Insider or outsider? Issues of power and habitus during life history interviews with menopausal Iranian women

Elham Amini

Introduction

This chapter explores issues concerning the sexuality of Iranian Muslim menopausal women, but focuses on how power was negotiated between me, as an interviewer, and the interviewees throughout the life history interviews I conducted with them. As an Iranian woman conducting interviews with Iranian Muslim menopausal women who practise the Shia Islam faith, I found, in addition to my biography and personal characteristics (such as gender, race, and sexual orientation), what Bourdieu calls the *habitus* (how I spoke, sat and what I wore) had a significant influence in how I negotiated my status with participants. Thus, I argue for the need to go beyond a focus on intersectional categories per se, and to look at the broader social landscape of power and its process. I do this by employing a Bourdieusian perspective, which considers the symbolic and cognitive elements by emphasising the social practice.

This issue of positionality speaks to debates about being an ‘insider’ or an ‘outsider’. From one perspective, since my gender, nationality, language and sexual orientation were apparently the same as the participants, I entered the research field as an insider, giving me a lived familiarity with my research participants (Griffith, 1988: 361). Yet, I found that simultaneously I was an outsider (not an actual member of the specific group under study) because of my different social status and lived experience as a doctoral student at a British (that is, Western) university. Thus, I had a different set of *capitals*, from Bourdieu’s (1984, 1990) perspective, which raises the question of my position in this biographical life history research. To understand the
effect of these on the power relationship and research process, I employ the Bourdieusian approach, as embedded in a specific time and place, rather than intersectionality theory.

I begin this chapter with a brief review of the methodology of my study and some concerns pertaining to power and reflexivity in order to explain how my biographical research approach led me to be conscious of the power relations between myself and the participants. I then clarify how my social location as a researcher affected my research about Iranian Muslim menopausal women, how I consider insider/outsider status when conducting research on the participants and the intersectional nature of these issues in the Bourdieusian conceptual framework. Following this, I outline the significance of Bourdieu’s theory of practice and apply key aspects of this to my research.

**Biographical research and methodology**

The central aim of my research was to understand the process by which individual menopausal women’s sexual biographies are shaped by cultural, social and religious (Shia Islam) structures, and the ways that women’s individual agency responds, in turn, to these social structures. I employed a biographical approach, which aims to enable participants to narrate their own stories from their own perspectives.

The biographical approach provides a reflexive space within interviews for the researcher to understand the women’s lived experiences, and so relate their individual biographies to their sociocultural structures (O’Neill, 2010). As such, this gave my participants a voice, to construct knowledge in their own way and provide a space for this normally silent group of women to be heard. It places the participants’ realities at its centre, focusing on their subjective interpretations and perspectives instead of identifying them as objective facts (O’Neill, 2010).

Furthermore, as the biographical research approach is based on individuals’ narrations and the meaning that they give to their everyday lives, it is very dependent on the agency of storytellers to create their unique stories by adjusting narrative types, which sociocultural structures make accessible (Frank, 1995; Plummer 1995). While biographical research is about individuals’ experiences, they live within wider sociocultural structures and their stories are narrated through an interaction with these structures, which have considerable impacts on them. Thus, an individual’s life story is not just a self-production; it is shaped by the influence of cultural, ideological and historical contexts (Denzin, 1989: 73).
In addition, biographical research can develop a space for dialogue between the researcher and participants, one that inculcates creative listening and understanding (O’Neill, 2015). The style of biographical research approach I conducted was informed by my social justice principles, emphasising non-exploitative, non-hierarchical approaches to participants; thus, exploring my relationship with the participants formed an essential part of my study.

I conducted 30 individual in-depth life history, biographical interviews. To obtain my sample, I attended religious classes in Tehran and Karaj and recruited research participants from the women who attended these classes regularly. To make initial contact, I spoke with my religious friends who attended these classes and, before attending myself, I was introduced to the teachers of the classes and obtained their permission. Indeed, to meet the women regularly, I attended all of these sessions, every week, for four months.

At the first session before the classes were started the teacher introduced me to the other women and then at the end of that session I spoke about myself and my research with the women themselves. I introduced myself as a midwife who has been continuing her studies in the sociology of health and gender. I invited them to join the research by giving me their telephone numbers, or taking mine, in order to have contact with each other and to arrange a date and a time which was suitable for them and at a location of their choice.

Each interview commenced with a brief explanation about myself and an outline of the research. Although I had an interview guide, I let the discussion flow quite freely. However, if a participant diverged from the subject quite a lot, I led the discussion back to the research by asking a question from the interview guide. Hence the interviews were semi-structured and in-depth, which gave the participants significant power to control the process (Corbin and Morse, 2003: 335). The length of the interviews ranged from one to two hours.

**Researcher’s social status: reflexivity and power, Bourdieusian perspective and intersectionality**

Given the importance of understanding my role as a researcher in this study, reflexivity is a crucial issue. Reflexivity is a way to engage with the mutual effects of the researcher (her values, behaviours, and even gender) on the research process and, in turn, how the research process influences the writing up of the research. It is also about the power relationship between the researcher and the participants, and the researcher’s consciousness about this interaction (Mays and Pope, 2000).
Bourdieu (1999: 607–8) highlights that although the researcher might be unconscious about how she affects participants during an interview, it is crucial to analyse the potential for these effects to minimise them. The distinction between the positivist researcher and others is between a science which does not acknowledge these effects and dreams of a perfect innocent science and the science which is aware of these effects and endeavours to explore them as much as possible, since these effects are inevitable. Bourdieu (1999: 608) clarifies that this reflexivity is ‘based on a craft, on a sociological feel or eye, allows one to perceive and monitor on the spot, as the interview is actually taking place, the effect of the social structure within which it is occurring. Similarly, O’Neill (2015) underlines that the conditions and structures in which qualitative interviews occur have considerable influence on the social interaction between researcher and the participants. As an Iranian woman, educated in a Western country, conducting my fieldwork among religious menopausal women in Iran, the issue of my position as the researcher in this biographical research is important.

All the participants were menopausal women and were more than 45 years of age at the time of interview, which means they were older than me. As such, they had a level of power and respect by virtue of their age: Iranian culture treats its elders with great respect and gives them high priority within the family; for instance, if an older person enters a room the younger people have to rise to show their respect. Thus, interviewing women who were older than me was the first challenge of my study, as they might hesitate to narrate their sexual lives for a younger person in order to protect their respected status. In addition, due to belonging to the same culture, it was very difficult for me to ask the older women very sensitive questions about their sexual relationships, since I was worried I would be regarded as a ‘rude’ person who does not heed ‘cultural values’. This made my age very crucial, both with regard to the research process and the power relations between interviewer and participants.

These issues of age cohere with religion. The participants were religious women who practised Islam and I had gained access to them through attending their religious classes, yet I am a young woman who has been educated in a western country (the UK) and lived there alone. It is possible, even likely, that participants would presume that I have been affected by ‘Western culture’ – an issue that intersects, and may be exacerbated by, my age, given the cultural suspicion with which many older Iranians view the younger generation.

It seems that intersectionality theory, which emphasises the intersection of identities, could be appropriate to address the power
relationship within the interviews, especially regarding the age differences. However, in the particular context in which the power is embedded, the social practices of people may be different from the ways in which they have been categorised (Anthias, 2013). The key point here is the way that the categories of intersectionality appear within the interviews as a social practice. I explain later how it can be different, notably when, from the Bourdieusian perspective, it is related to symbolic representations or symbolic capital. Thus the complexity arises when I refer to other dimensions of power relations such as capitals and habitus.

Additionally, intersectional categories are not fixed and unchangeable. Rather, they are emergent through the interactions among the researcher and interviewees. They are shaped through these interactions in a social practice (the interview) and as a part of the exercise of power within the interviews and in relation to capitals and habitus that are brought to bear on them. Hence, interviews need to be viewed as socially located, bodily practices in which embodied agents mediate and negotiate power. In other words, the interviews, as social practices, are shaped through the interplay between the researcher’s and interviewees’ experiences, shared knowledge and their sociocultural structures (in this case Iranian Muslim Shia).

In this way, by employing a Bourdieusian perspective, I go beyond intersectionality theory, and address the ‘doing’ of practice itself and its fundamental outcomes, through meaning-making and mediating power. The use of Bourdieu’s practice theory, by conceptualising capitals and habitus, can develop individual categories to include cognitive diversity in such a way as to acknowledge the capitals in producing power relation in specific times and places. Habitus can also point out the engagement of the actors (the researcher and interviewees) with structure through practice (interviews). Therefore, I argue that Bourdieu’s (1990) theory of practice is an important theoretical framework as it can clarify the interrelation between embodied agents and society in a particular social practice (the interviews) and explores the interview as both a social practice and an aspect of interaction.

**Applying Bourdieu’s practice theory**

By drawing on Bourdieu’s practice theory, I aim to explain the process that shaped the data collection according to my position in this biographical research within the Iranian Muslim sociocultural structure. Key defining features of this theoretical framework (capitals, field and
habitus), including its explicit attention to power, are illustrated to explore the ways in which this approach can inform a more nuanced understanding of power relation within the interviews.

Bourdieu’s practice theory identifies a central interplay between the body and the society. He articulates that habitus is a ‘system of durable, transposable, dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organise practices and representations’ (Bourdieu, 1990: 53).

Habitus is the position of the individuals in the society according to their understanding from the sociocultural structure. Crossley (2001: 94) argues that habitus functions like an underlying ‘grammar’ which determines the framework for social practice, but also allows innovation to be created by the users. Similarly, Painter (2000: 242) clarifies that habitus is the ‘mediating link’ between sociocultural structures (social determination) and individual’s agency or in other words it is the internalised component of the individual’s history and social norms. In order to situate habitus, Bourdieu develops the concept of field, which is the social structure and is in mutual relationship with habitus or the practice of actors: ‘a field is a distinct social space, consisting of interrelated and vertically differentiated positions, a “network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions”’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 97).

Bourdieu (1984: 101) formulates the relationship between these concepts in the following way: \((\text{habitus}) \ (\text{capital})\) + field = practice. Capital from Bourdieu’s perspective is all of the resources which can have exchange value in various fields (Crossley, 2001: 96), the set of artefacts and actions that maintain some form of worth within the specific social context. Cultural capital is an embodied state of non-financial assets that can promote social mobility; symbolic capital can explain one’s prestige in a social group; and social capital refers to the cultural resources a person has based on their networks and group membership (McCormack, 2014).

**Cultural capital**

Thinking about my capitals in this research, my professional background is in midwifery, and I had been a health professional in Iran for more than six years. Cultural capital defines, in Bourdieu’s (1984) view, qualifications and education. In this case, for me, being a midwife is a form of cultural capital. Trusting a health professional, especially a female midwife, makes it relatively easy for women to talk about their sexuality and therefore my cultural capital allowed me to
build a trustful relationship with the participants and made it easier for them to narrate their sexual biographies.

However, the participants’ educational level varied greatly, from being illiterate to being medical specialist. This shaped the power relationships between me and the participants in various ways. When the participant’s educational level was lower than mine (especially when they did not have a university degree), they hesitated to narrate their life stories as they considered their stories ‘worthless’. On these occasions, I reminded them of the crucial role of their stories in my research and emphasised that their narratives were central to my study and that it would be weakened without their willingness to participate in the interviews. This indicates that narratives and stories have the power to cross intersectional differences, such as educational level, and thereby potential class differences. For instance, Zohreh\(^1\) who was 47 years old and had high school degree started her interview by asking me:

\begin{quote}
Zohreh: ‘I don’t have a good education, so I don’t think that I can help you; I don’t know how I, an uneducated woman, can be helpful for you and your academic research. I can only tell you about my life, is this enough for you?’
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Elham: ‘Oh, yes, I would definitely like to know your life story. My research is about your life story, so it’s very important for me to know it. Without your life story, I can’t do my research, so, to tell the truth, I am dependent on your story [smiles].’
\end{quote}

Thus, although I entered in this particular interview with a certain degree of power, particularly around education and social class, I endeavoured to shift power by explaining the significant role of Zohreh’s biography to my study. I also reminded her of my eagerness to learn from her, and that, although I am educated, her lived experiences were important in order to move my understanding from an abstraction to Zohreh’s lived realities. This gave Zohreh a more equal power during the interview and made me more of an insider.

In contrast, my interview with Sarah, 57 years old and a paediatrician, started with her mentioning her higher educational level in comparison with my own, arguably as assertion of her power:

---

\(^1\) All the participants names have been changed to preserve anonymity.
Sarah: ‘You know, I’m a paediatrician and I know all about the menopause and its consequences.’

Elham: ‘Yes, and I really appreciate your participation in my research, but now I want to know about your lived experiences and not about what has been written in the text books.’

In this interview, unlike Zohreh’s, Sarah entered the interview with a certain degree of power, due to her cultural capital. Although I chose Sarah for interview and I had control over the process of the interview itself, by asking specific questions, Sarah’s cultural capital gave her considerable power in our relationship. By pointing out that the goal of the interview was about Sarah’s lived experiences, not her professional knowledge, I aimed to rebalance the power between myself and Sarah. On this basis, cultural capital was one of the essential elements in negotiating power during the interviews and the shifting dynamics of power in interview relationships and shows how intersectional differences can be shifted through such practices.

Symbolic capital

Bourdieu (2011) explains that symbolic capital is status, or recognition. Although, the participants and I were female, studying in a Western country (the UK) was a form of symbolic capital for me, which did not have a positive effect on the process of building a trustful space. All the participants were religious practising women who believed in maintaining their traditional, religious culture, which they believed is contrary to ‘Western culture’, especially in relation to sexuality.

I carefully negotiated my symbolic status, gaining each participant’s trust when conducting the interviews. For example, one of the participants, Zahra, 51-years-old, challenged me by claiming that I should be doing my fieldwork in the UK. Although I had been away from Iran (my home country) for only two years before conducting the fieldwork, Zahra believed that as my role as student in a ‘Western country’ meant that I could not (or perhaps should not) do my research in my own country (as an ‘Eastern country’). As a result, the first 10 minutes of the interview were devoted to explaining to her my reasons for choosing the research topic and Iran as the place for the fieldwork:

Zahra: ‘Isn’t there any problem with doing your research about women here?’
Elham: ‘No, my subject is Iranian women. It’s my home country and I like to do my research about Iranian women. Also, I know Iranian women better than English women, so I can do better research about them.’

Zahra: ‘Don’t you need to research in that environment? About the women over there? I mean, you studied there and the women who live there are totally different from us. Don’t you need to do your research in the place of your study?’

Elham: ‘No, not at all. My supervisor has approved it. But in which way do you think they are different?’

Zahra: ‘Everything, but … all right.’

Elham: ‘Do you think I’m different as well?’

Zahra: ‘Uhum … willy nilly you studied there too.’

In this case, reflection started when Zahra stated her concern about the ‘problematic subject’ of the project by questioning my capability of doing the research. Her claim was based on the location of my university, a Western country. From her point of view, studying in a Western country made me one of the ‘women there’ (the UK) and not one of the ‘women here’ (Iranian Muslim woman), despite my nationality (Iranian) and conducting the interviews in Farsi. Consequently, I was not sufficiently insider enough to do the interview with her as I was more outsider. This extract reflected the dynamic power relations between Zahra and me throughout the interview, in which she intermittently highlighted my position as an outsider. This example can elaborate that the interviewee (Zahra) as well as interviewer can display their interrelationship through the process of mediating the power in the course of the interview situation. Thus, although Zahra could be categorised as a person with less power in terms of being the interviewee, her symbolic capital as an insider (and mine, classified by her as an outsider) can be used to resist that power dynamic.

My other symbolic capital related to my marital status. I got divorced 10 years ago. Marriage has symbolic importance and meaning in Iranian culture. Moaddel and Azadarmaki (2002) point out that significant value is attached to the institution of marriage in Iran and it is embedded with the meaning of sanctity. Accordingly, divorce or marital dissolution is a distinct cultural stigma. Hojat et al. (2000) assert that Iranian people believe that divorce is a calamity (لا) and an unfortunate fate (بدبختی). Although divorce is allowed under Islam, it is strongly condemned and viewed as a disaster due to the considerable
symbolic importance placed on family and marriage. On this basis, divorce carries a stigma – a negative symbolic capital – especially for women. Indeed, as one of my research participants, Fatemeh, who is a 53 years old, explained, paraphrasing an expression that is very well known in the Farsi language: “My father always told us that women should go to her husband's house with a white dress [a bride's dress] and return [to the family home to be buried] in a white dress.” In Islamic tradition, the corpse is typically wrapped in a simple, plain white cloth and buried. Thus, according to this expression, a woman cannot/ should not divorce; she can leave her marriage status just on one condition, which is death.

During the interviews, all of the participants asked about my marital status. Due to the stigma attached to divorce, I felt that it was inappropriate to disclose this information. I believed that they would not answer my questions and would refuse to participate in the interviews. I therefore hid my negative symbolic capital and told them I was single. Consequently, the next question concerned the reasons for me ‘still’ being single and also involved encouraging me to get married, reminding me that soon it would be ‘too late’. Even the women who were unhappily married were vocal in encouraging others, including me, to get married. This illustrates well the value that Iranian Muslim women may place on the social institution of marriage as symbolic capital.

Hiding my marital status could be seen as deception and therefore an ethical dilemma for my study. Nevertheless, according to Bryman (2004: 514) ‘Deception occurs when researchers represent their research as something other than what it is.’ Since my marital status was not related to the research, it was not considered to be deception; rather it was a strategic element of non-disclosure that facilitated the richest data possible. Yet, it was a symbolic capital with the potential for a negative impact on the process of power during the interview, which shaped my positionality during the interaction.

Social capital

Social capital relates to the power and usefulness of social networks. To access the participants, I gained help of my friends who are themselves religious women. They introduced me to the religious classes that they regularly attended. As the participants knew my friends well and had friendly relationships with them, they accepted me easily. Most of them started their interviews by mentioning that my friends ‘said good things’ about me to them, so they decided to participate in the
research. Thus, my social capital had a positive effect on building a trustful space in order to collect my data. Additionally, my social capital had a positive impact on my positionality, making me more of an insider for the participants due to their relationships with my friends.

Field

The field is a social structure that has mutual relationship with social practice (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). I consider the places where I conducted the interviews as the field for two reasons: first, the locations could shape the positionality of both the participants and myself. Second, they had a notable influence on the power dynamic between the participants and myself (social practice). The location of an interview is not just a physical space; rather, it embodies various relations and symbolic meanings for both the participant and the researcher and can be considered as part of a social structure.

After making contact with the participants, it was necessary to arrange a time and place for each interview. I encouraged my participants to choose locations where they would feel as comfortable as possible. The interviews took place in a variety of agreed settings. Most of the time they were held in the location of the religious classes, at others in participants’ houses. In these cases not only were the participants familiar with their chosen places, but there was the symbolic meaning of the places belonging to them, which was not the case for myself. On one occasion it was in my car, in the street in which the participant’s house was located, as the participant told me her house was small and her daughter was in the house so she was not comfortable to talk in her company.

It was always the participants’ decision to select the location and I had limited power in this regard. The participants took advantage of the opportunity to choose a place which was familiar for them and unfamiliar for me. Depending on their choice, I experienced a different power dynamic. It was their familiar territory; in all locations I was a guest with less power. For instance, one of the interviewees, Maryam, 50 years old who has a BSc degree, asked me to conduct the interview in her house. When I entered, I found Maryam’s husband in the same room that she had chosen for doing the interview. As the house was very big and modern I asked Maryam if it was possible to go to another room and conduct the interview in a more private place. However, Maryam answered that her husband liked to be with us in the same room during the interview, and as she wanted to do the interview she accepted her husband’s condition. So, the
The interview was held while Maryam’s husband sat at a distance of six metres from us, although with his back to us. He did not utter a word, not even a greeting. Throughout the interview, my feeling was one of fear, and when the interview was finished, I rushed out of their house. I had respected Maryam’s decision about the location that she had chosen for interview and the conditions under which it was conducted. However, during the transcription process I realised that she had spoken throughout in a faint voice, so it was difficult to decipher the words.

In this interview, two different power relationships were created by Maryam (interviewee), her husband and I (researcher), based on the location of interview (field). First, the place of interview or the field is inscribed in the gendered social structures that shape the power hierarchy between two women (Maryam and me) and a man (Maryam’s husband). The patriarchal power imposed by Maryam’s husband’s surveillance of the interview, and its pattern of practice authorises men’s dominancy over women, which made us to keep our voice down. However, we (Maryam and I) negotiated power and demonstrated our agency by insisting on our desire to continue the interview. Maryam’s agency is revealed by her success in doing the interview and selecting her choice from the existing possibilities and constraints. We did not have total freedom of choice, but we actively chose from the possibilities (doing the interview despite the presence of Maryam’s husband or abandoning it) and constraints that we had, highlighting our agency.

Second, the other power relationship was shaped between Maryam, as an interviewee, and me, as an interviewer who accepted the conditions of the field. Whereas Maryam was empowered by her familiarity with her own home and knowing about the presence of her husband beforehand, I was disarmed by the discomfort of being in an unfamiliar place with the existence of another person whom I had not expected to be there and its consequence, which was feeling fear. In this case, the process of power relationship according to the chosen field had started before the actual interviewing began, with the negotiation of power based on gender order (between Maryam and her husband) and continued throughout the interview (between Maryam and me, and both of us with her husband). This reveals the importance of the field, of its structured rules of social (and indeed physical) locations, in understanding the dynamics of power relationships during research, and shows the significance of embodied practices to one’s positionality.
**Habitus**

I consider my habitus as my embodied position (how I speak, sit and what I wear) in the field according to my understanding from the sociocultural structure of the field. It was another important factor in the power relationship with the participants and determining my positionality as an insider/outsider, which emphasises the interviews as socially located bodily practices. All the participants wore a hijab in their religious classes, although there were no men there. Moreover, when they wanted to leave the class they wore a chador, a full-body-length fabric, without any hand openings, which covers a woman’s body from head to toe over the top of her clothes. Thus, to be an insider, I changed my habitus in a way to show them that I respected their wearing of a complete hijab. So, I too wore a very long and black one, covered my hair completely by a black veil and, in addition, I gave them some small gifts such as arm bands to show my respect for their hijab.

In spite of all these efforts, sometimes I was seen as more of an outsider, as the participants endeavoured to change my view towards their family members, the true insiders, and tried to keep up a gendered appearance. For example, in one of the interviews when Nahid, 51 years old and a midwife, wanted to explain how she recognised her gender, she said:

‘I found, whenever we wanted to go out, one of my brothers would accompany us. Even if it was a birthday of our friends, we had to go with one of them. If our friend’s family didn’t let the boys to join in the party, then we had not to go. … But, never think that we weren’t free. No, we were free; my parents are educated, intelligent and modern Muslims.’

In this example, Nahid’s parents are insider, and the researcher is an outsider who intruded into her family matters and even might judge the insiders. Thus, Nahid tried to not allow me to criticise her family for not giving her freedom. Similarly, Farideh, 57 years old and a teacher, emphasised that telling her story to me was like talking behind her relatives’ backs and she did not like to wash her dirty linen in public (in Farsi it is literally ‘spit on your own face’); consequently she felt ‘bad’ about it. After reassuring her that I would not judge her or her relatives, she started her story.
Both of these participants considered me an outsider, certainly compared with their relatives, but not a total outsider as they accepted the invitation to be interviewed and trusted me to narrate their hidden stories. Thus, at first they hesitated to narrate their stories in order to prevent me from judging their insiders. In the above interviews, I was not a total outsider and, simultaneously, not a total insider; my positionality was that of a distanced insider who endeavours to shift to being more of an insider.

Nevertheless, being conscious of the power dynamic between myself and my interviewees and deploying my capitals and habitus within the field helped me to negotiate an insider/outsider dichotomy. Although my research was completed, I was called by other women, who were the interviewee’s classmates, to conduct the interview with them. Hadiseh, 60 years old was one of them: “I was waiting for your call to do the interview with me, but you didn’t call me. I am wondering if you can do the interview with me like what you did with my friend …”

This, first of all, indicates that the participants talked about the interviews with their classmates (insiders) and then decided to accept me (the researcher) as someone who they could narrate their hidden part of their life for me. Second, it reveals how needful they were, in wanting to be heard and how they would accept an outsider to give voice to their concerns.

**Conclusion**

This chapter set out to reflect on the shifting power dynamics in life history interviews that I conducted with menopausal Iranian women. In this chapter I have demonstrated how I sought to make sense of these shifts using Bourdieu’s theory of practice (1984, 1990) and its attendant concepts of capitals, field and habitus. I adopted this Bourdieusian approach, rather than an intersectional analysis, to show how dynamic power can be in interviews of this kind. I have therefore sought to demonstrate that rather than categories such as age, gender and sexuality fixing people into locations, a range of embodied practices in those situations are important as well.

In my study I argued that the social practices of the women in the interviews were different from the ways in which they have been categorised. For instance, Zahra has been categorised as a person with less power due to her lower educational level, but she questioned my appropriateness of doing the research due to my symbolic capital. This also reveals my positionality was various even during the course of one interview. In this case, I entered the interview as an outsider
but gradually my status shifted to that of an insider whom Zahra trusted to tell her story. Accordingly, categories are not fixed; rather they are shaped through interactions, which themselves are mediated by power. I explained how the power of narrations could shift power within the interviews. In this way, a participant could assert power by choosing not to reveal certain aspects of her story, to stop the interview whenever she wished or not to participate at all. For example, Zohreh’s case has been categorised with less power and Sarah’s case has been categorised with more power.

Additionally, I have highlighted the importance of specific locations or fields in power relationships. Habitus also indicates the key element of bodily practice in negotiating power as the position of the women and me in the interviews. Simultaneously, I as a researcher by employing my capitals endeavoured to negotiate power in order to gain rich data.

Finally, it is important to remember the shifting dynamics of being an insider/outsider and the ways that intersections are used in that process. I was not a complete outsider (due to our similarities in gender, nationality, language), but neither was I a complete insider (due to our differences in capital and habitus). Thus, the power dynamic within the interviews could not be explained only by identity categories and how they intersected, but also needed to include how the actors deployed them in social practice, that is, in the interview situation. So, rather than consider the status of the researcher to be static, and bounded dichotomously (either as an insider or outsider), instead I experienced a complex, dynamic status as both insider and outsider, during even a single interview, based on the capitals, habitus and the field from Bourdieu’s perspective.

Acknowledgement
I would like to express my special thanks of gratitude to Professor Mark McCormack for his comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

References


