

RECLAIMING THE OUTSIDER-WITHIN SPACE: AN AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY

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Abstract

This article emerged from a personal need to reconcile the duality of my experience as a person working to raise awareness of equity issues, with that of being a female academic of mixed ethnicity. I discuss the formation of my subject as a developing sociologist, my attraction to the pre-reflexive identities of class, gender and ethnicity, and my struggle with the ambiguous nature of cultural cohesion. I move on to discuss how through conscious ways of knowing it is possible to reflexively act in ways that support substantive change. I argue outsiders-within, i.e. people like myself who grapple with such dual experiences, need not become “hot commodities in social institutions that want the illusion of difference without the difficult effort needed to change power relations” (Collins, 1999:88). Rather, I believe outsiders-within can knowingly achieve small but important substantive changes that lead to future systemic change.

Keywords: Auto-ethnography, Outsider-within spaces, Equity, Formation of the subject, Pre-reflexive identities, Reflections on, Reflexive action.

Introduction

This article emerged from a personal need to reconcile the duality of my experience in assisting in the faculty with equity issues with the experience of being a female employee of mixed ethnicity. As a Level A female academic (the lowest level of appointment for tenured academics in Australian universities) one of my work roles was to implement the university wide but faculty

specific equity plan. While the legislation in Australia fills an important gap in social justice for women and ethnic minority groups¹³, substantive change at the

¹³ In Australia the passage of anti-discrimination and equal opportunity legislation is associated with the rise of women’s and indigenous pressure groups who sought to introduce civil libertarian principles of equal employment opportunity in statutory legislation. These groups borrowed ideas on civil liberty from other countries because the Australian systems of industrial relations and trade unionism were seen to be racist and sexist (Petzell, Abbott & Timo, 2007). In other words, the procedures used to allocate positions and benefits

systemic level, and change at the micro level of interactions between individuals and groups in organizations, is much harder to achieve. My auto-ethnography is a narrative about the re-framing of my outsider-within space as a developing sociologist.

According to Collins (1999), outsiders-within can be used as substitutes for the implementation of substantive change, in that outsiders-within can easily become “hot commodities in social institutions that want the illusion of difference without the difficult effort needed to change power relations” (Collins, 1999:88). In other words, organizations can opt for cosmetic change by marketing hand-picked individuals in lieu of substantive and organizational changes (Collins, 1999). A person like me, someone who is caught between groups of unequal power; i.e. a female, of mixed ethnicity, but an academic holding a career position, can

in Australian workplaces were designed for Anglo-Australian, able-bodied, heterosexuals (Hunter, 1992). Based as it is on civil libertarian principles the antidiscrimination and equal employment opportunity legislation supports freedom of choice, individualism, and equality of opportunity (Whitehouse, 1992). Compared with the broader aims of social justice principles underpinning Australian government welfare policies, and the collectivist concerns of the industrial relations system, the aim of the anti-discrimination and equal opportunity legislation is to provide equality of opportunity for individual talent rather than have the opportunities determined on the basis of race or gender (Petzall, Abbott & Timo, 2007).

be considered an outsider-within. There are several reasons for this. First, an outsider-within occupies social locations or border spaces attached to specific histories of social injustice (Collins, 1999). Women and people of ethnicity have a long history of social injustice through gendered and migrant inequality. Second, it was appealing to me to believe that by assisting in the faculty with equity issues that I might be able to achieve substantive change. Collins (1999) refers to this as the assumption of equivalency of oppression, that is, the belief that outsiders-within can build coalitions and support for the marginalized, within the organization. However, what I was able to achieve through the equity plan was very limited. I merely worked within the faculty to raise awareness of equity issues. Or to put it another way, policy implementation to raise awareness and to educate staff about equity did not constitute substantive change at the systemic level, or improve micro-level interactions between individuals and groups within the faculty.

Writing this auto-ethnography has helped me to focus on my personal experiences and to reflect on self and other, in relation to equity. Other authors have used auto-ethnography for similar reasons. For instance; auto-ethnography enables one to focus on self while also taking a wider ethnographic gaze at the

cultural and social aspects of that experience (Reed-Danahay, 1997); can be adopted to resolve a deeper understanding of self-struggle with racism (Lee, 2008); can be adopted as an outing of self in the form of a critical narrative on management identity (Mischenko, 2005); can be adopted to interpret the micro practices of everyday life and a critical questioning of established social order, and this is congruent with critical research methods (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000 cited in Mischenko, 2005). In the following I discuss; the formation of my subject as a developing sociologist interested in class and status and gender and ethnicity; the force of my attraction to pre-reflexive identities; my reflections on ambiguities concerning the way forward, and my reclaiming of the outsider-within status as reflexive action.

Formation of Me as the Subject

Freedom to Think

I arrived at Griffith University as a mature age student. I loved the freedom to be who I was without having to discuss my gender, age, and ethnicity. I told folk at home how much I loved being in an environment where such things didn't matter. Back in those days Griffith University was considered a left wing institution, almost hippy! I admit to enjoying sitting on the lawns with fellow

students talking about left wing issues. I happily concede to mixing with gay and lesbian friends, and older and younger students, but I didn't think of them as belonging to the categories I've just listed. These people were simply fellow students working towards a better future. By my last year as an undergraduate, I'd developed a strong set of friendships. We would spend the weekends comparing notes, studying, and just generally talking about our studies. The engagement in learning was without a doubt what attracted to me academia.

Organizational Sociology

At the Work and Industry Futures Research Centre at Queensland University of Technology (QUT), I was able to pursue a PhD in organizational sociology. During my time as a PhD candidate I was drawn to academic work on class relations, gender and migrant inequality and alternative forms of industrial organization. After a lot of work and a confirmation of candidature process I graduated. I recall saying to my supervisor that I would like to work in an equity related area. I believed class and status were the reason women and migrants were disempowered and segregated and I believed in the need for systemic change.

An Authentic in an Outsider-Within Space

I took up my first tenured academic position at the University of Tasmania (UTAS). As a Level A I was able to draw on my knowledge of industrial relations and human resource management as the basis of my teaching in the School of Business.

I was also fully engaged with the equity role. There were many issues that we dealt with that I thought were valuable; the desire to support students in regional areas, to enroll and retain students with marginal status (including those with disabilities); the career advancement of women and ethnic minorities.

Yet, the often negative reactions of staff to the implementation of the equity plan concerned me. Although the equity plan was supported by legislation and management policy, achieving systemic change was very hard to achieve. In other words, policy implementation did not make the achievement of cultural cohesion any easier, i.e. there was a palpable social distance between people of gender and ethnicity and the main group of staff in the faculty. Based on my observations and personal experience, I believed the raising of awareness of equity issues served to reinforce stereotyping and further isolate people of gender and ethnicity. I became

disenchanted with the work I was doing and asked to be given alternative duties.

At the end of my third year at UTAS I was promoted to Level B. As if to fill a left wing void I moved on from the role of equity plan representative to union activism. Through the Industrial Relations Society Tasmania I was able to develop community links with industry practitioners; labor lawyers, unionists, human resource practitioners, and commissioners of the Industrial Relations Commission. I was also elected to the Tasmanian Division of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and became actively involved unionism.

Transforming My Outsider-Within Space

I'm now working as a senior lecturer at the University of New South Wales at the Australian Defense Force Academy (UNSW@ADFA). Since my arrival at UNSW@ADFA I've tried to avoid outsider-within spaces in which I might be used as a hand-picked hot commodity. This is because I genuinely believe these spaces merely reinforce marginalization. I acknowledge that I am an outsider-within by virtue of who I am. However, I've changed as a consequence of the experience of the equity role. I did concede to give a presentation to academic staff on diversity, but this time

the underpinning message had a clear directive for others; “diversity does not just belong to me it belongs to all everyone”. If I can’t avoid being seen as the equity person then at least I can be clear that other individuals in the organization also have a responsibility. The following narrative is about transformation or change of meaning that occurred for me in not allowing others to define my role as outsider-within.

Pre-Reflexive Identity

As a female academic with an interest in sociology I have always had a strong attraction to the pre-reflexive identities of women and ethnic minorities. Most of what I understood about class and status and gender and ethnicity came from my background, life history and any a priori or theoretical knowledge that shaped my thinking as a developing sociologist.

Pre-reflective identities can include positional, situational and or dispositional identities related to class and status. According to Bourdieu, 1998, these identities can become buried in our consciousness as forms of knowing. For instance, culture as *habitus* or situated-identity can provide an embodied sense of belonging and make clear the structural linkage to one’s position in society. As Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992) note, pre-

reflective identities also provide schemas for practical action. Pre-reflexive identities thus tacitly inform us about how and when people identify themselves, perceive others, experience the world and interpret their predictions (Brubaker, 2004: 18, cited in Bottero 2010).

Consequently, it seemed reasonable; during my years as equity plan representative to assume that diversity in Australian universities would not suffer the hindrances that occur in more commercially based organizations (see Jackson, Faifua, Hanson, Grimmer, 2005). This assumption had much to do with the notions that universities are learning communities, and therefore institutions open to the development of collective and societal knowledge (Bianchini, Hilton-Brown & Breton, 2002). The contradiction is that women and minority groups remain under-represented at the top two academic grades in Australian universities. These grades are the associate professor (level D) and professor grades (level E), and in 2003, 32.0 % of tenured males were employed at this level, as compared to 14.5 % of tenured females (see Austen, 2004). Women and members of minorities groups, regularly report a need to perform better than others to achieve similar, and even less, recognition (White 2004, cited in Jackson, et al. 2005). Less research

work has been undertaken on the career mobilization of ethnic minorities in Australian universities.

There are a range of 'unsurprising reasons' typically given for the persistence of gender imbalances in universities: poor representation of women on key decision-making bodies; notions of merit and success in universities that are based more closely on what men do well; a likelihood that women's career paths will be interrupted by child birth and child care; possible reticence by women to apply for promotion; the tendency for women to begin careers at lower levels; lower rates of PhD completion; and the concentration of female academics in discipline areas less likely to attract funding from industry or government (Austen, 2004; Carrington and Pratt, 2003).

Much less has been made explicit about the powerful normative, dispositional and tacit assumptions underplaying gender inequality. According to Pocock (2000) and Pollert (1996), assumptions of 'gender-specificity' or the over-focus on female gender underplays the dynamic nature of gendered relations between women and men. This leads Pocock (2000), a leading academic on gendered relations in Australia, to argue we need to be careful of the pitfalls of inaccurately reading of

gender as pertaining only to women. More generally, feminist analyses demonstrate how leadership roles are normatively biased towards Anglo-Saxon males (Hyman 2001), how power tends to be male gendered (Acker, 1990), and how women tend to be tacitly excluded from processes of negotiation and decision-making (Creese, 1999; Colling & Dickens, 2001). Put simply, women are assumed to have gendered biological deficits; i.e. a lack of aggression and an inability to make decisions (Pocock, 1997, Härtel, 2004, Kochan et. al., 2003, Kundu 2003, Richard & Kirby 1999, Segal, 2005). The biases concerning women's abilities have lead many to support the mobilization of gender through resistance and struggle. As Pollert (1996:655) points out, "if the aim of analysis is to explain men's dominance of women, then politically, it is also to inform on the spaces in which women challenge".

While feminist views in Australia attempt to move beyond gender specificity and challenge debilitating assumptions about women, the identities of women and ethnic minorities are non-the-less still normatively, dispositional and tacitly shaped by assumptions about class and status.

Reflections On

The pre-reflective identities of class and gender were easy to adopt yet there were many times when it was difficult to reconcile my theoretical knowledge with my lived experience of equity. I found the role of equity plan representative fit my beliefs on social justice, and also my understanding of class and status and gender and ethnicity. However, I didn't see the mobilization of resistance and struggle as a solution to empowerment or desegregation. In the face of such ambiguities I sought solutions from the diversity literature on group formation and cultural cohesion and from the literature on sociological modeling on relationship ties. I also reflected on crises in my personal experiences of equity.

Ambiguities

As a sociologist, I found the diversity management literature steeped in ethnocentrism. Cultural cohesion is understood as related to race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender or other dimensions that make the group distinct or different from other groups, then it is the dimensions of belonging that makes groups culturally distinctive (Foldy, 2003), and defines their power base (Nkomo, 1992). By contrast, members of culturally diverse groups are understood to suffer miscommunication and interpersonal

conflict (Tsui, Egan, Xin, 1995). If this occurs members of culturally diverse groups are likely to become more aware of being different from the norm (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). This also means group formation and group culture may merely reinforce the status quo. Indeed, it has been pointed out that members of diverse groups are more considered likely to withdraw and communicate mostly with members of their own sub-group (Earley & Mosakowski, 2000).

From a sociological point of view, the diversity management literature focuses on group formation and cultural cohesion at the expense of class and status. Hence, Brown and Starkey (2000, cited in Foldy, 2003) argue cultural cohesion can only be achieved by individuals making them-selves vulnerable, and admitting they are dependent on others to grow and develop. This though attributes the need for change to the marginalized, as members of groups who are more powerful may consciously or unconsciously act in ways to reinforce their conversation styles, decision making processes, and social interactions (Elsass, 1997; Ridgeway, 1997; Smith-Lovin & Brody, 1898, cited in Foldy, 2003).

In search of diversity models inclusive of political interaction I turned to the literature on the sociological modeling.

The focus in this literature is relational and social, rather than individual. Moreover, the social selection mechanisms of groups assume links between individuals, groups and social structures. Hence the argument, sociological models of the interplay between individuals and social context need not only to explicate the structure of opportunities and constraints but also the psychological and cognitive processes they trigger (see Hedstrom 2005).

The sociological model advocated by Agneesen & Wittek (2008) entails three classes of mechanisms. The first selection mechanism is *interpersonal influence*. Social influence reasoning emphasizes the impact of the given social structural context on the individual actors. The second selection mechanism is *interpersonal selection*. Here individuals are conceived as choosing their interaction with colleagues based on the latter's characteristics (attitudes, beliefs, sentiments). The two key influences of *interpersonal selection* are attractiveness and homophily. Attractiveness is the degree to which others are inclined to build and maintain a personal relation with another person. Homophily concerns similarity of characteristics. According to Blau's (1977) homophily principle people who are similar to one another are more likely to interact than people who are

dissimilar. The third social selection mechanism is *intrapersonal spillover* mechanisms; i.e. an individual's attitudes and sentiments may be related to his own tendency to build ties with others.

In theory at least, this sociological modeling entails a form of social reflexivity that acknowledges individual agency, and group formation influences, in the context of social structure. The assumptions underpinning social modeling are arguably less reductionist and less ethnocentric than those in the diversity literature on cultural cohesion. However, the difficulty I encountered with the literature on social modeling is that is largely alien or unknown, and certainly less popularized than the diversity literature. In other words, it has no leverage in the field or in practice. These reflections led me to critically question whether in fact these two sets of literature were offering essentially different solutions or whether they offered something very similar.

While I have struggled somewhat with what I perceived to be ethnocentrism and reductionism in the diversity literature on group formation and cultural cohesion, comparing it to sociological modeling may merely be to juxtapose two very different views of organizational life. If I move away from a priori or theoretical knowledge and look for the seed of what is important I see there may be another

way forward. Perhaps, for me at least the way forward is not to get bogged down in paradigm debates, but to recognize and critically reflect on the trans-historical and communal aspirations (Benjamin, 1931) underpinning social justice. If I do that then the differences in the literatures are somewhat lessened. Moreover, I see it is possible to recast the questions we ask about the achievement of equity and social justice. Critical approaches to gender and ethnic inequality highlight the historical emergence of power inequality and social injustice. Yet the task that remains is to work out what is required of moral and just social and organizational policies to make them work, and what it would take for people to take this responsibility seriously.

Crises of Experience

In my faculty, implementation of the equity plan antagonized a number of the academic staff. It became clear to me that many of my male colleagues believed my equity work was organizational propaganda. I know this because they told me so! If I am correct, propaganda is a term sometimes used to describe the systematic spreading of a doctrine or set of ideals. It is little wonder that staff in the faculty simply deleted my equity related emails. What I found was even more

alarming was staff thought it was 'ok' to tell me these things.

Viewing the interactions of staff in my faculty from a sociological view point was often disappointing. I recall a situation where the percentages of academic staff due to complete a compulsory on line equity module were less than they ought to be. The situation didn't change until a male colleague stepped in. He initiated a game, where the males in a particular corridor competed with each other to achieve the highest grade possible (100%). The game reminded me of Goffman's 'presentation of self' (Goffman cited in Attewell, 1974), the communicative expressive mode of interaction that deals with ritualized modes of honoring selves, and expressing solidarity, etc. On the one hand, more of my male colleagues completed the module. On the other hand, the game trivialized the underlying importance of the online equity module. I believe the pre-reflexive identities of class and status, and gender and ethnicity, and masculinity and feminism played a significant role in the forms of interaction I encountered.

In the face of ambiguities and crises of experience it was difficult for me to see myself as part of any dominant group. If self is defined by group membership, and self-definition or self-categorization produces characteristically

“groupy” behavior (Hogg & Terry, 2000), my self-concept and self-categorization is not typically or usually that of the dominant group.

Reflexive Action

I now believe what is required for systemic change and social justice is for people to undergo a transformation from pre-reflexive identities based on class and gender and ethnic inequality, to reflections on self, to the normative shift where people of all kinds are one and the same and I treat them as such reflexively. This way of knowing is conscious and reflexive or automatic. The duality of my experience of the equity work in the faculty, and of being a female academic of mixed ethnicity, leaves me convinced legislation and diversity management initiatives have a limited impact. I believe this is because of the dominance of the pre-reflexive identities of class, gender and migrant inequality.

As an outsider-within I needed to build on my own pre-reflective identities. They remain a key aspect of the formation of my subject even though they do not provide a way forward. I now understand the force of pre-reflexive identities on my subjectivity, and that a priori knowledge need not preclude me from thinking and acting in new ways. I regret the loss of self and self-representation when the outsider-

within status is defined by others, rather than by me.

I agree with critics of pre-reflexive identity who see social position as a decisive aspect of experience that downplays self-representation (Scott, 2001). It has taken some time for me to see that I’ve been caught up in a reinforcement of marginal identities that downplays my belief that systemic change is possible, and also presents me as something other than me. I agree with the need to examine the formation of the subject (Butler, 1999). It’s important, given the idiosyncratic nature of individuals and because not everyone will see inequality in the same way. Some outsiders-within, but not all, will have a contextualized identity similar to mine. Some outsiders-within, but not all, would have reacted in the same way that I did.

I’ve learnt the slippage between pre-reflexivity and conscious mobilized action is indeed ambiguous and individual (See Bottero, 2010). For me, empowerment is now not about being disempowered or empowered; instead it is about accepting self, and others, and taking up ones’ place in the workplace. Similarly, desegregation for me is not about resistance and struggle. By recognizing the limits of my ‘pre-reflexive identities’, and ‘reflecting on’ the diversity literature on group formation and cultural

cohesion, the sociological modeling literature on relationship ties, as well as crises of I experienced in the role of equity plan representative, I have been able to reconcile the duality of my role when working with equity issues and my position as a female academic of mixed ethnicity.

Outsiders-within, like me, hold positions where they can implement small changes that amount to substantive change, for individuals, in the organization. In hindsight one of the better things I did for equity was to employ teaching staff; one international person of UK nationality, one disabled person of Australian nationality who conducted classes in a wheelchair, one Indian person of Australian Nationality, and another Anglo Saxon Australian person. I had reflexively constructed a team of four people, of mixed ethnicity, comprising two males and two females. I never spoke to these people about the composition of the team, or about their various backgrounds. I never differentiated between Australian and non-Australian. These people were my teaching team and I included them all in open discussions about the work of teaching. I also encouraged conversations about their career aspirations. Each of these very bright young people has gone on to good careers. One is a labor lawyer, another

works for the public service, another as a research strategist for a union, and another is undertaking postgraduate studies. In other words, for me equity had become conscious but reflexive through my actions. I no longer rely solely on the pre-reflexive identities of class, gender and ethnic inequality though they remain an important part of my knowing. Thinking and acting in this way helps to substantively change systemic biases in the system of university employment, by building and developing diverse teams.

I understand Collins' (1999) concerns when she claims organizations should aim to eliminate outsider-within positions. Yet, I argue people like me, caught between groups of unequal power, are outsiders-within who can achieve small but important substantive changes in organizations, and this I hope will lead to further systemic change.

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