Abstract

This article revisits the critical realist ethnographic process that was adopted in my doctoral thesis, which was concerned with the experiences of ethnic identity of White British and Pakistani British children as they started kindergarten in the north-west of England. The article focuses on the ethnography that emerged from the visits that I carried out alongside staff to children's homes before they started kindergarten and on the way in which these were portrayed and analysed in the final thesis. I conclude that the process of observation, writing field notes and then producing a fuller ethnography produced a very partial representation of the empirical world. This was problematic in that, in critical realism, what is observed in the world of the 'empirical' and considered in the world of the 'actual' forms the basis for understanding the underlying causal tendencies which point to the underlying explanatory concepts in the world of the 'real'. I argue, however, that more careful critical realist ethnography has the potential to be a powerful methodological framework which accepts the contested nature of reality but which, unlike postmodernism, provides a means of addressing possibilities and of moving beyond 'undecidability'.

Key words: ethnography, critical realism, ethnic identity, young children

Introduction and Context

This article is based on some of the fieldwork that was carried out as part of my doctoral thesis and revisits the critical realist ethnographic process that was adopted. Following Athens (2010: 98), I am seeking to 'reinspect (my) original analysis … from a fresh perspective and spot things to which (I) was previously blind and therefore missed'. In so doing, it is acknowledged that the person carrying out the re-reading in this paper is not the same one who made the field notes. In common with the conceptualisation of Thomson and Gunter (2011), researcher identity is considered to be multiple and constantly in flux. The study was concerned with the experiences of ethnic identity of White British and Pakistani British children as they started kindergarten in the north-west of England (see also Barron, 2007; Barron, 2009; Barron, 2011). This article will focus on the ethnography that emerged from the visits that I carried out alongside staff to children's homes before they started kindergarten and on the way in which these were portrayed and analysed in the final thesis.

The kindergarten is one where I had worked ten years earlier. This had the advantage that I was known to many of the staff, which facilitated relationships in the field, but that the intervening period had added a degree of distance and strangeness. The intake at the time of the study was approximately fourth-fifths Pakistani British children and one-fifth White British children. The kindergarten is located in an area that comprised small terraced houses when it was built in 1950 but which was redeveloped in the late 1980s. At this time, some of these houses were demolished and replaced with housing for the elderly, a small local authority park area and some business units. The small park has since been donated to and built upon by Sure Start (UK government funded support aimed at improving the lives of children and their families experiencing economic disadvantage), providing parenting classes, training and wraparound care facilities. A mosque has opened directly behind the kindergarten. The local Pakistani community is long established with some parents having been brought up in the area whilst others continue to arrive from Pakistan.

The research began with visits to the children's homes alongside staff before they started kindergarten in Autumn 2004 and 2005. These were intended to enable me to understand something of the children's homes and prior experiences before they started kindergarten. These visits were followed by week long observations of the same children in the kindergarten in early September 2004 and 2005, late October 2004 and 2005, November and December 2004 and 2005 and in January, February, March, April and June 2006.

Choosing Ethnography

An ethnographic approach was adopted because of the lack of previous research into young children's experiences of ethnic identity. Such an approach finds support in the work of Corsaro and Molinari (2000, 180) who argue that 'ethnography is an ideal method ….particularly when it aims to both document children's evolving membership in their culture ….. and when focused on key transition points in children's lives'. The term ethnography is often used to mean different things by different researchers. Atkinson et al (2001) indicate, however, that most approaches have in common the use of participant observation in order to seek to understand how people interpret the world and their experiences. They also tend to involve collecting very detailed descriptions of the field of study which are then used to generate theory. There is a concern with 'suspension of preconceptions' (Ball, 1993, 32) and to 'make the familiar strange' (Gordon et al, 2001, 188) in order that events are described in as much detail as possible and that significant elements are not overlooked through over–familiarity. The ethnographic concern to record in detail was considered important to ensure that the theory that was generated was based on carefully recorded events. In this way, Emerson (2009, 536) notes, ethnography 'discourages reified accounts and too easy generalisations'.

Early anthropological ethnography was often missionary and colonial in character and Behar (2003: 16) raises the question of whether 'every use of ethnography in the present (must) inevitably be an act of apology and grief for

the shamefulness of what ethnography was in the past?' This is a concern that will find echoes in the current paper. More recent approaches to ethnography have come to recognise (though not always easily) the importance of an awareness of time, culture, society and politics in analysing the detailed descriptions. As Shaffir notes (1999), the generation of theory increasingly involves the researcher sharing his/her interpretation and theories with those studied and taking account of their views. It remains true, as Lassiter and Campbell (2010, 4) point out, that 'ethnographers seek to reflexively offset colonial modes of research by engaging research participants as dialogic partners in projects (still) largely initiated by the researcher'.

Other challenges in the current study stemmed from the dangers of speaking for the young children I was studying. These dangers arose doubly, rather in the way that Cannella and Lincoln (2007) identify, from the study being concerned with young children and from many of them being Pakistani British when I am male, adult and White British. It required a complex model of what it means to engage with children's voices. Whilst I was aware of other previous ethnographic studies of young children's ethnicity, such as those by Connolly (1998), van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) and Brooker (2002), I was faced with the challenge that only a small minority of the children I was studying were of White British English – speaking origin and that few of the Pakistani British children spoke more than a few words of English. I did not have the time to learn Punjabi and did not have the resources to work with an interpreter (which would have brought its own issues) and so listening to the voices of both Pakistani British and White British children involved observing them and their homes and studying their play, actions and interactions, as a means of giving them a thickness of 'voice' that was made up of more than their words. Pahl (2007, 187) took a similar approach and argues that, in this way, a 'complex web of meaning … became embedded and could be given a provisional, interpretative context'.

Choosing Critical Realism

In choosing ethnography, I was concerned, on the one hand, to adopt a critical stance which would problematise current, dominant and common sense understandings about young children's experiences of ethnic identity. This meant seeing the social world as 'multilayered, complex and at times pockmarked with ambiguous contours' (Houston, 2010, 74) and recognising that the single ethnographic authorial voice is no longer tenable because, as Nayak (2006, 412) notes 'at the interpretative level ethnographies remain delicate cultural constructions intricately interlaced through a diverse community of tellers, listeners, writers and readers who in turn may unravel and string together these 'truth regimes' differently.' It meant also recognising that 'we have no direct access to the truth, even the truth of our own perceptions or emotions. And we certainly have no privileged access or magic key to unlock the 'true' perceptions and emotions of those we study' (Van Maanen, 2010, 227). On the other hand, I was also seeking to avoid what Oakley (2005, 208) describes as postmodernism's 'newly suicidal relativism' which leads to 'a post-critical logic of haunting and undecidables' (Lather, 2001, 480) in the hope of making a contribution that would not only change understanding but offer some basis for deciding how to act differently in order to respond to the needs of children from a particular minority ethnic group in a particular community.

In seeking to make sense of my findings, following Porter (1993), I allied critical realism to my ethnographic approach. In the UK, critical realism is closely associated with Bhaskar (1998a, b; 2009). Critical realism conceptualises the world and its meanings as stratified. The layer that we readily perceive, 'the empirical', is a world of effects which provide evidence, for Bhaskar (1998b), of pre – existing causal tendencies to explain those effects. Causes are viewed as tendencies rather than as certainties because they are in no way linear or easy to establish. The relationship between effects and causes is multidimensional with several causal tendencies usually behind any effect. There may be causal tendencies whose effects are not played out or are not seen and so the next layer is the world of 'the actual',

which contains all events and happenings, whether we are aware of them or not. These causal tendencies are seen by Bhaskar (1998b), however, as evidence of an external reality, independent of human perceptions of it in the world of 'the real'. By striving to record carefully what we see in the world of the empirical and in seeking to identify all the possible happenings and events in the world of the actual, Bhaskar (1998b) argues that we have the basis for arriving at understandings about the underlying causal tendencies that might explain them. These causal tendencies in turn tell us something of the underlying concepts in the world of the real, whose identification, in the case of the present study, was seen as giving a basis for thinking about whether existing educational practices were meeting the needs of a minority ethnic group in a particular community, given what had been gleaned about their experiences of ethnic identity.

The Home Visits

The Challenges of Taking Field Notes

The visits involved me in making notes about the external appearance and internal decoration and furnishing. By noting these details, I hoped to glean something of the context that had shaped the children's experiences of ethnic identity before they started at the kindergarten. As noted by Emerson et al (2001) and Walford (2009), there is very little agreement amongst ethnographers regarding how to go about recording what happens in the field. Whilst most agree that use is made of observation and field notes, there is little consensus about how these are undertaken. Some ethnographers make notes from the very beginning on the basis that by so doing they minimise the effect of note taking on those being observed. Others withdraw or make notes as soon as they can after observing. Both of these approaches assume in different ways that observation distorts 'truth' whilst this study was based on the premise that 'truth' is necessarily mediated through our senses and so to seek to eliminate this mediation is impossible. I therefore took notes at the time that I was observing, with the intention of capturing as much of the detail

as possible, but with the intention of making a note of the ways in which what I observed would be mediated in a variety of ways.

Despite this concern to record detail, all-too-often this did not actually happen and what I recorded was what I found interesting, either because it was familiar and I did not expect it to be or because it was unfamiliar, usually because it was not typical of (white, middle class) western homes. What I did not always do, however, was to note at the time my reflections on this process of mediation and representation:

The garden at the front of the house has been concreted over. We go through a hall way to a front room which has a beige carpet and cream leather sofas, a fan, a coffee table very close to the sofa and some folding chairs. There is a fireplace with lots of trophies displayed on it, especially for volley ball, from all over Europe, including one in French. Dad works at a sweet centre and there is a huge stack of card printed in Arabic / Urdu. Some have been made up into boxes for the sweet centre. There is also a huge stack of cans of Coke, Lilt, Fanta, Sprite. There are plastic flowers in baskets. There are also large pictures of a mosque and extracts from the Qu'ran. There are also three Qu'rans on their sides on a corner shelf, high up by the door. A tall wooden lamp of rectangular cube shape has pictures of waterfalls up the plastic sides.

August 2004

In this case, I seem to particularly note the contrast between the signs of Islam and Arabic / Urdu, multinational drinks corporation packaging and the French inscription on the volley ball trophy. The latter was perhaps probably of particular note and interest to me because my first degree was in French.

The less westernised they were, the more I tended to record, particularly of what was not familiar to me. Perhaps, in so doing, I sought to make the strange familiar, rather than the familiar strange (Gordon et al (2001):

We are shown into a room at the back of the house where there are two floral bench style sofas, with seats which lift up, a dresser full of china, a coffee table and two smaller tables with plastic covers on. The wall paper is a patterned white. There is a heavily patterned carpet with a gas fire in a marble fire place. There are two medium and one small vases of plastic flowers on the top. There is a glass case above the fire place with a mosque inside. There are nine hangings with extracts from the Qu'ran and pictures of Mecca

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in gold frames – some are at angles on the wall and have nails underneath to make them hang like this.   On a small table there is what looks like a prayer stool with handles on either side. In a corner of the room the grandmother is praying sitting on a prayer mat. There are Islamic symbols on the doors. There is a mini working fountain in Arabic style on a wall unit. There are photographs and sports trophies in glass units. There is an ornate ceiling light fitting with lots of bulbs at angles and what look like wind chimes to make up the shade.

August 2004

I noted the presence of gold and its relationship to Islamic objects in early observations such as this one as part of the 'exotic' without really understanding its significance. Pahl and Pollard (2008) draw attention to the ways in which gold can be as transitory as gold plated jewellery and ornaments or can 'carry inherited values associated with charity to others and the survival of values across generations and diasporas' (180) and these meanings would have been useful ones to me in understanding children's early experiences of ethnic identity but they were meanings that I struggled to find a way of accessing.

As well as describing the 'exotic', there was also a tendency, as the visits went on, to record what I saw in comparison to what I had already seen in other homes: in many homes I noted, as above, that the sofa seats lifted up to reveal a storage space and so when this was not the case I found myself writing that they were 'not lift up sofas' without saying what they were actually like. This, in effect meant that the details were missing in some homes and, despite the ethnographic concern not to take for granted, this is exactly what I found myself doing. I could explain this in a number of ways: the fatigue that comes with researching and studying alongside (or in addition to) a full time job could be seen to influence my ability to see and perhaps I was also concerned that recording everything afresh when so much was similar from one home to another would generate large amounts of raw data which I would have to spend long hours transcribing.

Perhaps the problem too was that I relied too much on *writing and describing* what I saw when other means of recording would have been useful.

Wacquant (2004, 400) refers to Bourdieu's use of photography which 'operated as an efficient recording and storage technique that enabled him to capture and collect large quantities of information'. Photography may well have been a useful medium but I felt less than comfortable with the notion of taking photographs of other people's homes and felt that this may well have smacked of surveillance and made many families feel uncomfortable or even unwilling to allow me into their homes. I was also mindful that whilst photography may have helped with the collection of data, it is not a neutral medium that records things 'as they really are'. Whilst photographs capture the detail of situations, they still rely on the photographer to choose what to photograph. Rose's work (2003, 2004) has been significant in looking at the significance of photographs within families but also in drawing attention to the complexity of photographs. She notes the ways in which photographs carry a trace of what has been photographed but also 'absence'. A shadow of difference and deferred meaning, Derrida's 'differance' (2002), is cast between what has been photographed and the photograph itself where 'the actual effect of seeing what has been depends on, and is unique to, a particular viewer' (2003, 8). Thus as well as issues of selection, images involve an act of interpretation. As Mannay (2010, 100) points out, 'the sense that viewers make of images depends upon cultural assumptions, personal knowledge and the context in which the picture is presented'. In short, whatever the data, 'what we transcribe, and to some extent how we transcribe it, reflects substantive assumptions (about human beings and their social institutions) and methodological ones too (about how best to describe and explain social phenomena' (Hammersley, 2010, 558).

In visiting the homes of White British families, my observations seem to focus on well-being, cleanliness and degree of affluence (the latter also noted in the case of Pakistani British families). If the home was relatively unremarkable in relation to my own experience, I tended to write very little. One entry merely notes that the house was '*Well decorated, comfortably furnished.*' However, difference and lack of recognition functioned to increase both detail and a tendency for spoken or unspoken value judgments.

We approach what has been a very grand house but now there are recycling bags in the front garden. The windows are rotten at the front. They have been replaced with uPVC at the back. The substantial front door gives on to a porch area with an inner door with a substantial amount of stained glass. We are shown along a poorly decorated hallway to a back room. The house smells strongly of dogs. The mother reluctantly puts these in the kitchen when we ask. The backyard is full of rubbish. The living room has a TV (which is on), an Xbox, a Freeview box and a DVD player. The floor is covered with battered, dirty laminate . The room is untidy with stacks of things in the corners. There are two leather sofas and chairs covered by blankets dirtied by the dogs.

August 2005

It will be seen that I noted that the house had been grand and contrasted this with the recycling bags now to be found in the front garden but that I gave no details about what the house actually looked like. The reference to Upvc replacement windows could suggest my recognition and valuing of the house being restored but could equally be a value judgment about installing such windows in a formerly grand house in place of the sash windows so beloved of the western white middle class. The stained glass is highlighted (approved of?) but the hall is 'poorly decorated' and the house 'smells strongly of dogs'. The television and associated equipment are noted (and the fact that the television is turned on, which is disapproved of?) and the expenditure on these is contrasted with the 'dirty laminate' and 'blankets dirtied by the dogs'. As Nayak (2006, 413) puts it, 'many ethnographic studies have a good deal more to say about our own cultural values and assumptions than they do about the exotic Others'.

Negotiating Relationships and Meanings

What I chose to note and what I chose not to note, what I noticed, what I did not notice, what I took for granted and what I did not were all concerns for me at the time but have become even greater concerns since. In carrying out the observations, I was aware of Coffey's contention (1999) that notions such as the familiar and the strange, knowing and not knowing and closeness and distance are not in any way straightforward. Visits to the children's homes were complicated by the fact that I do not speak Punjabi whilst more than half

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of them were not fluent in English and that we did not share a common heritage. Deegan (2001) argues that this raises questions such as 'Can a stranger ever understand an insider or an 'alien' culture?' (21). I was also concerned by Abbas' observation (2006) that lack of detailed knowledge regarding religion, culture and ethnicity may lead to the researcher being viewed as an intruder and significant thoughts not being shared. I was left feeling that my observations had been seriously undermined by methodological weaknesses and linguistic, cultural and class differences. Thus I was left feeling very uncomfortable and the visits led me to question my ability to view the homes other than from a white, British, middle-class, male, educated perspective. In ways that echo the concerns of Gallagher (2011) about much educational ethnography, my feelings of experiencing the 'exotic' in the homes of some of the families of Pakistani-heritage troubled me, as did my struggle to remember to note down what was not 'other', what was not different from my own experience. All of this led to concerns about whether the research was authentic and a distinct feeling that what I had recorded was voyeuristic. I found myself worrying that, despite my intentions, my observations produced only 'the stereotypes and structures of the orient (which are) crucial to the Western fantasies of itself as the world of enlightenment, progress and evolutionary superiority' (Said, cited in Marcus, 2001, 111).

Perhaps I could have alleviated some of these shortcomings by sharing my observations with the staff and parents and I did share with the staff some of the observations that I later carried out in the kindergarten but I did not share the home visit observations in this way. In part, though I never acknowledged this at the time, this was because several of the staff appeared to believe that I was there as expert, both because I had been the head teacher and because I was now an academic. They sought my views on their conduct of the visits and on what I thought of the children and families at every turn. Often they asked about things that I had barely noticed, usually because they were not related to the focus of my study. The result, however, was that I felt incompetent as an ethnographer and did not feel comfortable sharing what I

had observed. I also had a sense that my observations were rather voyeuristic and judgemental and so sharing them also felt very uncomfortable.

Constructing the Ethnography

As well as the concern over what I was and what I was not observing and the cultural lens through which I saw it, there was also the matter of the process by which these observations became the ethnography. As Walford (2009) notes, this is a matter about which relatively little has been written. I made brief handwritten notes during the home visits but this was not always easy to do whilst sitting on the floor with the children and then on the move between houses and so, each evening,   I then produced a fuller version of what I had noted during the day. In this sense, my approach had much in common with that used by Paul Connolly and Sara Delamont (see Walford, 2009). I was concerned, however, as Emerson et al (2001, 353) note, that 'field notes are inevitably *selective*. The ethnographer writes about certain things that seem 'significant', ignoring and hence 'leaving out' other matters.   In this sense, field notes never provide a complete record'.

The fuller account was intended to add detail not always captured at the time and to become the basis for construction of the ethnography but this also involved further processes of selection, filtering and refinement.   This processing of the field notes was very time consuming and had both advantages and disadvantages in terms of the on–going analysis that is part of ethnographic research. On the one hand, it meant that there was regular and progressive engagement with and reflection on the data but on the other hand the significant time involved, often late at night, meant that there were challenges in terms of remaining analytical whilst also seeking to transcribe the notes, much in the way that Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) describe. It is also the case that there are signs of the emerging analysis coming to affect what I saw and what I did not see because of what I was coming to see as important and this clearly affected what I recorded.   Whilst I accepted Van Maanen's contention (1988, 8) that 'there is no direct correspondence between the world as experienced and ….as conveyed in a text', I was still

concerned, in common with Hammersley and Atkinson (1995), that this should not mean that the relationship between the two was arbitrary. I hoped that my critical ethnography could establish 'a sort of stammering relation to its object' (Lather, 2001, 487).

Behar (2003) muses upon why the writing of ethnographies is not taught and I certainly worried that I was being left to work out how to write mine with little guidance but perhaps came to the same conclusion; that ethnography cannot be taught in any straightforward way 'because every ethnography emerges from a unique encounter between an ethnographer and those who become the subjects of the ethnography' (35) and is constructed from 'the fiction of who the ethnographer thought she/he was in the field, the fiction of how that society was constructed by the ethnographer, whether harmoniously or conflictively, depending on the nuances of the ethnographer's sensibility and the historical moment in which the ethnographer happened to be present as an observer' (19). This does not mean that these realities were easy to come to terms with, however.

'Analytic auto – ethnography' or 'reflexivity'?

In order to destabilise the sense of superiority and researcher authority that could emerge from a lack of engagement with others about what I had observed, I engaged in what I termed, at the time, a form of auto-ethnography. Van Maanen (2010) notes that reflexive confessions are now routinely part of ethnographies rather than appearing as an appendix as previously. However, whilst reflexivity and auto-ethnography have grown in acceptance and popularity over the past 15 years, they still have their opponents, particularly at the emotional and confessional end of the spectrum. Behar's work (2003) is strongly confessional and evocative in places but, like her, I was concerned at the time and have been again during the process of writing this paper that 'the reflexive musings of broken-hearted ethnographers' could be presented as nothing more than 'solipsism and the palm reading of gypsies' (Behar, 2003, 37). Thus, whilst there was a great deal of emotional response in my field notes and in the draft chapters, very

little of this actually survived into the thesis. As Sikes (2006, 114) points out, to suggest anything else 'could have career as well as personal consequences'. Whilst in some ways I took a conservative approach to risk, Drake (2011: 87) notes that such caution is not unusual and that 'exposing the clumsiness of research is a risky business' particularly for doctoral candidates because of power relations and notions of what a doctoral thesis should contain.

In any case, my concern was not only with the emotional self but with the exploration of how meaning emerged from my reflection on and representation of the world I observed. In common with Walford (2004, 2009), I could see little point in an approach that did not have a commitment to attempting to represent events which had been experienced by others and to analysing them in order to understand matters that others might consider important and relevant. I therefore adopted Anderson's (2006) analytic auto-ethnographic approach, which involved analytic reflexivity, together with narrative presence in the research field, as I had conversations with myself about what I was observing and about my responses to the research process. I was involved as a member of the social world under study (though not a complete member) through my previous occupational appointment there as the head teacher, analytic reflexivity, narrative presence in the research and dialogue with others in the research field.

Foley (2002) points out that the shades of methodological difference from reflexivity to auto-ethnography are not easy to distinguish. Delamont (2008, 58) makes a sharp distinction between 'reflexive ethnography' which she says involves the study of others and their context and 'is acutely sensitive to the interrelationship(s) between (oneself) and the focus of the research' and 'auto-ethnography', which she sees as concerned only with studying the self. She sees the latter as strongly associated with the emotional, confessional and fictional narrative work of Ellis and Bochner (2006). The form of analytic ethnography in which I engaged had much in common with Delamont's notion of 'reflexive ethnography' and with the ways in which Pillow (2003, 178) characterises reflexivity, which she sees 'as involving an ongoing self-

awareness during the research process which aids in making visible the practice and construction of knowledge within research in order to produce more accurate analyses of our research'. There are commonalities too with Piper's (2004, 51) notion of the 'dialogical self' which is 'oriented toward an awareness of its own multiplicity' and which recognises 'the complex ways in which (our) own perceptions are both socially and subjectively constructed'. In my case, as noted by Pillow (2003, 179), it also involved discussion of the challenges involved in my research and sought to 'validate and legitimize the research precisely by raising questions about the research process'.

This tends to lend a confessional flavour to the reflexivity or analytic auto-ethnography in which I engaged as shortcomings are discussed. The danger, as Pillow (2003) notes, however, is that the implied message is that the researcher can 'get it right' whilst simultaneously claiming that this is at best problematic because of the difficulties of representation. In short, the form of reflexive ethnography in which I engaged was an analytical one, though imbued with the emotions of the confessional in seeking to challenge the representations and meanings I created whilst at the same time seeking to find ever better ways of representing and making meaning, whilst recognising that success in so doing is, perhaps, forever just beyond reach.

Ethnographic Analysis

Whilst there is a wealth of literature concerned with ethnographic approaches and a growing literature concerned with the collection of ethnographic data, there is relatively little literature concerned with ethnographic analysis. Snow et al (2003) suggest that the 'analytic moment' (184) is either ignored completely or treated as a 'black box' (184). In my search for an analytical framework for the present study, I decided that Clarke's (2005) notion of 'situational analysis' was the most useful. She argues for pushing 'grounded theory around the post-modern turn' (21) and that there needs to be a concern with the significance of discourses within narrative, visual and historical sites, in order that sufficient account is taken of the operation of power as meso and macro influences within the micro field to be studied. In

the case of my research, this points to the importance of studying the decoration of the homes to consider what they might suggest in terms of meso and macro level influences. She proposes a model of analysis based on the use of situational maps. These are intended to identify all the elements in the situation and to examine the relationships between them, first in messy and then in ordered and relational forms. In parallel, she promotes the use of social worlds/arenas maps (which identify all the meso and macro level influences and their discourses in the social worlds and arenas and the boundary markers between them), and positional maps (which chart the different positions taken and the spaces and silences between them without reference to the identification of individual or collective voices). In this regard, the model was considered useful to establishing the multiple and messy analyses that were central to the study.   This can be seen also to have much in common with the concern to consider both the empirical and the actual in critical realism in seeking to understand the causal tendencies emanating from the world of the real which may explain those characteristics, events and activities. Thus, as within critical realism, Clarke argues that situations are 'rooted' in notions of the underlying world. Whilst Clarke uses the root metaphor, she actually draws attention, in the same way that Bhaskar and Lawson (1998) do, to the need for an analysis of the ways in which there may be multiple causes and effects that cannot be linked together in any singular manner: 'there are no one-way arrows, but instead attempts to delineate processes of co-constitution through specifying conditions and relationalities' (Clarke, 2005, 298).

More recently, I have found the work of Houston (2010) helpful in conceptualising the stratification of the social world in critical realism. Developing Bhaskar's work (2009), he conceptualises the world of the real as made up of a number of domains with their associated generative mechanisms: the domain of the person, with its biological, genetic, psychological, linguistic and cognitive forces and mechanisms; the domain of situated activity, seeking to maintain the social order through face to face interactions where social actions occur and are given meaning and where people respond according to those meanings; the domain of social settings,

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which is the institutional sphere of family and organisational settings where mechanisms reproduce social relations, positions and practices. The final two domains are the domain of culture, and the domain of the economy, which dominate the previous three domains. The domain of culture includes norms, rituals, customs and tastes along with generative mechanisms which create and maintain cohesion or create division; and the domain of the economy, which commodifies labour, identity, relationships, lifestyles and the value of goods.

These notions are helpful in seeking to conceptualise the causal tendencies that might explain what I observed in the world of the empirical. They resonate with the ways in which culture, religion, economic, social, psychological and linguistic factors seemed to interact in the children's homes (and subsequently in the kindergarten) to create children's experiences of ethnic identity. They cannot, however, be used at this stage to attempt a new, stronger critical realist analysis because such analysis depends on the adequacy of the data and, as we have seen, the process of observation, writing field notes and then producing a representation of them in the full ethnography was unsatisfactory. This is problematic in terms of analysis because critical realist perspectives maintain that a key concern for the social scientist is to provide an adequate account of observable effects. As we have seen, describing the effects carefully is extremely difficult because representation is so problematic but it is also very important because an inadequate conceptualisation of effects leads to difficulties in seeking to understand the causal tendencies that underpin them. As it was, my attempts at mapping experiences and events in the world of the empirical and actual in order to seek causal tendencies of explanation in the world of the real were undermined by the inadequacies of the data collection and by the fact that I was heavily influenced by the emerging messy analysis which was never mapped sufficiently systematically.

Thus, despite being aware of Clarke's criticism that analytical frameworks (and grounded theory in particular) tend to skate over differences and variation in a search for homogeneity, 'the normal' and coherence, this was

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exactly what I tended to do in analysing and categorising the homes of the Pakistani British children in terms of the extent of the influence of Islam and the degree of affluence and the homes of the White British children in terms of cleanliness and signs of relative wealth or poverty. It could be argued, following Houston (2010) that my analysis pointed to the significant generative mechanisms from the domains of culture and the economy dominating the domains of the person, situated activity and social settings as causal explanations for children's experiences of ethnic identity. It did so too easily, however, with the possibility of the explanations being misleading ones. As well as the lack of empirical detail, there was a lack of attention to competing explanations and a lack of nuance, leading to the very generalisation and stereotyping that I had been seeking to avoid. There was more evidence of these in the original analytic auto-ethnography but, as outlined above, the debates surrounding how much of the ethnographer's own feelings, ideas and musings should appear in the final thesis, meant that analytic auto-ethnography (or, in Delmont's terms, 2008, reflexive ethnography) did not appear to any real extent in the final ethnography and analysis. In removing this reflexivity, the world of the actual was perhaps inadequately conceptualised because the world of multiple explanations was impoverished.

The Potential of Critical Realist Ethnography

Thus it is argued that critical realist ethnography allied to reflexivity has the potential to be a powerful methodological framework which accepts the contested nature of reality but which provides a means of addressing possibilities and of bringing about change where it is needed. In order to harness its potential, however, the preceding discussion suggests that the research needed to be carried out differently in a number of respects.

The greatest challenge was that of recording and representing the world of the empirical. Whilst the problematic nature of the relationship between written, audio or visual recording methods, representations of them in written form and the 'real' needs to be acknowledged and taken account of, the use of photographs alongside field notes would perhaps have provided a more

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adequate means of framing or capturing the world of the empirical, without being overly intrusive. The adequacy of the account of the empirical world in the children's homes could also have been further enhanced by sharing the field notes, photographs and emerging ethnography with both the parents and the kindergarten staff in order that all could add to the framing by commenting, challenging and providing additional empirical detail where needed. Turning to the world of the 'actual', what would then be needed would be to consider in the case of the children's homes whether there were other events that may not have been seen and how what had been seen might relate to events that had not. At this stage, it is argued, analytical auto-ethnography or reflexivity needs to play a crucial role in enabling us to challenge straightforward readings and to consider as many events as possible in the world of the 'actual'. Alongside this, a sharing of research findings with the kindergarten staff and the parents, taking account of the worlds of the empirical and the actual, would then be critical in allowing for exploration of the ways in which the experiences of home and of kindergarten rubbed up against each other and how the difficulties that some of the children experienced could be understood. Here, as above, I would still, of course, have been left with the responsibility as the ethnographer, of resolving disagreements and determining what should finally 'count' but at least in so doing I would have been drawing on a range of evidence, not all of which emanated from me.

In short, it is suggested, a more systematic and robust critical realist analysis needed stronger empirical and reflexive foundations. These could have been provided by: the use of photography as a different 'text' or supplementary representational tool; dialogic exchanges with parents and kindergarten staff about the observations; harnessing the potential, interplay and complexities of making the familiar strange and the strange familiar within written and photographic 'texts'; and rigorous engagement with analytical auto-ethnography (or reflexivity). Such approaches would then form a stronger basis for systematically identifying, at least for the present and to the extent that our perceptions and representational abilities permit, what the causal tendencies for events and phenomena might be (drawing on Houston's (2010)

domains of the person, situated activity, social settings, culture and economy) and what these might help us to understand about the nature of ethnic identity in the world of the real. This, in turn, would then create a basis for considering whether the nature of ethnic identity as constructed socially in the world of the real has discriminatory consequences and what possible changes may be needed to early childhood practices for children from different ethnic groups to be able to benefit equally from early childhood education.

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