which included 60 in-depth interviews and 20 focus groups with veiled Muslim women who had experienced Islamophobic attacks in public in the UK. The fieldwork took place between 2011 and 2012. All the interviews were conducted in English, and the vast majority of participants were British citizens who were born in this country. In-depth interviews were designed to reveal the nature, frequency and impact of Islamophobic hate crime upon victims, as well as their coping mechanisms for dealing with this victimisation. Focus group interviews explored shared understandings, experiences and participant narratives concerning incidents of Islamophobic hate crime in public, and the role of formal and informal mechanisms in supporting victims in coping with such incidents.
- 3.3 With respect to the researcher's positionality, it is important to outline all aspects of my identity that were in play including religion, gender, race, ethnicity, age, language, sexual orientation and occupational identity. Specifically, I was a heterosexual, white, Orthodox Christian woman. Additionally, I was a Greek immigrant who spoke with a foreign accent that marked me as 'different'. Also, I was a doctoral student at the University of Leicester with an occupation background in Victim Support. Lastly, I identified myself as a heterosexual, single woman in her thirties without children.

Insider/Outsider Perspectives at Different Stages of Research

- 4.1 In this section, I reflect on how different aspects of my identity influenced the research design, data collection, and analysis as a way of informing debate on how insider/outsider perspectives can shape the decisions that researchers make at different stages of the research process.

Research Design

- 4.2 As an Orthodox Christian woman, my research was primarily from an etic position. As will be discussed

later in more detail, having a practicing faith did provide me with a degree of commonality with these women; however, my research was primarily from an outsider position on the basis that Christianity and Islam are two different religions. My attention was drawn to the vulnerability of veiled Muslim women as victims of Islamophobic hate crime through my occupation identity as a victim support officer in Victim Support. Victim Support is an independent charity helping people cope with the effects of crime, by providing free and confidential support and information. In essence, I embarked on the research with some insider knowledge because I had worked with veiled Muslim women who had reported their experiences of Islamophobic hate crime to Victim Support. Insider knowledge meant that through these cases, I developed a good professional understanding of the nature, extent and impact of Islamophobic attacks upon veiled Muslim women, their families and the wider Muslim community. Additionally, I familiarised myself with reading about Islamophobic hate crime, racism and targeted victimisation in order to enhance my understanding and knowledge, both theoretically and empirically.

4.3 With respect to designing the interview guide, it is argued that insiders hold an advantage over outsiders in terms of developing nuanced and meaningful research questions (Hayfield and Huxley 2015). In this regard, insiders are familiar with the types of issues that affect participants' lives and therefore may be aware of pertinent questions to ask that might not occur to an outsider when developing an interview schedule (Labaree 2002). My knowledge of Islamophobic hate crimes through cases in Victim Support coupled with drawing upon the hate crime literature helped me to easily construct an interview schedule. In other words, my familiarity with veiled Muslim women's Islamophobic hate crime experiences made it easy to identify relevant issues, and this formed the basis of my investigation through interviews.

4.4 At the same time though, I engaged in an iterative process where I asked participants' feedback and revised the interview guide accordingly. I found this process very useful as I realised that I should avoid using any academic terminology that participants might not have been familiar with. The issue of language is not merely technical, but actually relates to two different frameworks for making sense of women's experiences – an academic, technical jargon and another language used by the women themselves. Using critical reflexivity, I recognised that although I had some insider knowledge, there could be hidden issues or ones, which I had not thought of since I were only a partial insider. Therefore questions and themes were added as the study progressed. For example, questions were added concerning the issue of intersectionality of identities based on the fact that some of the veiled Muslim women who took part in the study had experienced hostility based on different aspects of their identities such as religion, gender, race, ethnicity, age, body shape and size, mental health problems, physical disabilities and learning difficulties.

4.5 Intersectionality is a sociological theory that holds that constructed notions of 'difference' impact upon a particular group simultaneously resulting in a cumulative effect (Yuval-Davis 2011). The term was coined by legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989. It is not an abstract notion but a description of the way multiple oppressions are experienced. Indeed, Crenshaw (1989: 149) uses the following analogy, referring to a traffic intersection, or crossroad, to concretise the concept:

Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in an intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination? But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: Sometimes the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm.

4.6 Crenshaw (1989) argues that Black women are discriminated against in ways that often do not fit neatly within the legal categories of either 'racism' or 'sexism' – but as a combination of both racism and sexism. In the context of the present study, intersectionality can be understood as a nexus of identities that work together to render veiled Muslim women an 'easy' target to attack, especially in the minds of their abusers. This means that some veiled Muslim women may be targeted not just for their group membership (Muslim identity) but because they are stereotypically perceived as 'soft', 'easy' or 'convenient' targets by virtue of the fact that they are visibly 'different' (through markers of dress, skin colour or language) and because they seem vulnerable (because of their gender, race, ethnicity, age, disability or physical presence) in certain spaces and places. This is a point worth noting as it helps us to recognise that veiled Muslim women who have experienced Islamophobic hate crime will all have their own distinct individual experiences in addition to common patterns of this victimisation. This notion of intersectionality of identities was not known to me through my work in Victim Support. This points to the fact that reporting incidences of Islamophobic hate crime to formal agencies such as the Police and Victim Support only captures part of victims' experiences. Intersectionality is left out of these partial reports of

Islamophobic hate crimes as criminal justice agencies typically focus on religion when veiled Muslim women suffer hate crimes thereby ignoring the presence of multiple identity factors.

- 4.7 Moreover, as the study progressed I developed the interview schedule to include other interesting and important areas that participants specifically wanted to talk about but were not initially part of the main research questions. Such issues included the reasons why Muslim women choose to wear the niqab (for example, as a form of public modesty, liberation and Islamic feminism), the experiences of converts to Islam, as well as the problem of Islamophobic hate crime within the private sphere, for example, where family members pressured women to take the niqab off. As such, participants led the discussions, empowering them to voice what was of importance to them. In this regard, participants insisted that I record the 'whole story' of their lives, and not just their experiences as victims of Islamophobic hate crime in public. This demonstrates the importance of reflexivity in the research process, and especially the fact that qualitative research is open to adaption, and having assumptions constantly challenged.
- 4.8 Furthermore, key informants such as veiled Muslim women from the local community played an important role in designing the fieldwork. In light of my non-Muslim identity, they advised me to dress and behave in a religiously and culturally appropriate manner throughout the fieldwork, particularly when visiting mosques, Muslim schools and Islamic community centres. These spaces were highly gendered in the sense that women and men used separate rooms and often participated in different types of activities. The use of space was defined by strong ideologies of *purdah* (i.e. division of male and female space with the purpose of maintaining segregation between the sexes), and they advised me to abide by this by not using the male spaces in these premises. Also, they advised me to dress modestly, including wearing a long loose dress (preferably black) and covering my hair with a hijab (headscarf) when conducting focus group sessions at mosques. It was not appropriate to shake hands with men, to sit or stand next to them, or to talk to men unnecessarily. They also advised me to avoid eye contact with men in these premises. Thus, the process of becoming an insider involved learning about, and abiding by cultural and religious norms as well as codes of behaviour in Islam.
- 4.9 The active involvement of veiled Muslim women helped to develop a great sense of trust with the local Muslim community that became the real strength of the access process, particularly since I conformed by the advice I was given in relation to my behaviour and dress. Researchers' bodily appearances and bodily actions, adaptations and interactions are important markers of their identity in the fieldwork (Zubair et al. 2012). Participants may perceive and judge researchers either positively or negatively and/or as insiders or outsiders based on their embodied identity (Ellingson 2006). Okely (2007: 71) argues that researchers often have to learn to adapt their bodily performances and actions – including the way they dress – in order to fit in with, and be accepted amongst, those they are researching, especially when they are closely scrutinised and instructed. Attempts to change, however clumsy, are usefully interpreted as signs of respect. This demonstrates the important role the researcher's body and behaviour may play in developing (or hindering the development of) trust and rapport with participants.
- 4.10 This discussion shows that research design needs to take into account the religious and cultural context of the community. Without an understanding of the cultural and religious norms of practising Muslim men and women, access to mosques, Muslim schools and Islamic community centres could have been extremely difficult, and the relationship between researcher and researched one of suspicion and noncooperation. Awareness of cultural and religious norms is vital for negotiating insider/outsider dynamics through showing respect for culture and religion, particularly when working with minority communities.

Participant Recruitment

- 4.11 In a post-9/11 and 7/7 climate, Muslims in the UK have taken on the status of a 'suspect community' (Ryan, Kofman and Aaron 2010). This has created a general sense of mistrust towards people investigating issues concerning Muslims. The fear of being investigated by agents undercover from the secret services has made access to the community much more difficult for researchers (Bolognani 2007). Muslim communities have an additional cause of discomfort about participating in research studies: the fear of misrepresentation of their religion. Spalek argues that 'due to the verbal and physical abuse suffered by Muslims communities in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, interviewees may have distrusted my interest in their lives' (2005: 411).
- 4.12 In light of my non-Muslim identity, access to potential participants was initially challenging. I found that participants were keen to establish my motivations for researching their lived experiences before agreeing to take

part in this study. This curiosity might simply reflect their suspicions about the motivation behind the research. It might also reflect their concerns that non-Muslim researchers might misinterpret their views, experiences and behaviours. I found that being open, authentic, honest and deeply interested in their lives encouraged openness and trust between the participants and myself, and helped to assuage any suspicions about my motives. Also, the fact that when interrogated about my faith, I answered that I was an Orthodox Christian seemed, in the majority of cases, to contribute towards the idea that I was a person with good morals who followed a religious code, and therefore, could be trusted. Therefore, I was a partial insider not as a Muslim but as someone who holds strong religious beliefs. My background in Victim Support and the fact that I was a doctoral student at the University of Leicester also afforded me a level of respect and recognition that I was a serious researcher with a genuine interest in understanding and reporting their experiences.

4.13 At the same time, some participants told me that they were keen to talk to non-Muslims in order to dispel myths about Islam. In this regard, I found that many participants were concerned about the implications of what they had to say, as they felt they were seen as representatives of Islam. By answering my questions participants knew they were contributing in some way to outsiders' perceptions of Muslims. They felt the duty/burden of projecting a good image of Islam to non-Muslims. Whilst this question of individuals feeling representative of Islam at times affected the direction of the interviews, in some cases this was probably the trigger that convinced some participants to agree to participate in the study. As such, being perceived as an outsider has a value in terms of encouraging individuals to take part in the study.

4.14 Finally, engaging with key local Muslim organisations and community leaders eased access to participants. Receiving their 'seal of approval' through publicising my project on their websites helped allay any doubts about the motivation behind the research. Berg (1999: 239) highlights the 'value of obtaining the support of community leaders when conducting research in minority communities'. Community gatekeepers have local influence and power to add credibility and validity to the project by their acceptance of it. Positive recommendations from gatekeepers provide the outsider researcher with social capital within the community, giving them a degree of credibility (Sixsmith et al., 2003). However, community leaders can also act to block access. Indeed, there were a couple of local Muslim organisations that declined any engagement with my project, and refused to introduce me to their members. Clearly, gatekeepers and local Muslim organisations have both afforded and impeded access to potential participants in this study. Although some veiled Muslim women might have agreed to take part in the study because of my validated identity and endorsement by certain Muslim organisations, others might have been discouraged from taking part due to my (perceived) non-credible status resulting from a lack of engagement with certain Muslim organisations. This discussion demonstrates that insider/outsider status can have a significant impact on the recruitment process and participants' motivations for taking part.

Data Collection

4.15 Hayfield and Huxley (2015) argue that when conducting qualitative research, researchers need to consider how they present themselves and their research to participants; providing specific information can influence how participants feel about and behave towards the researcher. Due to my non-Muslim identity, I knew that participants would automatically consider me an outsider to their religion, culture and context. My outsider status became even more evident when I interviewed Black and Asian women.

4.16 On the one hand, it seemed inappropriate and irrelevant to think in terms of who is classed as 'us' (insiders) and 'them' (outsiders), as the boundaries of people's identities are blurred and constantly shifting. On the other hand, I was aware of my position as a white researcher and of the possibility that some participants might have seen me as the 'oppressor' on the basis of my racial identity. Adler and Adler (2001) highlight that if participants perceive themselves as marginalised and vulnerably positioned by the white society, they might be reluctant to share information with a researcher who is 'one of them'. Agreeing to be researched by a white researcher becomes a political decision which impacts upon the data made available to the outsider researcher (Shah 2004). This decision may not necessarily be based upon the colour divide but upon what 'white' represents for Black and South Asian communities that have been historically discriminated against and racially abused based on their perceived 'otherness' (Shah 2004). To complicate matters further many white, non-Muslim western social commentators and journalists have promoted false images of Islam and as a result some participants might have viewed me as being a part of this 'white, western, establishment' (Spalek 2005: 411).

4.17 Although my religious and racial identity placed me as an outsider, as soon as I spoke with participants, they spotted my foreign accent, and questioned me about my ethnicity. I realised that my immigrant status played

a very important part in building rapport. In essence, I was perceived as an insider due to being 'different' myself. According to Harrington (2003), this could be the result of a sub-conscious strategic identity match. I was considered 'other' myself but also an outsider from the Muslim community, and thus I was trusted not to gossip within it. Being interviewed by an insider researcher may lead participants to have concerns about being judged by a peer, and despite assurances of confidentiality, may worry about breaches of privacy and local gossip (Ryan et al. 2010). Spalek (2005) and Song and Parker (1995) found that being placed as an outsider makes one easier and perhaps 'safer' to talk to. Also, the fact that I was Greek triggered discussions about the history of Ancient Greece, summer holidays and the more recent financial crisis in Greece, which helped to break down the researcher/researched boundary. As the research progressed, I came to realise that my whiteness and non-Muslim identity were secondary once my ethnicity emerged. I also realised that there were many insider elements to my (predominantly) outsider status including my gender.

- 4.18** Although I was an outsider in terms of my religious and racial identity, I was a partial insider in that I was a heterosexual woman. This is important, first because it highlights one of the ways in which the categories insider and outsider are not necessarily clear-cut and fixed. Secondly, some feminist researchers have discussed the idea that there are often unequal power relations between 'researcher' and 'researched,' with participants answering questions, being analysed and presented in ways often largely determined by the researcher (Oakley 1981). When women interview women, rapport can be built and these hierarchies can (to some extent) be broken down due to their shared identities (Labaree 2002). The more 'like' your participants you are, the more opportunity there is for empathy, implicit understanding, and shared experience (Hellowell 2006).
- 4.19** Despite explicit religious differences between me and the participants, I empathised with them through our shared identity as women. In this sense, I used my gender identity to establish rapport and trust with the veiled Muslim women who took part in the study. Similarly, in a study documenting Black Muslim women's experiences of victimisation and the management of their personal safety, Spalek (2002) drew upon her position as a woman in order to establish rapport since her racial and religious identity differed from those of the research participants. This approach is based on the argument that there is a special woman-to-woman connection between female researchers and female participants, thereby encouraging the latter to disclose sensitive information.
- 4.20** Jeffery (1976) found that being female was advantageous as it provided her with access to areas that would have been denied to men because of purdah (gender segregation). Indeed, it is important to recognise that it would be problematic to employ a male interviewer in this study. Crucially, the principle of avoiding contact with 'non-mahram' (unrelated) men is pivotal for Muslim women who decide to wear the niqab (Hannan 2011). According to the Quran and the Sunnah (the way of life of Prophet Muhammad), free-mixing and socialisation between non-mahram men and women is strictly forbidden in Islam, at least as a general rule, unless a woman has a mahram in her presence such as her husband, father, brother, father-in-law, son and so forth. The presence of other male family members during the interview could potentially limit the extent to which participants could disclose their experiences of Islamophobic victimisation to a male interviewer. This provides evidence for the proposition that being a female researcher was crucial in the present study.
- 4.21** However, it is important to acknowledge that although being a woman was a commonality with my research participants, there were many differences between my understanding of womanhood and femininity and that of my participants. This also challenges the aforementioned notion that a shared identity of gender ensures a 'special woman to woman connection'. This means that being a woman rendered me a 'partial insider' rather than a 'complete insider' researcher. As Pillow (2003) observes, researchers often choose to research their own cultural, sexualised and/or racialised communities but being part of the community does not automatically yield the research egalitarian. Being a woman gave me a degree of commonality on which to build rapport with these women, but other aspects of my identity namely sexuality, class, faith and lifestyle constructed more differences within the group of 'woman'. To illustrate this, it is important to reflect on the ways in which womanhood is not a unitary category.
- 4.22** For example, in addition to being female, I was also an unmarried woman without children. Some participants were critical of my choice to be single in my thirties, whilst others sympathised with my 'situation' as they stated that it was not my fault that I could not find a good man to marry, hence they proposed introducing me to single Muslim men who would make a good husband. In this context, there was also an assumption that I was heterosexual; as such, it was deemed appropriate for participants to engage with me without wearing their niqab. In other words, women could be un-veiled with me as I was not a potential sexual partner (in light of my heterosexual status). In order to confirm my sexuality, some participants would ask me about it at the start of the

research whilst other participants would assume I was heterosexual. In either case, it is important to point out that this was not just a women-only space where veiled Muslim women would unveil themselves to other women; sexuality was key here. As mentioned earlier, covering the face with a niqab serves the purpose of concealing the beauty of the veil wearer, especially from non-mahram individuals (that is, people with whom Muslim women could have sexual relations). The definition of 'non-mahram' is a sex neutral definition whereby women would consider both males and females as being potentially sexually interested in them and thus they would keep the veil on if suspected that the individual was homosexual, regardless of gender. This discussion shows that different aspects of the researcher's identity can make it easier to gain participants' trust and build rapport; therefore they may become more fully engaged with the research resulting in rich and authentic accounts. However, it is not always easy or indeed possible to predict how researchers will be positioned by the participants, how commonality or difference will be constructed or perceived.

- 4.23** Furthermore, it is important to reflect on and critically examine power relations during data collection. Specifically, I was often asked (especially by older participants) whether I wanted to convert to Islam. Since my answer was negative, I was questioned as to why I was interested in conducting research on the lived experiences of veiled Muslim women, given that I had no intention of converting to Islam. Such questions by the participants made me feel uncomfortable, and somewhat vulnerable. A couple of participants gave me booklets, which included information about the benefits of converting to Islam, or prayed for me (in order to convert to Islam). For me to ask them not to pray for me or refuse accepting these booklets would result in violation of the code of respect and courtesy thus jeopardising rapport and even their participation in the study. Thus I decided to accept the booklets and prayers. As Zubair et al. (2012) argue, research participants – including older individuals – are not necessarily a vulnerable and passive group vis-à-vis the researcher but can be active agents who exercise considerable power over the research process and research relationships.

Data Analysis

- 4.24** In comparison to outsiders, insider researchers are arguably more likely to be able to understand or represent participants' experiences, which can be particularly important in research with groups that have been marginalised or oppressed (Bridges 2001). In light of this, I had concerns about how my outsider status might affect the data analysis. On the one hand, I felt a strong responsibility to ensure that the research represented the voices of the participants. On the other hand, I was conscious of not simply replicating participants' stories but to look critically at the data. Correspondingly, I took steps to ensure that the data interpretation was more critical than descriptive.
- 4.25** Within a Grounded Theory framework (Glaser and Strauss 1967), the analysis of the data in this study followed an inductive approach in the sense that themes were allowed to emerge from the data, thereby enabling theories about the nature of Islamophobic victimisation to be generated, tested and refined during the analytical process. As such, the data were allowed to 'speak for themselves' by the emergence of conceptual categories and descriptive themes. Inductive reasoning moved from a set of particular observations with reference to the lived experiences of participants as victims of Islamophobic hate crime to the discovery of a pattern of targeted victimisation of veiled Muslim women, which was theoretically based upon these observations.
- 4.26** Verbatim quotes of what participants said were used to illustrate key themes and patterns in the data but also to enable readers to assess the validity of the analysis against what had been said. In this regard, transcript extracts not only constitute evidence for the current findings but also help readers to understand how women made sense of their victimisation, how they had been affected and how they coped with it. In this regard, I shared the data analysis with participants to verify its accuracy. Moreover, it is important to reflect upon how voice is given to the subjects, and also to demonstrate how power is shared by researcher and researched (Pillow 2003). This may include discussions of co-development of the research focus and analysis, use of extensive member checks, 'sharing the data' with the subjects, and co-writing (Pillow 2003). Correspondingly, I asked some of the veiled Muslim women who took part in the study to evaluate the interpretations and explanations pulled from the data (e.g. 'Does this represent your experiences?' or 'Have I captured the meaning of the niqab correctly?'). Doing this also helped to overcome the power relationship in 'being the one who tells their stories'. Clearly, I was in a position of power in framing the research and findings but participants did influence all aspects of the study by giving me feedback, ranging from the interview guide to the data. However, as Trinh (1991: 67) points out, this share of power is 'given' to the research subjects, it is 'not taken'. Reflexivity then always occurs out of an unequal power relationship and, in fact, the act of reflexivity may perpetuate a colonial relationship while at the same time attempting to mask this power over the subject (Pillow 2003).

- 4.27 I found that my non-Muslim identity helped me to think critically about the research data. To illustrate this, some participants reported that Islamophobic victimisation was part of God's plan to 'test' their faith. In line with the belief that this victimisation was part of Allah's plan, participants felt confident that He would 'reward' them in the afterlife for not giving up their Muslim identity despite the abuse that they suffered in the present life. This contributes to the sense of resilience that some victims of Islamophobic hate crime might feel in light of the 'rewards' that they will receive in jannah (paradise). Initially, I did not challenge participants during interviews as I did not want to offend them by questioning how Allah, or any God for that matter, could cause suffering to His followers in order to 'measure' the degree of their religiosity and loyalty to Him. However, in retrospect this was something that I did challenge in the data analysis. Watts (2006) highlights how it may be problematic when researchers are keen to faithfully report and validate their participants' experiences. During analysis it is not necessarily realistic or appropriate to simply be a conduit for participants' stories, and at times it may be necessary to challenge or criticise their accounts rather than simply validate and legitimate them. This issue is one of epistemology and also applies to both insider and outsider researchers, who feel responsibilities toward their participants to produce meaningful research that benefits their everyday lives.
- 4.28 Finally, I asked the participants about their feedback of the interview process and all of them stated that they found being able to talk about their experiences of Islamophobic victimisation 'cathartic'; they also felt 'that someone actually cared'. This indicates that both interviews and focus group discussions contributed to participants' sense of confidence and enhanced their notions of being valued by listening to disclosures of abuse, harassment and violence. The concept of Islamophobic hate crime was not familiar amongst the women who took part in the study but following the interviews and focus group discussions, the majority of participants stated that they felt empowered to seek support and report future incidents of Islamophobic victimisation to the police as a result of taking part in this study. Indeed, one of the reasons for employing qualitative interviewing was to empower veiled Muslim women to come forward and also, to raise awareness amongst actual and potential victims in the local community about access to relevant organisations that could support them.

Conclusion

- 5.1 The issue of the researcher's positionality has been at the forefront of much discussion and debate in terms of gaining access to participants and securing recruitment, as well as the establishment of trust and rapport and a non-oppressive relationship between researchers and participants, particularly when researching 'other', marginalised or vulnerable groups.
- 5.2 In this article, I have discussed my experiences of being an 'outsider' and an 'insider', being different in some aspects of my identity while sharing similarities in other aspects of my identity. In particular, I utilised the concept of strategic occupation to analyse my insider/outsider status and its impact on the research process. In so doing, I analysed the complexity and multiplicity of identities, and examined the ways in which religion, race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation and occupational identity may impact on the research process. Throughout the study, critical reflexivity enabled me to work towards a deeper understanding and awareness of my own identity/positionality and how this interacted with the identity/positionality of my participants. Through the process of critical reflexivity, I regularly questioned my methodology and deconstructed my interactions with the veiled Muslim women who took part in the study. Similarly, I questioned my understanding and representation of veiled Muslim women's lived experiences. Critical reflexivity also helped me to continually re-evaluate methodological, analytical and ethical research processes as the research progressed. In this regard, I found it essential to engage in critical reflexivity during all stages of the research as it enabled me to deal with some of the challenges experienced as part of the shifting insider/outsider journeys and to make sense of them and their influence on the research process.
- 5.3 The preceding discussion supported the view that qualitative researchers are not either/or insiders/outside; rather, they continuously negotiate their multiple identities and aspects of the research process by moving fluidly within 'the space between' (Corbin-Dwyer and Buckle 2009). The fluid, multiple, intersectional and context-dependant nature of identities means that in reality a researcher may hold multiple and shifting identities and positionalities in the field, as opposed to being a total 'insider' or a complete 'outsider' (Zubair et al. 2012). As Corbin-Dwyer and Buckle (2009: 60) point out 'The notion of the space between challenges the dichotomy of insider versus outsider status. To present these concepts in a dualistic manner is overly simplistic. It is restrictive to lock into a notion that emphasizes either/or, one or the other, you are in or you are out'. In order to fairly and accurately represent the researched community the crucial element is not whether the researcher is an insider or an outsider; rather, researchers need to recognise how their multiple identities influence the research process, and the ethicality of their actions and decisions. As such, critical reflexivity allows

for the development of changed perspectives that improve future practice.

5.4 Rigorous and continuous critical reflexivity enables researchers to frame and problematise the impact of their subjectivities on the research environment; it also transforms the researcher by allowing them to dynamically critique and challenge their own values, be outside their comfort zone when inhabiting 'the space between' (Corbin-Dwyer and Buckle 2009), actively deconstruct preconceived assumptions, and develop new research theories and practices for the future (Savvides et al. 2014). Ultimately, the values that critical reflexivity promotes allow for the co-creation of knowledge amongst researchers and the researched, and they are therefore more likely to generate strong, authentic and credible research outcomes.

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