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Researching across differences: Unsettling methodological discussions from a minority's perspectives

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Abstract

Just as we inhabit multiple positions and identities in our everyday life, when conducting fieldwork and analysis, we also both consciously and unconsciously draw on different positions as researchers. Simultaneously, through field interactions, we, too, are positioned by research participants. Some of these positions and identities can be flexible and fluid while other positions such as 'race' or gender can be imposed and rigid. There are ample methodological discussions interrogating the question of insider-outsider positions. One of the conclusions in this body of literature highlights the importance of reflexivity and awareness of positionality. This line of literature, moreover, focuses on the fluidity of social positions by emphasising the transgressing of hierarchies between the interviewees and the interviewed. However still, methodological discussions tend either reinforce the insider-outsider binary thinking, and not to further than reflexivity. Our key claim is that it is precisely because reflections written from the perspective of researchers belonging to a minority group of different kinds are still scarce to date. Thus, there is an urgent need to critically engage with a 'traditional' gaze as a researcher. In this article, we take a step to unsettle the taken-for-granted mode of knowledge production by reflecting both upon our own experiences of conducting research across various social differences in Austria, Germany, Japan, and Sweden.

Introduction

When I tell colleagues that I am conducting research on spatial and career mobility of migrant academics, the most common response is, “Oh, you are studying about yourself.” While I cannot read their mind to understand what they meant and why they say so, I am often left with a sense of irritation as if migrants studying about migrants were something rare and thus to be commented upon (Kyoko Shinozaki, scholar of Migration and Mobility Studies)

I identify myself as a non-white, Asian and Japanese researcher based in Sweden. In Japan, I am invisible phenotypically and become the majority, however the lack of the Japanese social code reveals the fact that I am a Japanese abroad. In Sweden, I am phenotypically visible and racialized as Asian. (Sayaka Osanami Törngren, scholar of Race and Ethnicity)

When reading methodology literature on fieldwork, both in the social sciences generally and in migration studies more specifically, one of the themes addressed is the field relations between researchers and their research participants (cf. Hammersley and Atkinson 2004). Qualitative studies typically involve careful attention to, and extensive discussion of, the questions concerning methodology, interpretation and practice in relation to the positions of researchers and the researched. A commonly discussed matter are the power structure of the researcher-researched relationship and the implications of what it means to occupy an ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’ position in research (Merton, 1972). The dominant underlying assumption here is that the researcher is entering her/his field, which is foreign, that is the context to which the researcher does not belong. A successful fieldworker is characterized as someone who is “going native”, who can immerse and assimilate herself/himself into the new, foreign environment that she/he studies. In the case of migration studies, then, this would often imply that the researcher is in a position of power, examining migrants and racialized groups who are a minority.

Methodological discussions in involving researchers and the researched of different racial and ethnic background generally center on the challenges that white researchers face when approaching minority populations or concerns among researchers of ethnic and racial minority backgrounds regarding studying their own or other minority groups (e.g. Adamson and Donovan 2002; Sands et al. 2007).¹ As Hoong Sin (2007) critically observes, there is a substantial imbalance in the literature on interracial and interethnic research: Whiteness and otherness are rarely problematized and examined in a ‘reversed gaze’, and race and ethnicity are nearly always observed and analyzed with a ‘white gaze’ (Hoong Sin, 2007: 490). Moreover, Song and Parker (1995) point out that little attention is paid the ethnic minority researcher who interviews persons of partially shared racial or ethnic background.



On a similar note, there have been notable contributions in the past few years, which challenge the classical dominant binary between “insiders” and “outsiders” specifically within migration research. Some reject a priori commonalities constructed along a national/ethnic lens (Nowicka and Ryan 2015) while others critically engage with challenges and potential when migrant researchers themselves study migrants, complicating the category of “insiders” emphasizing their plurality (Carling, Erdal and Ezzati 2014; Matejskova 2014; Nowicka and Cieslik 2014).

One group of scholars advocates the “matching” of social characteristics of the researcher and the interviewees (e.g. Archer, 2002; Fine, 2004;) while another group of researchers argues that “matching” does not necessarily reduce the power imbalance in an interview, and thus does not automatically lead to a more accurate and non-marginalizing interpretation of the studied phenomenon (e.g. Gunaratnam, 2003). Numerous studies (e.g. Hoong Sin, 2007; Krysan and Couper, 2003) have noted research participants’ social desirability needs, the race-of-interviewer effect (RIE), and the “‘adjustment’ that people make to their opinions and attitudes when questioned by an interviewer from another racial or ethnic group” (Gunaratnam, 2003: 54). Nevertheless, despite the important influence that race and other social positions seem to have on how respondents behave during an interview, it remains unclear what effect exactly these have on the “truthfulness” of responses (Rhodes, 1994). Moreover, matching is grounded in a binary understanding of the researcher as either insider or outsider, and thereby this approach ignores the dynamic interplay of social difference while reproducing simplistic beliefs regarding commonality and difference among the members of various social groups (Tinker and Armstrong, 2008).

Why is it that methodological discussions tend either to reinforce the insider-outsider binary thinking, or fail to go further than reflexivity? Our key claim is that it is precisely because reflections written from the perspective of researchers belonging to a minority group based on for example race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation — and an intersection of these — are still scarce to date. Thus, there is an urgent need to critically engage with the ‘traditional’ gaze as a researcher who very often belongs to the dominant group. In this article, we take a step to unsettle the taken-for-granted mode of knowledge production by reflecting upon our own experiences of conducting research across various social differences, from the perspective of two Japanese female researchers, based in Sweden (Sayaka Osanami Törngren), Austria and Germany (Kyoko Shinozaki). Our initial common standing point is us being ascribed as a minority/majority, Asian and female, however, there are also notable differences in our positionalities and the process of negotiation of our positionalities.



Reflexivity: our positions as researchers and our experiences

As we claim above, evaluating research processes by including the researcher's positionalities deserves more attention. This is especially relevant to the social sciences in which the socially constructed nature of a 'reality' has been heatedly debated by feminist philosophers and critical social scientists (Haraway 1988; Harding 1992; Plummer 2001). After all, whilst the researcher can truly be empathetic towards the people and the communities they study, it is her/his worldview through which the researcher observes and makes sense of the field encounters. This debate can be linked to the 'writing culture' debate in anthropology (Clifford and Marcus 1986) in which the conventional scientific authority of anthropology is challenged. The argument here is that academic textual representations are fundamentally produced in asymmetrical power relations between the researcher and the researched. For example, overlooking these relations leads to producing colonial discourses on and knowledge about a singular 'third world woman' (Mohanty 1991). In one of her earlier pieces, Shinozaki has argued that "to think about 'whose knowledge; what sort of knowledge; what constitutes the social?' (Moore 1996, p. 1) requires us to be self-reflexive" (Shinozaki 2012: 1812-1813). In the following discussion, we would like to question the taken for granted 'traditional gaze' based on our ascribed racial status in relation to gender and social class, by presenting our own experiences in conducting research.

Sayaka Osanami Törngren

In Japan, I conducted interviews with Japanese officials and stakeholders involved with refugee resettlement programs. There was an unspoken understanding that I do understand the cultural elements of Japan, but at the same time, a clear understanding that I was Japanese overseas who was unfamiliar with the Japanese context of refugee reception. I was given opportunities to ask critical questions regarding refugee reception and integration in Japan. This gave me a unique opportunity to tap into the issue of refugee reception and integration a rather political and sensitive issue in Japan and interesting discussions, although many of them were "off the record" (read more in Osanami Törngren 2015).

In Sweden, when I interviewed white Swedes on attitudes towards interracial relationship, the question of "where are you from?" emerged. This question should be analyzed critically, in relation to the question of race, whiteness and the norm of what it means to be Swedish. The fact that most of the telephone interviewees (16 out of 21) who did not "see" me did not ask the question but the majority of the face to face interviewees did (6 out of 8), reveals the negotiation of the positions between my interviewees and myself (read more in Osanami Törngren 2018). Exploring mixed identity among multiracial and multiethnic persons in Japan and Sweden thus provided an interesting arena where positions of the interviewees and I were negotiated through implicit and explicit inquiries of similarities and differences. Questions such as



“why are you interested in mixed identity?” and “are you mixed as well?” were recurring. Through sharing my experiences as an Asian in Sweden and a mother of mixed-race children, we recognized common experiences. At the same time, our positions differed sharply with the identification as Swedish, which the interviewees strongly possessed and expressed.

Kyoko Shinozaki

When I was conducting fieldwork with irregular Filipina and Filipino domestic workers in a German city (Shinozaki 2015), I had mixed experiences. On the one hand, most of them saw me *also* as Asian — as the majority population in this city saw them and me. Thus, my research participants wanted me to confirm this shared identification, for example by way of the shared dietary practice, i.e. how terribly they/we miss cooked meals served with rice and how important for them/us to cook warm meals instead of having a simple, cold dinner (i.e. dark bread, cheese and ham) even during the winter. Thus, almost every weekend during my 18 month-fieldwork period, they would graciously invite me to their flat to “treat” me with a series of self-made dishes. This provided me with invaluable access to their lives.

On the other hand, I still vividly recall several striking moments of literally embodying difference (Shinozaki 2012). One such moment was when I was introduced by one Filipino to his Filipino friend as a potential interviewee. When shaking hands, he told me, “Kyoko, you have a very soft hand!” While for some Filipinas/Filipinos (and for many Europeans) I could “pass” as a Filipina, when I hung out with them, his remarks made me unmistakably clear that we were located in two opposite ends of a social class-based hierarchy. As a then-doctoral researcher with a prestigious fellowship living in Germany, I was able to concentrate on my research only. By contrast, he and many other Filipinas and Filipinos had coarse hands (some even suffered from allergic reactions) as they were exposed to aggressive chemicals on a daily basis.

Concluding remarks

Phoenix (1994) writes that if different results are produced depending on the different social characteristics of the researcher, then it is precisely for this reason that researchers of varying social positions should perform interviews to “illustrates the ways in which knowledge [is] ‘situated’” (1994: 66). Our experiences above show clear incidents in which the boundaries of our positions were implicitly and explicitly negotiated. As Song and Parker (1995) write, we experience multiple positioning and identification shifts during the interviews, and the implications and effects of the differences between us and the interviewees varied and were unpredictable in the fieldwork context generally, and in each interview in particular.

As a concluding remark, we also want to highlight the issue of knowledge production. Firstly, it relates to the question of who produces knowledge. In both countries, academics of migrant and non-white



background are still marginalized to a varying degree (read more in e.g. Behtoui and Leivestad 2019; Shinozaki 2017). Secondly, related to the first point, is the question of what kind of knowledge is produced. There has been a move towards problematizing the tendency to define “migrants” as an inherently disadvantaged group with a deficit vis-à-vis the local population in a predetermined way (cf. Mecheril and Rose 2012; Dahinden 2016; Foroutan 2016), which we think has led to the institutionalization of the “traditional gaze”. Reflecting upon the reality of Europe and beyond, it is urgent to shift our focus to treating racial minority studies in relation to a majority, and migrant and non-migrant populations in an integral way. Thirdly, we join the call in stressing the needs for a critical engagement with interdisciplinary methodological reflection, especially bringing together Ethnic and Racial studies and Migration Studies. We believe that cross-fertilization is crucial in order to break the insider-outsider binary and the traditional gaze in knowledge production.

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ⁱ Here we primarily refer to the works published in English.

