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Interviewer and Interviewee Relationships Between Women

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ABSTRACT

In this research note, I readdress the discussion of relationships in women interviewing women initiated by Ann Oakley in 1981. On examining existing feminist literature on interviewing relationships, I seek to further explore the differences of power relationships between women interviewers and interviewees. Based on my own experience of interviewing peers – academic mothers in both China and the UK – I argue that both the interviewer and interviewee's perceptions of social, cultural and personal differences have an impact on the power relationship in the interview, which is not simply an issue of quality of the interview, but the dynamics between the interview pair.

KEY WORDS

academic mother / interviewee / interviewer / power relationship

Feminists in sociology initiated the discussion on the power relationship in women interviewing women in the early 1980s. Because of women's general experience of gender subordination, a 'non-hierarchical' relationship in women interviewing women has been suggested (Oakley, 1981). However, some feminists have argued that despite women's shared understandings of gender subordination, other social attributes also contribute to different power relationships in women interviewing women (Edwards, 1993; Ramazanoglu, 1989; Ribbens, 1989; Riessman, 1987). More recently, while feminists insist on the empowerment of the researched (Maynard and Purvis, 1994), it has been recognized that power dynamics in the interview are fluid, therefore the presumed dominant position of the interviewer within the hierarchical research

relationships has been questioned (Bola, 1996; Cotterill, 1992; D'Cruz 2000; Millen, 1997; Phoenix, 1994; Puwar, 1997; Reed, 2000). In this research note I shall examine some existing feminist literature on interviewing relationships, and readdress the issue of the relationship between women interviewer and interviewee by discussing my own interviewing experiences in a comparative research project on academic mothers in China and the UK. The research note demonstrates that, while power dynamics are at work in peer interview, the woman interviewer and interviewee's perceptions of each other based on differences in social, cultural and personal backgrounds have an impact on the power relationship in the interview. It argues that such differences in women interviewing women are not a matter of the quality of the interview in simple terms, but of the dynamics between the interview pair.

Feminist Debate: A Non-hierarchical Relationship in Women Interviewing Women?

When Ann Oakley first challenges the masculinity of 'proper interviews' in sociological textbooks, she argues that

> in most cases, the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship.
>
> (1981: 41)

Her own experiences of interviewing mothers make her believe that such a 'non-hierarchical' relationship can be achieved in women interviewing women:

> Where both share the same gender socialization and critical life-experiences, social distance can be minimal. Where both interviewer and interviewee share membership of the same minority group, the basis for equality may impress itself even more urgently on the interviewer's consciousness.
>
> (1981: 55)

Some feminists such as Janet Finch echoed Oakley. Through drawing on her research experiences in a study of clergy wives and a study of mothers involved in pre-school playgroups, Finch claims that women share a subordinate structural position in the society, therefore they are 'almost always enthusiastic about talking to a woman researcher' (1984: 72).

However in women interviewing women, 'gender and personal involvement may not be enough for full "knowing"' (Riessman, 1987: 189), as some feminists point out. Other social attributes, such as race and class, can influence the balance of power relationship in interview. Catherine K. Riessman's (1987) two contrasting interviews, one with an Anglo woman and another with a Hispanic woman, illustrate that 'the lack of shared experience between the middle-class, white interviewer and the working-class, Puerto Rican interviewee has created

barriers to understanding'. 'Although the interviewer is sensitive to the issue of gender roles' (1987: 183), she cannot make sense of the working-class Hispanic woman's narrative which contrasts sharply with a middle-class Anglo woman's discourse. Consequently 'the interview fell short' (1987: 173). Caroline Ramazanoglu (1989) discussed her 1960s research on shift-working women in a paper. The shiftworkers were aware that the woman interviewer's life and middle class experiences were different from theirs. As a result, the questions, 'particularly those on childcare and domestic arrangements, were treated as hostile' in the interviews (1989: 430). According to Ramazanoglu, on the other hand, the women's defensive attitudes to questioning, expressed their resistance to 'an unequal' interview situation in which the middle-class interviewer had control. Rosalind Edwards found in a research study of mature mother-students from different races and classes that 'white middle-class women were willing to discuss "private" family matters with me without me having to place myself', while 'the black women I interviewed were not always at ease discussing their family relationships with me' (1993: 189). She points out that, if

> . . . we accept that there are structurally based divisions between women on the basis of race and/or class that may lead them to have some different interests and priorities, then what has been said about woman-to-woman interviewing may not apply in all situations.
>
> (1993: 184)

In addition to the issues of race and class, 'much of what is said about gender can equally apply wherever the researcher has different ascribed social characteristics from the people being researched' (Ribbens, 1989: 579). In other words, the wider social dimensions of power within the interview must be recognized. In discussing her experiences in interviewing mothers, Jane Ribbens suggests explicitly that particular social characteristics, such as the interviewer's educational and professional status, status as a mother, age of children, etc. 'imply different cultural backgrounds as well as a different power relationship within the interview itself' (1989: 581). She argues that '[u]ltimately, research interviews may inescapably involve power imbalances, stemming from public domains' (1989: 580), therefore the researcher will inevitably have some power over the research process.

However, on the other hand, feminists 'have rejected the inevitability of such a power hierarchy between researcher and researched', in which the researched are regarded 'as the passive givers of information, with the researcher acting as a sponge soaking up the details provided' (Maynard, 1994: 15), while at the same time they are clearly aware that 'it is not always so easy to reduce the power dynamics that are likely to be present in research and it is unlikely that they can ever be eradicated completely' (1994: 16). Ann Oakley also acknowledges feminist methodological problems 'in relation both to the validity of truth-claims and conflict with feminist values', for example, 'methods such as interviewing do not necessarily rid the research situation of hierarchy' (1998: 713–14). Although she insists that 'where non-hierarchical

relationships between researcher and researched exist, the resulting data are intrinsically *more valid*' (1998: 711, emphasis in original). One way of dealing with such a dilemma is associated with empowerment of the researched in feminist research (Maynard, 1994).

Yet this raises some questions. For example, what is the nature of empowerment? In discussing ways of empowering a participant in the interview, such as through their contribution to the description and analysis of a social issue, through their reflection on, and re-evaluation of, their experience as part of the process of being interviewed to achieve a therapeutic effect, etc., Anne Opie is critical of positioning women in the research process as being guided to consciousness while the researcher 'is consistently privileged, particularly through her location in a more ideologically correct position' (1992: 66). Thus her critique poses an important question: Is this empowerment of the researched or empowerment of what the researcher wants?

Another issue raised is to what extent the strategies of empowering the researched 'can create new kinds of power relationships which have new kinds of detrimental effects' in the research (Bowes, 1996: 15). Alison Bowes describes how in an action-research project conducted with south-Asian women in Glasgow, the researchers' notion of the oppressed, thereby silenced position of south-Asian women in Britain has been challenged. Because those women 'were not structurally oppressed into silence, but were completely competent and capable of speaking, presenting their views of the world and acting upon them', the white, middle-class researchers 'were challenged, disrupted and silenced, and got somewhere near a partnership with the women' they worked with. Such experience draws attention to 'the need to be conscious of, and examine the process of, power negotiation' in research (1996: 15–16).

In fact many feminists have commented on the fluid power dynamics in the research interview, which questions the interviewer's assumed superior position. One argument is focused on the impact of individual differences in interviews. Pamela Cotterill notices in her interviews with women in the mother-in-law group, who were older and occupied different class and status positions that she did not share, 'the balance of power is not fixed and may vary according to how particular respondents are recruited into the study and the age and status of the women being interviewed' (1992: 599). 'No two interviews are the same', she concludes. 'Forms of interaction between the researcher and researched are highly individual, and it is impossible to predict levels of co-operation' (1992: 600). Manjit Bola experienced a sense of powerlessness, which was one of the major impacts of difference in her research on white women's experience of pregnancy. As an Asian black with vitiligo and having no experience of pregnancy, she was disempowered in the early stages of the research process, leaving her feeling 'self-conscious about my suitability as an interviewer based on people's perception of my difference'. She realises that the researcher's similarity between self and respondents, like Oakley's, 'was based not only on gender but also on past experience' and that 'the possible lines of perceptual difference between the interviewer and interviewees and the relative power in the

interview situation is more complex and thought-provoking' (1996: 127). Another black researcher, Ann Phoenix, agrees it is true that when a black woman interviews white respondents, the traditional power relation in the interview is inverted. However, her own interview experiences in two studies on mothers under 20 years of age and social identities in young people suggest that the power relations in the interview entailed in race and gender positions do not exist 'in any unitary or essential way' (1994: 49). The aspects of the interviewer, 'the simultaneity of "race", social class, gender, (assumed) sexuality and age', she emphasizes, have an impact on the interviewee or on the power dynamics between interviewer and interviewee (1994: 56).

Another argument stresses the shifting differences in the existing research hierarchy. Unlike the cases of Bola and Phoenix, Katherine Reed is a white researcher involved in a research project on the health beliefs and behaviours of south-Asian mothers. Similarly she discovers that 'the differences between respondents and myself within the interview were continually shifting and were rarely equal', and 'the existing research hierarchy is always in process, moving from the researcher being dominant at particular times and respondents being dominant at others' (2000: 11). For example, there are times when the white interviewer is perceived to be 'medical expert' while at other times she is led to new spaces in being offered advice on alternative, non-Western medicine and remedies. Such subversion of the power relations, according to Reed, reinforces 'the contextual location of knowledge and the production of knowledge through dialogue which makes room for a plurality of voices' (2000: 11). Heather D'Cruz feels the same as Reed in her reflection on her doctoral research: 'While I was apparently "more powerful [as] researcher" (as I was asking questions), the informants could disrupt this identity by overtly or covertly subverting it and asserting their own knowledge/power in different ways' (2000: 10). She notices that the identities of the 'knowledgeable researcher' and 'knowledgeable informants' are fluid, thus the interview is complex and shifting micropractices of knowledge/power between the researcher and informants.

Moreover, feminists emphasize the multilayered and dynamic nature of power in research interviews. There remains a problem in using the concepts of empowerment and equality, especially when researching women of higher status than the researcher, or women who are not sympathetic to the aims of conducting feminist research, as pointed out by D. Millen. In her research on women scientists Millen finds that the respondents may outrank the researcher 'in terms of social indicators such as income, education and power within hierarchical occupations', 'but in academic, intellectual terms, some felt less powerful' (1997: 6). She argues that 'empowerment is also situational and fractured: some women do have access to some social power and privilege through their ethnicity, their economic position, or their sexuality' (1997: 3). N. Puwar's reflections on interviewing women MPs further reinforces the argument that power relations in women interviewing women are fluid with the balance sometimes weighted on the interviewees. Based on her experiences in gaining access

to women MPs and in managing time, location and unexpected company for the interviews, Puwar writes:

> Where researchers come from outside the higher circles of power and are interested in people's experiences of being MPs, then one has to rely on interviews granted under conditions over which one has little control.
>
> (1997: 4)

Within this reversed power relationship, experiences other than gender, class and race can be used for creating rapport in the interview. However, she points out explicitly that 'the sharing of a gender or some other experience' as a resource to facilitate closeness and rapport between the interviewer and interviewee 'is dependent upon both of them wanting to associate with each other' (1997: 9). This argument implies that the power relations in the interview process are affected by the dynamics between the interview pair.

So far feminists have expressed concerns over the fluid power relationships in women interviewing women, as discussed previously. They have questioned the presumed dominant position of the researcher in the interview process of both researching 'down' and 'up'. However, the power relationship in peer interviews seems to remain almost untouched in feminist literature. While the differences between the interview pair in terms of class, race, age, professional experience, social status, etc. are mainly discussed from the perceptions of the interviewee (Bola, 1996; Cotterill, 1992; Millen, 1997; Phoenix, 1994; Puwar, 1997), the interviewer's perception of the researched as a result of differences in social, cultural and personal backgrounds has rarely been emphasized as an important factor in the power dynamics (although Hollway and Jefferson (2000) and Walkerdine (1997), have discussed the researcher's feelings and intersubjectivity in the interview relationship). In the following part of the research note, I shall discuss my research experiences in interviewing peers, which also problematize the idea of 'non-hierarchical relationship', in the light of the interviewee as well as interviewer's perceptions of differences in women interviewing women.

Power Relations At Work: Perceptions of Both the Interviewer and Interviewee

My research project is a comparative study on academic mothers in China and the UK. All the 93 interviews were conducted in 1998 in Yangzhou and Beijing, China and Aberdeen and London, the UK. Unlike those feminist interviewers in researching either 'down' or 'up' in the previous discussion, I would seem to be in a relatively equal status with my interviewees, who are all mothers working in academic institutions, as I am also an academic mother. The aim of my research is to articulate the courage, efforts, dilemmas and successes of academic mothers in combining motherhood and an academic career. Naturally I took it for granted from the beginning to be an insider, a 'one of them' in the

interview, and this is typically a reflexive approach characteristic of feminist research (Charles, 1996; Maynard, 1994).

In discussing the interview relationship between the interviewer and her peers Jennifer Platt provides a definition of a peer:

> One's peers have a variety of relevant characteristics: they are in a diffuse sense one's social equals, they are one's equals in role-specific senses, they share the same background knowledge and subcultural understandings, and they are members of the same groups or communities. Some of these characteristics may, of course, occur without others, and the consequences vary accordingly.
>
> (1981: 76)

From this perspective, the academic mothers I interviewed in China and the UK are my peers. On the one hand, I was a university lecturer in China and some of my interviewees are my former colleagues in the same university. Thereby we shared the familiarity of 'group memberships', 'background knowledge' and 'understanding'. On the other hand, in the UK I was a doctoral student involved in academic teaching and research. Some of my interviewees are my peers 'in role-specific senses'. However, this seemingly equal social status, in addition to my 'insider' status was countered with the social, cultural and personal differences between my peer interviewees and myself – while some academic mothers are my colleagues or peers, some are from academic disciplines other than social sciences; while some are from institutions in China, some are from the UK; while some speak Chinese, some speak English. These differences greatly affected the interview relationships.

First, the differences embedded in 'the power structures within academia itself' (Ribbens, 1989) as perceived by both the interviewer and interviewee cast shadows on the ideal 'non-hierarchical relationship' in interviewing peers. In China, to be a professor, associate professor, or lecturer does not make a great difference to one's social status; they are all university teachers. But to have a PhD would be privileged and admired in academia since opportunities of studying for a PhD are very limited. Thus in interviewing my Chinese peers, I was often regarded as superior, especially in Yangzhou University where there had been so far no PhD holders among the female academic staff until the year that I conducted the interviews. In several interview situations when I asked the question, 'Do you think that you are a successful woman in your academic career?' My interviewees answered immediately, 'Oh, yes'. But they added quickly, 'Of course not that successful when compared with you, a PhD'.

When I was not perceived as their equal but at a higher level in the academic structure, the social distance between us had been widened. Sometimes I did not know how to respond to such a comment, especially when the interviewee suddenly stopped there and seemed not to be going to reveal more about her sense of success. I was not sure whether it was a compliment, or simply a joke, or even a complaint that they could not have such an opportunity to do a higher degree like myself. Under such circumstances, the interview atmosphere would become tense and I had to be cautious in the sequence of questions

asked, for if I continued the questions on their achievement and success in academic work, they might be too modest to talk about themselves. Inevitably this uncomfortable feeling of unequal academic status existed to some extent in the process of the interview.

On the contrary, there is no limitation in the enrolment of PhD students in British academic institutions and to do a PhD in the UK is not as difficult as it is in China. Therefore PhD students in the UK have no such high status, although they are involved in academic research and sometimes teaching as well in universities. The social status in academia is assessed by one's academic positions, such as professor, reader, senior lecturer, lecturer, etc. A researcher's position may also be weakened if they cannot legitimate what they are doing by saying it is government funded etc., such as my own doctoral project, which is for personal scholarship. Within this power structure, when interviewing my peers in the UK, as a PhD student I was often conscious of the relatively inferior status to my interviewees who are full-time academic staff. On several occasions, I was asked to wait outside the office of my interviewee until she completed the tasks at hand, although it was the time for the interview appointment. Sometimes I was also required to restrict the interview to one hour before it started. Consequently the interview would very likely begin with direct questions and answers. This was similar to what is said about elite interviews in which 'the researcher is questioning wealthy or upper-class people, or those in high positions regardless of their economic status', 'elites often limit the length of the interview, because their time is too valuable to spend in long discussions' (Rubin and Rubin, 1995: 113). In this sense the peer interview looked more like an elite interview and I, as interviewer, could not help feeling as though I was not being regarded as an academic mother of equal social status.

However, with the interview going on, such perception of the unequal power relationship would change to an unexpected direction. In one interview with a professor in London, as I was about to explain my research project, she said, 'I can only give you one hour. So just ask what you want to know'. I had to begin my questions in a rather formal way. But just as we started, the telephone rang. She picked it up and said, 'I've got someone with me now. Please ring back in an hour'. She put down the phone and pulled off the telephone line. Then she turned back, smiling, 'we can talk now'. Perceiving her seriousness with my interview, I felt that I could understand a female professor's tight timetable in juggling her academic work and family. Such understanding actually made me relaxed in the interview relationship so that I could follow my interview guide to ask questions as I wished.

Secondly, the variety of personal backgrounds and academic disciplines resulted in the fluid power dynamics in interviewing peers. Cotterill (1992) notices in her research the differences between interviewing older women and younger women. In my research on academic mothers, an interviewee's age is often closely associated with her academic position. Therefore in interviewing mothers of senior age groups, they seemed to have more stories to tell because they have longer experience of being a mother and an academic. Such situations

often turned out to be paradoxical, for on the one hand I wanted to stick to my interview task of data collecting, and on the other hand I felt the distance between my interviewees and myself was narrowing as they talked more and more about themselves. For example, on several occasions while interviewing senior Chinese mothers who had experienced the Cultural Revolution, I was so moved by their personal stories that I did not interrupt them and would 'fail to question' (Bourdieu, 1996) until they stopped themselves. In one interview with a senior British mother, she kept talking about her work for most of the time. When I finally found a chance to ask about her experience of motherhood, she simply said, 'Oh, that was quite long ago and my children are adults themselves now'. Thus my interviewees were weighted in the power relationship of the interview.

Compared with mothers of senior age groups, mothers of junior age groups both in China and the UK tended to give short answers more often. For example, in answering the question, 'Could you outline your academic career up to the present?', they would not elaborate the answer. One Chinese mother in the youngest age group of 25–34 just told me when she graduated and began to work in university and when she was promoted to lecturer. Coincidentally, a young British mother also answered this question in a couple of sentences which provided simple information regarding when she started her first university job, when she did postdoctoral work and then attained the post of lecturer. Such simple, short answers would enable me to control the interview situations more easily and to find the data I wanted. However, a short answer, 'I don't know', to an attitude question such as 'Some people would face a dilemma in combining academic careers and motherhood. What is your feeling about this?', would obviously constitute a hurdle in continuing questions on hard choices or conflicts. Therefore, when some younger mothers were reluctant to elaborate their answers to attitude questions, the balance of power shifted in the interview.

The power dynamics also played out in interviewing mothers from different academic disciplines. When interviewing some mothers from science backgrounds, my impression was that their account of juggling academic work and family would be given in a straightforward and general way. For example, in an interview with a mother from a chemistry department, I asked the question, 'Do you feel pressures in your work?' She answered, 'Yes'. Then I asked, 'What are they?' She said, 'Er . . . pressures in teaching, in research, in promotion'. I expected her to give some examples or to tell me about her feelings at particular times. But she just stopped and waited for my next question instead.

There was a tendency in some mothers from science backgrounds to answer 'yes' or 'no' to most of my general questions. On a couple of occasions, they even answered about 40 questions on their work and family background in less than 20 minutes. I would seem to be weighted in the power balance when they remained passive in answering questions. However, when they appeared unlikely to make any further comments on some important issues in combining

academic work and family responsibilities, I would feel that such power balance had been reversed, as in the following conversation:

Q: Do you think that society makes it easy or difficult for academic mothers to develop their career?
A: It's not to do with society, but with the management of [the] university.

When interviewing academic mothers from social science disciplines, as interviewer I was 'in a relatively powerless position' (Hockey, 1993: 218) vis-a-vis my interviewees. One typical example was in an interview with a mother from a history background. I first briefly explained my research, then I asked her to say something about her intertwined work and family history. However, she started with women's social status in the past and present from a historical perspective. After a while, I tried to pull her back by asking about her own experience in her academic work, 'Do you enjoy your present work?' So she began to tell about her research which resulted in her visit to Japan. Soon she turned to compare academic women in China and in Japan, which was really interesting. But what I wanted to know was her personal stories and this had not been achieved until I squeezed in the questions, 'Will your son be home soon? Which school is he in?' I was certain that questions about her son would definitely draw the conversation back on track because I knew that Chinese academic mothers, especially with one child, would be ready to talk about their child with me. This familiarity with the Chinese context actually helped me in balancing the power relationship between the interviewee and myself.

Mothers from social sciences also appeared more interested in my research project. Sometimes the interviewees kept asking about my research before I asked questions about themselves. In a couple of interviews, I spent nearly half of my interview time in answering their questions on my research and they also recommended some of their own publications and other books which they thought useful in my research. Consequently the interview became a tutorial and my own role as a researcher was changed into a learner. The reason why I lost control of the interview for a while was related to the perceptions of the interview pair with each other as well. Those mothers from social science backgrounds usually are concerned with recent studies related to their own fields. And they seemed to be pleased to offer help to a PhD student, whereas I regarded them as experienced and knowledgeable, willing to have their comments and suggestions on my research project. Such a situation is described by Pierre Bourdieu:

> by objectifying the respondent [the interviewer] is also objectifying herself, as is attested by the adjustments she introduces into certain of her questions, moving from the objectivizing 'you' to 'one', which refers to an impersonal collective, and on then to 'we', in which she clearly states that she herself is involved in the objectification.
>
> (Fowler, 1996: 21)

In addition, cultural differences reinforced the power relationship between the interviewer and interviewee. In discussing the interview as being 'an unnatural situation', Lynda Measor suggests that 'it goes against a cultural value, which we hold strongly – one about not talking too much about oneself' (1985: 67). This might partly explain why some British mothers preferred to answer questions about work and family history generally and chronologically, whereas many Chinese mothers, who have adopted a different cultural value of not regarding one's life stories as most confidential, were open to give detailed stories about their lives. As a result, in interviewing British mothers very often I had to ask all the questions successively and this made the interviews look more like formal encounters, while in interviewing Chinese mothers, their answers to one question may include answers to the next few questions, as in the following answer given to the question, 'did you have your first child before or after your first academic job?':

> Er . . . I had my child when I was 29, that had been six years after I started teaching in the university. I didn't want to have a child in the first few years. Not until I was promoted to the post of lecturer, my husband and I didn't plan to have a child.

This not only answered the question I asked but also some questions I intended to ask, such as 'did you plan to have children at a certain time? Why?', and 'how old were you when your first child was born?' Such interview situations looked more conversational, although the order of my questions had to be rearranged in the process.

Cultural differences are also reflected in mothers' understanding of the word 'interview'. In the UK, 'interview' in social sciences refers to one of survey methods used to obtain data through questioning. The interviewer plays the role of asking questions whereas interviewees perform the role of answering questions. This assumption can also suggest to some extent that in my interviews in Aberdeen and London, often my interviewees remained passive, answering no more than the questions asked, although I explained the anonymity and confidentiality of the research, sometimes repeatedly, before asking questions. Therefore the interview contact would become a 'business' rather than 'social' affair.

In China, 'interview' is a popular word. Usually when people have achieved something in a certain field, they would be interviewed by journalists, radio or TV programs and so forth. Some of my friends who linked me and my interviewees, would say, when introducing me to the interviewees, that it was because she was a famous female professor, or she was so well known in the city, or so successful in her field that I would like to write about them in my thesis. Consequently these interviewees felt pleased to be interviewed. They tried to let me know as much as possible how they overcame the difficulties and came to their present positions. In one interview situation which lasted over lunch, the interviewee was over 50 and was one of those intellectuals whose career had been interrupted by the Cultural Revolution. She repeated several times that it was unimaginable to continue her scientific research after that

period of nightmare; she felt that she had so much to tell me about how she was separated from her children during the Cultural Revolution, and how she found the time to catch up with the developments in her research area when returning to academia. The person who recommended this interviewee to me, at first was 'modest' enough to think herself 'not worth of being interviewed', in her own words. However, she was moved too by the interviewee's stories and reminded of her own past. Thus she joined in the conversation during lunch and became another interviewee of mine that day. In a sense, such interviewees played an active role in the interview while, as interviewer, I remained passive in listening and taking notes.

The power dynamics embedded in cultural differences made me think further about my own cultural assumptions. Is it because my expectations were too high, particularly when I wanted detailed personal stories from women whom I hardly knew; as one of my interviewees pointed out that I would feel an interview with a British mother tended to be more professional and more formal? Or is it because I placed myself in ready openness to the familiar cultural context that I would feel an interview with a Chinese mother could be more conversational and more social? Nevertheless, I never asked a British mother if I could visit her in her home when making an appointment for the interview. This was partly related to the more anonymized and impersonal route in gaining access to the British sample. I distributed questionnaires to some academic institutions through e-mail to find out who were mothers and who would be willing to be interviewed. But I gained access to the Chinese sample mainly through a snowball effect. So I usually asked Chinese mothers for their preferences of being interviewed in their homes or in offices. These differences had kept me at a certain distance with my interviewees from a different cultural background. It is true that 'unless you can recognize the legitimacy of someone else's views, you will have a hard time communicating across cultural boundaries' (Rubin and Rubin, 1995: 21).

Another form of power which cannot be ignored in interviewing women is also an 'interpersonal situation' (Milwertz, 1997: 218), that is, linguistic domination (Bourdieu, 1996). Bourdieu discusses some of the elements in facilitating a relationship of enquiry, such as 'the level of language used and the appropriate (verbal or non-verbal) signs to encourage the collaboration of the individuals interviewed' (1996: 19). This linguistic domination and subordination was displayed in my peer interviews, as I used both Chinese and English in the interviews alternatively.

In interviewing Chinese mothers, I used my first language, Chinese. Therefore on my part, 'the level of language used' 'can be consciously or unconsciously controlled in the *interaction*' (Bourdieu, 1996: 19, emphasis in the original). However in interviewing British mothers I used English. Since I am not a native speaker of English, I appeared sometimes in a position of linguistic subordination in the process of interviews. The first example was that when my interviewees spoke very fast, I could not easily follow them. As a result, there

would be a pause before another question was asked, which always made me feel uneasy, as my interviewee was waiting for me to continue the interview.

In another instance, the interviewee would express disagreement with my choice of words used in questions. In one interview with a mother from a social science background, when I asked the question 'do you think your attachment to your daughter is weakened when you have commitments to your academic work?', she said:

> What do you mean by 'attachment'? . . . I think I'm definitely a lot more comfortable in talking about my relationship with my daughter. I'm very sceptical about talking about 'attachment' because of the political load that word has carried for the last two and three decades.

This made me aware of the difference of using the two words in the question: while 'attachment' sounded emotional and politically disputable, 'relationship' seemed more professional and generally acceptable. In interviewing another mother from a social science discipline, I asked, 'How long do you usually spend on academic work a day?' She asked me in return, 'Do you mean how many hours I spend on my work every day?'. Here, 'how many hours' makes it more explicit than 'how long' in the question. In spite of the fact that I used 'how many hours' to replace 'how long' in the question in later interviews, I sensed an element of British cultural superiority over the foreigner. However, on the other hand, 'Cultural assumptions are embedded in the language that people use' (Rubin and Rubin, 1995: 20). My choice of words in asking questions and my interviewees' replacement of other words in answering questions may be associated with different subjective perceptions of the same issue, as in the example of the replacement of 'attachment' by 'relationship'. In such encounters, I was turned into a learner unconsciously and 'the level of language used' (Bourdieu, 1996) was not controlled consciously due to the fact that I am a Chinese, not a native English speaker.

Achieving the Goal of the Interview: Dynamics Between the Interview Pair

Although the 'non-hierarchical relationship' between women interviewer and interviewees did not exist in my peer interviewing, as discussed above, nevertheless 'the goal of finding out about people through interviewing' (Oakley, 1981) was achieved. This was because the power dynamics, hence the differences in interview, are not a simple matter in relation to the quality of interview. They exist in the interview process as a consequence of the dynamics between the interview pair. In spite of the power dynamics between my peer interviewees and myself, I conducted the interviews successfully by adopting some strategies.

The first strategy was to make known my research to the interviewees. Since we are all academic mothers, it is very likely that we share interests in

certain topics, such as motherhood, childcare, academic promotion, institutional structure, gender discrimination, etc. I usually gave a brief introduction to the aim, research questions and the areas covered at the beginning of the interview so as to provide interviewees with a general framework for my research. Over 95 percent of all my interviewees, both in China and the UK, expressed interest in this research and over 90 percent asked me to give them feedback when the findings are available. Sometimes when I felt obstacles in getting the information I wanted; for example, when a couple of junior lecturers from science disciplines gave very short and simple answers, I would explain why I needed such information in detail. This helped to win cooperation from the interviewees, for usually they too wanted 'to make themselves heard, to transfer their experience from the private to the public sphere' (Bourdieu, 1996: 24), as in the following interview situation:

Q: Have you ever had a particularly successful feeling of being an academic mother?
A: I don't know.
Q: I mean, any particular moments that you feel so good of being a mother and at the same time an academic? In my research, a mother told me that one day, three weeks after she gave birth to her second child, her colleague came with a copy of the book they co-wrote which just arrived. The mother felt so wonderful to have a baby in her arms and a book published at the same time. Such a story certainly expresses a sort of special sense of achievement of academic mothers.
A: Oh, I was once at a conference and I was having to answer questions on a paper, holding Elizabeth in my arms. I can remember that because I did that! She was tiny. A bit of fuss, really . . . We were part of a group in the university working together on one thing. Somebody gave the presentation. She was asleep in her pushchair out far in the conference room. Then all the people involved had to go to the front to be questioned from the floor. So I was in the front and when people asked me questions she started to cry out. People could hear her and eventually they said, 'get your baby, get your baby!' So I had to go and get her then go back to the platform in the front and hold her while I carried through answering the questions. That was funny, and people remembered me, 'Oh she is the one with a baby at the conference.'

In tackling 'linguistic domination' (Bourdieu, 1996), I also tried to equalize myself by making explicit the bilingual nature of the research. This would in return arouse the interest of academic mothers of one country in their counterparts in another country, thereby bridging the gap within the linguistic domain in the process of the interview. For example, when I asked the question 'what are your expectations of your children?' one mother said, 'Expectations of my children? I don't think that's my right'. I explained to her why I asked this question, because many Chinese academic mothers did have expectations of their children, especially when they had only one child, due to what had happened to themselves in the Cultural Revolution 20–30 years ago. 'Then what sort of expectations do they have of their children?', she asked me in return. I told her

that, because some mothers were prevented from going to university in the Cultural Revolution, they would expect their children to do well in school in order to go to a good university in the future, and that they would expect them to enter university immediately after completing senior middle school. 'I don't have any such expectations,' she said, 'I'd like my children to be happy, to be able to be in good relationships with people, to do work which is fulfilling for them'. In this way, she not only understood why I asked this question of expectations, but actually answered the question from a different perspective, which again revealed the social and cultural differences between mothers from the Chinese and British contexts.

Another strategy I adopted to balance the power relationship was to make use of personal connections in gaining the access. The interviewees in China were recommended by my friends, former colleagues or relatives and they usually let me know the general background of the interviewees as well as telling them about me. When I met my interviewee, we would not feel so distant. Especially when the introducer was a mutual friend, we would feel familiar and close to each other soon after we talked about the introducer, although such a situation may place the interviewee under an obligation to the introducer to cooperate. However, even in this sort of friendly and close relationship, either I as interviewer or the interviewee would become vulnerable at times. In one interview, the interviewee was telling me about her feeling for her husband's family who did not help her in childcare. Suddenly she asked me not to mention anything about it to the introducer, 'you know he and my husband are very good friends', she said, looking at me. I was just aware of the gap between us. Because I was a stranger to her and her family, she felt safe to talk about her private life to me. But because I was the introducer's friend, she was not so confident in what she was saying. My identities are thus fluid along with the dynamics between us.

In my interviews in the UK, a few friends and colleagues also offered to recommend some interviewees with whom they had close contact. When I interviewed mothers sampled from such a source, I felt that they were usually friendly and cooperative, although the introducer would not tell as much about me to my interviewee, nor about them to me as the Chinese introducers did. One impressive situation was in an interview in London. When a mother whom I interviewed learned that I had not got a big enough sample in London, she helped me to contact one of her colleagues at once. She rang her office and asked her colleague, 'Do you have time for an interview on academic mothers? It's a very interesting PhD project on mothers in British and Chinese universities. I've just done it'. Her colleague agreed to be interviewed, and I felt so grateful to her and her introducer; both of us seemed to be placed in a relaxed atmosphere. Such an interactive approach may 'give interviewees greater power' (Rhodes, 1994: 555), but it certainly helped to facilitate a kind of friendly relationship between the interviewer and interviewee.

Finally, the place of interview can influence the power dynamics between the interviewer and interviewee, as some feminists noticed (Finch, 1984; McKee

and O'Brien, 1983; Rhodes, 1994). As early as my pilot interviews in the UK, I discovered that interviewing an academic mother in her office would be different from interviewing her in her home. In one pilot interview with a mother in her office, we were interrupted by three telephone calls and two knocks on the door within an hour. I was unable to do anything about this since she is in a senior position and usually very busy during office hours. Both of us felt it a pity that an hour had passed so fast and we had not completed the interview. So she invited me to continue the interview in her home one weekend. When I arrived, she was in her leisure clothes and first introduced her family to me, then showed me around her garden. I soon felt that the distance between us had been narrowed and at tea we began to talk freely with each other. When we continued the interview after tea, both of us felt relaxed and intimate, and the conversation lasted for over an hour, although it needed only half an hour to complete the interview.

This experience made me aware of the advantages of conducting interviews in the home of the interviewees. Therefore, the strategy I used was to arrange interviews in their homes as much as possible. Again the agreement over the place of the interview illustrated the social and cultural differences. In China, over two-thirds of interviews were conducted in the home of the interviewee whereas in the UK, all the interviews, except the pilot one I discussed previously, were done in the office. This is partly because university lecturers in China usually do not have an office of their own, and they do not necessarily have fixed office hours in the university when they have no commitments to teaching. On the contrary, lecturers in institutions in the UK often have their own offices. They prepare lectures and conduct research more in their office than at home, therefore it would be convenient to arrange a meeting with someone in the office.

Another difference, as I perceive, is that British lecturers mostly regard the evenings and weekends as family time and they were unlikely to be willing to spare such time for an interview with a stranger. For example, when I made appointments for interviews, some mothers would restrict their availability. However, Chinese lecturers do academic work at home most of the time and they would not consider a home interview as an intrusion on their family life. Consequently, the interviews with Chinese mothers in their homes, often amidst children and housework, were usually much lengthier, from two to three hours, as compared with interviews conducted in their offices, which lasted no more than two hours. The lengthier the encounter, the more friendly and less unequal relationship existed in the dynamics between the interview pair.

Conclusion

In spite of the affinities that women share as fellow members of a community created by gender subordination, there are different forms of power relationship in relation to social, cultural and personal differences in women

interviewing women. In my peer interviews, the 'non-hierarchical relationship' (Oakley, 1981) does not seem to exist due to the structural inequalities in academia, the variety of personal backgrounds and academic disciplines, cultural differences and 'linguistic domination' (Bourdieu, 1996), on the part of native language speakers as perceived by both the interviewer and interviewees. However, I have achieved the goal of the interviews by adopting some strategies such as explaining explicitly my research to the interviewees, making use of personal contacts and arranging interviews to take place in the home of the interviewees, so as to create a relaxed and friendly interview atmosphere.

My interview practice has illustrated that the power relationship is very complicated not only in researching 'down' or 'up', but also in interviewing peers. 'Power relations around sex and gender never operate in isolation' (Griffin, 1996: 199). The interviewee as well as interviewer's perceptions of social, cultural and personal differences have an important impact on the power dynamics in the interview. In whatever way the power relationship plays out in an interview, it is not simply an issue concerning the goal of the interview but also of the dynamics between the interview pair, because interview is a social encounter (Ribbens, 1989), interpersonal situation (Milwertz, 1997) and interactive process (Edwards, 1993).

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