

The Splintering Selves: A Reflective Journey

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As researchers we need to maintain an informed reflexive consciousness to contextualise our own subjectivity in data interpretation and representation of experiences in the research process. Self-reflexivity promotes the reconciliation of personal motivations for conducting research and the extent of accountability owed to the population studied. Since no research, using any mode of inquiry, has no point of view and since research is not a value-free exercise, the challenge is not to eliminate but to document the effects of personas that influence our behaviour and positionality. As researchers we need to be committed to showing our place in the setting being investigated. We need to carefully monitor our position in the research process, and the relationship with the informants, which is critical to maintaining a focus on the research agenda. Hence as self-reflexive researchers it is important that we maintain a research agenda to secure a forum for informants to express, be accountable to and defend and validate knowledge claims. I offer my own reflections below as an Arabic speaking female from a Jordanian heritage doctoral student researching multilingual women's social literacy practices in the Yemeni community in South Yorkshire.

In any qualitative research study that seeks to give meaning to participants' voices, it is important to remember that the interpretation and process of inquiry can be influenced by the researchers' social and cultural identities. I faced and continue to face a number of challenges and opportunities as a result of my positionality in the current research. I have come to recognise how significant individual and cultural contexts allow access, rapport, and trust to groups of multilingual female learners.

The insider-outsider position is sometimes seen as an epistemological principle centred on the issue of access. From the literature I have reviewed in my study it seems that issue of access can take two forms. One is a 'monopolistic access' (Merton, 1972), in which the researcher possess exclusive knowledge of the community and its members, or where the researcher has privileged access, in which he or she has a claim to the hidden knowledge of the group that an outsider as a 'professional stranger' who is detached from the commitments of the group under study would be unable to access (Agar, 1996). In this sort of framework the insider is an individual who possesses intimate knowledge of the community and its members, and the general assumption in the literature is that this intimate knowledge offers insights that are at times difficult or impossible to access by an outsider. The values of shared experience, greater access, cultural interpretation, and deeper understanding and clarity of thought, are closely tied together and inform one another in a variety of ways. As an insider I am also able to interpret the Yemeni culture; having a shared understanding of the normative rules of the community contributes to minimizing marginalisation. An ability to utilize insiderness to create a rapport relatively free from tensions contributes to the legitimacy of the research in the eyes of the informants. This also helps to facilitate a shared knowledge of the normative rules, values and belief systems. I and my research informants come from different class positions in our respective countries of origin but in the UK we have, to a certain extent been homogenised under the gaze of a hegemonic cultural identity that partially erases class within the more general category of 'Other'. This in turn impacts on the concept of Britishness as we daily experience it. Our Britishness to a certain extent is constructed for us by being subject to the gaze of others. Our adoption of Islamic dress marks us Muslims; as 'other' and that visibility constructs us as outsiders, a commonality that cuts across our own class and geographical locations. In relation to the meanings

attached to an over-riding Arab culture and shared 'insiderness', in terms of gender relations, class, rural/urban orientation our identities get flattened and erased, excess being replaced with singularity. I am an insider in this sense for my research informants because of my outsider status in the eyes, hearts and minds of people who view all Muslim women as a possible threat in the light of 7/11 and other terrorist attacks. Under this all other differences are subsumed and I would suggest that all our identities as Arabic women have been transformed by being subject to a gaze that at best regards us as being different and as not belonging.

There are issues concerning the conceptual definition of insiderness and its relationship to outsidersness, and the search to understand why insiderness is considered revealing in an epistemological manner that is considered inaccessible to an outsider. As an Arabic speaking researcher I may be seen to have advanced cultural knowledge of the community; which serves as a source of understanding that informs the researcher. However, no matter where we are positioned as researchers, we should not disregard questioning one's own inside knowledge. As a researcher who shares cultural, linguistic and ethnic identities with my informants, I still had to negotiate objectivity and accuracy before I entered the research setting with the same rigour as any other researcher, whether I had easier access to the research field or not. However these advantages are not absolute and it is important to be aware of ethical and methodological dilemmas associated with entering the field, positioning and disclosing shared relationships and disengagements.

Reflecting on My Own Positionality

Looking through the literature on researcher positionality, I found it difficult to find a term that best describes my positionality; a term that I felt represented the role I play in the research. Reading through the literature on insider, outsider, native, indigenous and marginal researcher, I still could not find a term that seemed to fit. I came across the term 'outsider within' by Collins (1998). This term seemed to describe researchers like myself who find themselves between groups of unequal power. This unequal power stems from the interaction of hierarchies of race, class, gender, and language. My social location in specific historical contexts of race, gender, class and language inequality needs to be explored to examine the influence this may have on the research process and this examination needs to be made explicit.

There was a dimension of risk built into my research, one that I had not really prepared for, and only became aware of later in the research. As a multilingual researcher, information about me, my family, and my place in the community became part of the research process. Disclosure reinforced the duality of my role in the community, as an 'outsider within'. My role as a researcher, and thus an outsider, enabled the informants to ask about my education background, experiences, and identity. My community membership meant that this kind of information was significant to the informants in different ways. They were not asking an 'other', or an 'outsider', they were asking a community member. And so this dynamic status made the research relationship equalised in a different way than that advocated by feminist methodologists with outsider status (Smith 1987, Oakley, 1991). I found that there were multiple ways that my membership would be read. This demonstrates that my researcher identity was not one-dimensional or certain, but needed to be negotiated.

To do justice to the research and to my informants, it was critical that I examined my own positionality as a multilingual, ethnic, female researcher, affiliated with a British institution, conducting ethnographic research with Yemeni women in South Yorkshire. I often ask myself whether I have been too involved with post-modernist discourse about presentations of selves and identities. I also ask myself why do I continue to seek other ethnic minority women in order to investigate their marginality, hybridity, resistance and empowerment? However, I tend to find that the combination of my identity has led me readily to people, most often ethnic multilingual women, who are from an Arabic speaking background, and whom I perceive as being marginalized in terms of educational opportunities. Nevertheless, other aspects of my identity, such as my educational background, fluency in English and social class often set me apart from the women. The shared points of cultural commonality and language allow me to attain an emic rather than etic view. The dominance of women in my study is another feature that fits with my identity as a female researcher, with an interest in women's studies. The shared cultural assumptions about gender roles and the acceptability of certain behaviours within the Arab culture, the value of shared experiences; greater access, cultural interpretation and deeper understanding and clarity of thought, are all closely tied together and inform one another in a variety of ways. The reasons for studying 'my own kind' that represent common themes found in the nature of my identity and life experiences as a marginalized ethnic minority female, motivated me to seek more meaning about my own social identity. I was also motivated by the sense of being constricted within the boundaries of traditional theoretical explanations and conceptual frameworks that rarely spoke of 'the stigmatised social identity and educational experiences of minority women' (Collins, 1986:34).

In my own research I have become increasingly aware of the contribution of the different levels of my own cultural identity to my researcher 'persona'. My own macro-cultural frame of reference is an overarching cultural identity as a person of Arabic-heritage, whereas the micro- cultures with which I identify include Arabic and British cultural frameworks. Aspects of my identity have lead to a persona, which I explore further in my study. My preference for ethnographic and life history research has led to a persona where the researcher maybe seen as advocate, and my preference for an inclusive and just view of education has led to a persona that I label 'critical researcher'. My third persona is interested in the education and literacy practices of multilingual women and some form of justice for them.

People's social positions, cultural traditions and other factors influence their identities and so there are different levels of distinction between insider and outsider. However, these notions of difference between insider and outsider are also subject to change. The fact that I was born into an Arabic community means that both outsiders and insiders see me as an 'insider', but I feel that I can only be considered as someone on the periphery. My position is on the margins of Arabic society, of Yemeni traditional culture, and also of western society. I am both someone inside (an Arabic speaker), and someone adrift without (outside Yemeni society). In my particular situation I found it very difficult to define the concepts of 'insider', 'outsider', and at times I felt that this form of debate is inadequate in explaining the complexities of the insider and outsider dichotomy; as Deutsch (1980; 123) explains 'We are all multiple insiders and outsiders'. The researcher's positionality seems to be a process of achievement rather than simply a positionality which is ascribed, a 'process of ongoing evaluation' Deutsch (1980), which seems to be located somewhere, always moving back and forth.

Finally, there still remains a need to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the status of a researcher as both object and subject within qualitative inquiry. Through reflections of my own positionality, I find that it is more epistemologically beneficial to view researcher status not in terms of an ascribed or achieved status, which gives the impression that one can actually reach a final level of understanding, but in terms of a continuously shifting positionality.

Translation Dilemmas: Reframing the Gaze

As a multilingual researcher involved in cross-cultural research, for me it is fundamental that the act of translation/interpretation is explored and that the epistemological implications of being the researcher and translator/interpreter at the same time are examined. The debate on translation/interpretation in research should involve the hierarchies of language, power, and the situated epistemologies of the researcher, and issues around naming and speaking for people who may be seen as 'other'. In mainstream society, individuals who do not speak the dominant language in that country became dependent on others to speak for them; 'speaking for others, in any language is a political issue, which involves the use of language to construct self and other' (Temple & Young, 2004:167).

Being the researcher and translator/interpreter, it is important that I situate and engage myself with these issues, because they relate to my own epistemological positions. As a multilingual individual, I have always lived my life across languages, code switching, translating for my parents, and being involved in the dilemmas of the translated worlds, this all being part of the way I have

learnt to communicate, all being entirely normal to me. The importance of identifying the act of translation/interpretation was particularly important in terms of exploring my epistemological position as the researcher. From reading through various cross-cultural research studies, it seems that a discussion of the epistemological and methodological issues around translation/interpretation across languages has been neglected in cross-cultural research. An explanation for this neglect could be because the status of the languages involved in the research, the status of the speakers of such languages and the hierarchy of the languages. As Temple and Young (2004) explain, 'translation itself has power to reinforce or to subvert longstanding cross-cultural relationships but that power tends to rest in how translation is executed and integrated into research design and not just in the act of translation per se' (P167).

It has become a common trend that when reading literature on ethnic communities in Britain, little reference is made to language issues, translation/interpretation or even identification of the process of translation/interpretation, and when reading interview data, the informants all seem fluent English speakers. In this sort of research, as the reader I find myself entirely lost in terms of understanding the research process, the language used to collect and later interpret the data. As a reader I found it very difficult to engage with such texts, particularly when there is no available information on the research process and the source language or languages of the research are seen as being obstacles that have been overcome and controlled. This type of research where the researcher collects data and presents it as a collection of facts from the informants, and where the translator/interpreter, the act of translation/interpretation, the identity of the researcher are seen to be irrelevant to the representation of the

informants and to the informants engagements with that representation (Temple and Young, 2004).

Redefining the Dual Role: Researcher and Translator/Interpreter

It is important that as researchers we acknowledge our locations within the social world, and explore how our locations influence the way we see things. Temple and Young suggest that, 'there is no neutral position from which to translate' (Temple & Young, 2004:164), therefore the power relationships within research need to be acknowledged, whether it is the relationship between the researcher and informants or between researcher and translator/interpreter. The implications of multilingual informants of multilingual locations within language hierarchies also need to be explored.

Researchers and academics with an interest in the power of the written word and the process by which it is produced have argued that there is no single correct translation/interpretation of a text, and as a multilingual researcher I acknowledge that translation/interpretation is not about synonym, syntax and definitely not a matter of finding the meaning of a text in a culture, by using a dictionary, but in understanding that the language is 'tied to local realities, to literacy forms and to changing identities' (Simon, 1996:137).

Through my own experiences in translation/interpretation I have come to learn that communication across languages involves more than a literal transfer of information, because the translator/interpreter is involved in discussing concepts, ideas, positions which are all important part of the negotiation process of 'cultural meaning'. Dictionaries are not sufficient in trying to establish an understanding across languages. Language involves values, beliefs,

concepts and thoughts, which may not have the same conceptual equivalence in the language into which it is to be translated. During translation/interpretation, I had to make decisions about the cultural meanings which language carried, and spent a lot of time trying to evaluate the degree to which different worlds inhibit the same meaning. In a similar way to a researcher, as a translator/interpreter I see myself as active in the process and am accountable to the way I represent the informants and their languages. In the current study I am fluent in the languages of my informants, I have opportunities in terms of research methods that may not necessarily be open to other researchers in cross-language research. I am able to discuss points in texts where I had to stop and think about the meaning, and a discussion of the translation/interpretation process became a kind of a check to the validity of interpretation (Young & Ackerman, 2001). This by no means produces texts that are 'absolute truths', because as a researcher I am always situated in complex social locations.

Through my dual role as researcher and translator/interpreter, the role seemed to be shifting, and this was linked to how I am positioned. Researching from inside the language of the informants is an emancipatory and epistemological position that Ladd (2003:186) suggests 'can only be fulfilled by the researcher-translator/interpreter who shares the common culture of those researched'. This however does not necessarily mean that the multilingual researcher produces better research than the monolingual researcher, my research is just different. In addition, being multilingual is not enough to enable me to 'represent other', because translation/interpretation is not just about 'racial matching' of researcher with informants; as Twine (2000) points out, race and ethnicity are not the only, or always the over-riding factors in translation/interpretation work. In addition to being Arabic speaking and having

a certain degree of insiderness, my position was not as unproblematic as expected, and as Twine (2000: 16) argues 'difference may be a stimulator as well as a block to communication', which suggests a further epistemological and ontological point:

We see, then that the utility of racial matching is contingent on the subordinate person having acquired a particular subjectivity.... In my experience...researcher presume that different ideological positions are attached to one's location in racial hierarchies. It should be evident, however that when racial subalterns do not possess a developed critique of racism or idealize the racially privilege groups, race matching may not be efficacious methodological strategy (Twine, 2000:16).

In research where translators/interpreters are employed, it is important to consider whether the translator/interpreter is playing the role of an informant or a 'neutral and objective transmitter of messages' (Temple & Young, 2004:167). Without an open dialogue with the translator/interpreter about their views and perceptions of the issues being discussed, it becomes difficult to allow for differences in understanding of words, concepts and worldviews across languages. Hence, it is important that we report the translator/interpreter's involvement in the research process, since they have also contributed to the knowledge being produced and they are also socially positioned, this would also mean extending calls for reflexivity in cross-language research with translators/interpreters.

As individuals, we are all positioned differently in the social world, and so we begin to understand people as social actors. Because we are positioned differently, there is not one way in which to describe our social worlds, but many different ways. Our social locations influence our experiences and the

way we describe these experiences. Young (1997) argues that as researchers, informants, and translators/interpreter we are all produces of dispositioned accounts. We all have different stories to tell, different histories, and we occupy different social positions, but we understand each other across difference through dialogue (Young 1997).

To conclude, as researchers we need to be reflective of the ways in which we, as individuals with social identities and particular perspectives, have an impact on the interpersonal relations of fieldwork. This involves placing such perspectives into wider contexts and considering the consequences for the production of research accounts. This means being explicit about our own social and political positions, making visible the translation/interpretation process and being 'accountable', in addition to including translators/interpreter in debates on reflexivity. As a multilingual researcher, I have come to learn that one cannot assume that there are no problems in translating concepts across languages, instead in my study I have spent time trying to make my dual identities as translator/interpreter and researcher visible which have highlighted some of the tensions in asking the researcher to represent the 'other'. My multilingual identity has at times left me belonging and not belonging, being on the borders and the periphery, then in the centre, my locations continually shifting.

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