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FORUM

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Understanding, embracing and reflecting upon the messiness of doctoral fieldwork

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ABSTRACT

This Forum issue discusses the centrality of the fieldwork in doctoral research. The inevitability of researchers' influence and of their values apparent during and after their fieldwork calls for a high degree of reflexivity. Since the standard methodology textbooks do not sufficiently guide on addressing such challenges, doctoral researchers go through stressful phases, at times revising various decisions they made before starting fieldwork. By drawing upon four case studies from varied contexts, this forum highlights some of these challenges including: going beyond signing the consent form and building rapport to elicit student voices; the ethical implications of White privilege of researchers turning consent into an obligatory contract with participants; unanticipated delays in the fieldwork opening up new possibilities; and tensions resulting from negotiating between insider and outsider identities while researching in two hostile contexts.

Introduction

Arif Naveed and Nozomi Sakata

International and comparative education researchers engaged in cross-cultural settings are constantly challenged by on-the-ground realities of fieldwork. The coherence of their research design entails a critical engagement with the unfolding of various competing positions on the nature of knowledge and its acquisition, the epistemological positions, in the research sites. Their research quality requires systematically reflecting on the impact of their own presence, not just in the field, but also on the entire process of knowledge creation. The researchers are expected to reconcile the tensions between the local and the universal as they negotiate with the local realities (Shamim and Qureshi 2013), given that the 'ethical guidelines' they learn in the Western academy are often accused of Eurocentrism from

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postcolonial perspectives (Said 1978; Mohanty 2003, 76). Theorising data is subject to further challenges posed by the increasing concerns over the *transposibility* of the mainstream theoretical frameworks (Connell 2007). Such theoretical challenges bring fieldwork to the centre stage of the doctoral research projects requiring thoughtful responses.

The given context demands researchers to constantly reflect upon the assumptions and positions they hold (Greene and Hogan 2005), including their identities and ideology (Padgett 2008) and choices of methods (Punch 2002) and analysis (Arnot and Naveed 2014). Reflexivity is thus fundamental in ensuring transparency throughout the process of research (Rossman and Rallis 2010, 384). International and comparative educational research, by virtue of its positioning within cross-cultural settings, multiplies the relevance of reflexivity in the fieldwork where various power relations emerge inevitably (Robinson-Pant and Singal 2013). Fieldwork often reveals to researchers from a Western university their privileged background over the marginalised populations they choose to study (McEwan 2011; Phillips and Schweisfurth 2008), raising questions about the nature of their relationship with research participants. This requires researchers to demonstrate a systematic reflection on these relationships in order to achieve transparency of the data generated as well as in the process of analysing data. While the need for reflexivity is apparent, putting it into practice is a much harder and less discussed step in research (Blaisdell 2015). To bridge this gap in research, the authors in this Forum provide accounts of their ongoing practice and experiences of reflexivity from diverse field sites.

Western standard ethics guidelines do not necessarily work smoothly in local contexts, often posing ethical dilemmas in the field, which are well studied in the literature in international and comparative education (c.f., Shamim and Qureshi 2013; Tikly and Bond 2013; Hett and Hett 2013; Clark 2012). For instance, the ethical procedure approved by a British institution may not be culturally understood by people of different countries (Shamim and Qureshi 2013; Robinson-Pant and Singal 2013). Insisting upon adherence to these ethical guidelines may discourage people's participation, or even harm them. Similarly, the standard guidelines might not sufficiently cover some of the ethical challenges emerging from the field. The authors in this Forum shed lights on such ethical challenges they have experienced and attempted to resolve them, demonstrating the ways they report them in their doctoral theses.

Fieldwork entails further puzzles regarding the relationship between theory and methods (Billo and Hiemstra 2013). Almost all fieldwork requires changes in the pre-planned schedule, methods and/or research design. Following Valentine's (2001) illustration, new themes can emerge in the field, which will necessitate reforming research questions. Issues of access and other practicalities may force the researchers to a shift in the overall research scope. These necessary changes encountered during the fieldwork may not be in coherence with the theoretical framework adopted, even when carefully thought through beforehand. This poses new challenges on the one hand, but opens up new possibilities on the other. The researchers in the field not only come across the requisite of being flexible but they also constantly question the relationship between theoretical frameworks and methodological choices made.

International and comparative educational researchers also work with hegemonic influences of the mainstream theoretical knowledge produced in the Global North, which is convincingly accused of Western construction of its 'inferior other' through discursive practices (Said 1978). The influence of colonialism in constructing the contexts – which subsumes all differences of race, class and experiences (Mohanty 2003) and constructs hegemonic notions of the 'poor' (Green 2006), 'poor child' (Hopkins and Sriparkash 2015)

and 'poor women' (Zaman 2008) – calls for critical reflection on theory itself that researchers try to build. These notions and conceptual frameworks have a dialectic relationship with the realities studied on the ground through fieldwork. The researchers are thus demanded at the stage of data collection and analysis to engage with the mainstream theoretical perspectives while exploring the possibilities of alternative frameworks.

Lastly, the unique position of doctoral researchers in international and comparative contexts may cause specific strain and pressure as they enter into their field sites. For most doctoral researchers, their PhD is their first time to carry out a relatively long-term research project individually (Billo and Hiemstra 2013). They are constantly challenged to establish academic status within a few years, and a slight change in the fieldwork plan may cause a delay and disturbance in their career pursuit. Given the time constraint in responding to the challenges, we believe that this Forum will provide an account of ongoing fieldwork that can help other researchers to learn from, relate to and improve their own research experience.

The Forum introduces some of the key papers prepared for the British Association for International and Comparative Education 2016 Student Conference on 'Understanding, embracing and reflecting upon the messiness of the fieldwork'. The presentations at the conference addressed some of these issues, broadly classified into following themes:

- negotiating the researcher's identity and practicing reflexivity;
- positioning in the field and negotiating layers of authority and power relations;
- resolving the tensions between local and universal codes of ethics, and reporting them;
- confronting hegemonic paradigms in theorising complexity of social life in the Global South; and
- tentativeness of research design in the wake of unexpected realities on the ground.

This Forum invited papers reporting on fieldwork experiences. The four individual contributions provide only some examples of such issues presented at the conference and confronted by the doctoral researchers. Dealing with diverse issues of the messiness of the fieldwork, each paper touches upon one or more of the above sub-themes. The authors exemplify the criticality and usefulness of reflexivity as they report on their data collection experiences.

Kefallinou reports on her fieldwork experience on students with special educational needs in English and Greek secondary schools, highlighting the difficulties in eliciting their voices. She suggests the need to build a desired rapport rather than just seeking formal 'consent'. Sakata's fieldwork on learner-centered pedagogy in Tanzania demonstrates the impact of her perceived 'White privilege' on the research participants' signing informed consent. She points out the limits of ticking the boxes of ethical guidelines in ensuring an ethical conduct of research in a context vastly different from where these guidelines are developed. In the third contribution Young reflects on the challenges to adhere to the initial research design for investigating ethnic and linguistic construction in bilingual Polish-born teenagers. She argues that fewer than anticipated participants can actually increase the depth and breadth of the data generated. Lastly, Anand reflects on the tensions and anxieties associated with her identity as 'insider' and 'outsider' in her comparative study of the perception of relationship between and in the two politically mutually hostile contexts of India and Pakistan. Her use of vignettes illustrates the way she negotiated her roles and positions in the two countries throughout the research process.

It is hoped that the work shared provides helpful lessons not just for coping with the messy fieldwork but also in identifying new possibilities in the course of research. We also

hope that this Forum enhances understanding of the complexity related to doctoral fieldwork by opening up the space for constructive and critical dialogue on the topic and we invite doctoral researchers to further this conversation.

Practicing reflexivity in research with students

Anthoula Kefallinou

Over recent years the importance of reflexivity has become an overarching theme in research with students (Christensen and James 2008; Greene and Hogan 2005; Spyrou 2011). Reflexivity involves researchers critically reflecting not only on their different role, position and assumptions, but also on the choice of methods and their application while engaging with students (Punch 2002). In this section the notion of reflexive engagement is discussed, drawing on some reflections from the ongoing data collection of a cross-cultural PhD study. The study is qualitative in nature and focuses on students with special educational needs (SEN) in English and Greek secondary schools. The main research question is: 'How do students with SEN in English and Greek secondary schools experience inclusive practice?'

The study's methods include document analysis, classroom observations, interviews combined with participatory methods for eliciting student voice and the systematic use of a research diary. For the purposes of this study, two secondary schools in each context are recruited, from which 12 secondary students with SEN are selected as participants (6 students from the UK and 6 from Greece). The fieldwork in each participating school starts by observing each student during one school day; the student is then asked to give me a 'guided tour' and to take photographs of the school; subsequently, an in-depth discussion with each student takes place in two separate individual interviews.

The discussion that follows is structured around three 'critical incidents' that I had to address during fieldwork in the UK schools, which encouraged me to engage more practically with reflexivity, particularly in relation to: (1) the ethical considerations of my research; (2) the use of methods; and (3) the representation of student voice.

Ethical considerations: interviewing 'Brad Pitt'

> Brad is a student in Key Stage 3. He is in the autistic spectrum and he has also been diagnosed as having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). When Brad enters the room for our interview he seems angry and reluctant to talk to me. He says: 'Who am I to give you an interview? Brad Pitt?' He turns his back on me and doesn't talk at all. I don't know the reason he is upset (Extract from research diary).

The incident above was regarded as an 'ethically important moment' (Guillemin and Gillam 2004), which I had to deal with during my pilot study. Two weeks before the start of the data collection Brad has eagerly given his oral and written consent to participate in my research. In our previous encounters (during the consent process, the classroom observations and the 'guided tour'), I was given the impression that Brad was excited to be participating in my research. This is why his reaction before the start of our first interview surprised me and made me think more carefully about the danger of coercing participation.

The specific incident pointed to the need to make constant efforts to 'bridge the gap' between myself and the students' world. Besides, the requirement for participation and

democratic inclusivity is one of the underpinning values of learner voice work (Robinson and Taylor 2007), which I couldn't ignore during my fieldwork. In order to address the power imbalance between myself and Brad, I decided to have a long discussion with him, during which he was reminded of the research process and his right to withdraw. We negotiated the timing of the interviews and the order of the activities during the interviews. I also emphasised the importance that his 'voice' had for my study. I felt that the latter argument in particular has empowered him and was what made him change his mind and decide to be interviewed. For future data collection I kept in mind that I had to ask permission to proceed on an ongoing basis. Most importantly, I had to spend more time discussing and negotiating with the students about the research process. I was convinced that this was the only way to develop the necessary rapport with them, which would permit their meaningful participation in my research and the generation of rich data.

Use of methods: communication difficulties

> I found it very difficult to approach Rahman and Debbie, as they were mostly giving me 'yes' and 'no' answers, without elaborating much. In order to break the uncomfortable silence, I kept asking them questions, without leaving enough time for them to answer – it looked more like an interrogation, rather than an interview! [Extract from research diary]

Rahman and Debbie were two students who could be considered as 'challenging' cases: Rahman had language impairment and Debbie had severe and complex needs as a result of a degenerative condition. Following the first individual interview with them, a feeling of confusion and uncertainty was dominant: did their reluctance to talk reflect their inability to express themselves, as a result of their inexperience or immaturity? Was it because I haven't gained their trust, which could facilitate a deeper discussion? Or my poor interviewing skills and/or the use of inappropriate questions to blame?

In order to find answers to these questions, I decided to go back to the literature, which helped me to realise that instead of focusing and insisting on specific questions, I had to remain flexible during the interviews. Gollop (2000) suggests that it is more helpful to think of interviews with children as conversation, providing them with the opportunity to be heard. I was also reminded that the proposed methods and instruments had to be constantly questioned reflexively during the research process (Davis, Watson and Cunningham-Burley 2000). After listening to the initial interviews, I realised that some sentence structures proved to be too complex for the specific students, as they were frequently asking me for clarification. I therefore decided to simplify the language of some questions for the second interview. I also decided to begin the second round of interviews with the general prompts that were initially included at the end of the interview schedule (i.e. 'What is the best/worst thing about school/teachers/other students?'). These prompts could facilitate a more open discussion and could lead to other relevant questions.

This interview experience was particularly important for one more reason: it encouraged me to think more critically on why and how I respond to and interpret silence in my research, given that it is a constitutive feature of children voices (Spyrou 2015). I came to acknowledge that silence and no response might be a deliberate choice on behalf of my participants; thus, I needed to respect and consider silence as data *per se*, with all the challenges and possibilities that this might offer in the next phase of the analysis.

Representation of student voice: the representation dilemma

John is in Year 11 and has been diagnosed as having ADHD, also exhibiting some autistic characteristics. During the observations, I noticed that John spends most of his time in school on his own. In our interview he mentions:

> I am usually by myself … I wouldn't go as far as saying they [his peers] are all friends, because I don't know them enough, even though I am with them for five years …. Just because I don't speak to them, I have that independence thing. (Extract from research diary)

The major question that arose after my encounter with John was related to the idea of 'voice' and in particular the extent to which I was capable of representing the voices of children. I began my fieldwork with the belief that students are social actors with a unique insight into their own reality. But how could I, as an 'outsider', represent this reality? I was coming to English schools as a doctoral student from a UK institution, but also as a special education teacher from Greece. My dual identity and positionality as an outsider researcher and teacher was inevitably influencing myself, my participants and the knowledge I was going to produce.

A basic assumption that I was bringing to the field in the UK was related to my position as a special education teacher. My teaching experience has shaped the particular belief that for students who exhibit autistic characteristics, like John, social skills interventions are necessary. Driven by this assumption, I jumped to the conclusion that his teachers need to work harder in order to foster his social interactions. However, the discussions I had with two of his teachers made me challenge my previous belief. The first teacher noted that:

> John isn't alone because he is ostracised in any way. He has friends and he interacts but generally prefers to keep himself to himself.

The other teacher added that:

> We have tried many interventions for him to get more socialised in the past … but why we should pressure him? He just doesn't want to interact and our job is to make his life as happy as possible in the school.

This dialogue and intersubjective communication between myself, John and his teachers proved to be essential in order to understand his case in a more holistic way. It was particularly helpful to think of John's social world beyond the 'label' of autism and to consider the possibility that his limited social interactions might be his deliberate choice. Employing reflexivity on this issue included taking into serious account of different perspectives, acknowledging and working with the preconceptions I was bringing to the study (Christensen and James 2008) and, finally, realising the limitations of my initial interpretations.

Concluding comments

Throughout these 'critical incidents', reflexive engagement has prompted valuable insights to inform a variety of methodological decisions during fieldwork. In the first case, Brad's reaction has helped me to acknowledge the unequal power relations between myself, as an adult researcher, and my student participants. The communication difficulties I faced with Rahman and Debbie have urged me to use methods with flexibility in order to encourage their more active participation. Finally, keeping a reflective stance on John's case and listening to other perspectives has prompted me to challenge some previous beliefs I was bringing to the study.

The discussion above highlights the importance of being constantly reflective when doing research with students. As Shaw, Brady and Davey (2011) note, reflexivity can be particularly beneficial in child-centered research, by helping to identify appropriate tools and methods and enhancing the quality and quantity of data gathered. Therefore, this contribution supports the idea of further exploring the concept and the possibilities of student voice through research that practices reflexivity.

Imposing a research relationship in the field: implications for the inextricable link between power and ethics

Nozomi Sakata

In international and comparative education – where many researchers study a marginalised population and often choose less-developed countries as their field sites – an unequal power relationship evolves, impacting the research process in a prominent manner. These power dynamics, coupled with the existing social hierarchy, entail ethical implications. Reflexivity practice helps researchers deal with and scrutinise such ethical implications (Guillemin and Gillam 2004). It involves critically reflecting upon how a researcher's class, gender and race couple with the existing social relations to frame and reframe all phases of the research process (Pillow 2003; Adkins 2001). Drawing from doctoral fieldwork undertaken in Tanzania, this contribution explores how my own identity and positionality impacted the process of obtaining informed consent from research participants. After briefly introducing the overview of my research, I present the inextricable link between this power imbalance and ethical dilemmas, and problematise the style of research ethics embraced by Western research institutions.

This research investigated how Tanzanian primary schools conceptualise and implement learner-centered pedagogy (LCP) and what contributions LCP might or might not introduce to students' learning outcomes. Using mixed methods within a case study design, I employed systematic lesson observation, self-administered questionnaires to head teachers, teachers and pupils, subject tests for pupils, semi-structured interviews with teachers and focus-group discussions with pupils. The fieldwork lasted from September to December, 2015. Upon my arrival in Tanzania, I obtained written permission for my research fieldwork from the Tanzanian Commission for Science and Technology and the Prime Minister's Office Regional Administration and Local Government. Then in two regions of Tanzania, selected based on the results from the Primary School Leaving Examination, I visited local government bodies to identify individual schools. From a total of 13 primary schools that I was granted permission to visit by the municipal councils, I invited 13 head teachers, 17 teachers and 1024 pupils to participate in my research. This top-down selection procedure brought to the fore my positionality as a privileged foreign researcher and also intensified a social hierarchy between the government bodies and schools, as well as within schools. The power dynamics intertwined with each other in a way that put the standard research ethics into question.

Positionality and power differentials

Soon after I embarked on my fieldwork and started visiting the relevant ministries, I 'discover[ed] privilege and wealth' (Baaz 2005, 85) was granted to me because of my perceived identity. My status as a female foreigner, being younger but more educated than most adult

persons encountered in the field, spontaneously granted me a 'White privilege' with a socially advantaged position in relation to them. This status motivated bureaucrats in the national ministries and district education officers at the municipal councils to quickly correspond to my request. A ministerial government official, who was hesitant to issue a research permit through telephone and email communications, effortlessly made an exception to process the document upon my visit to him. A high-profile government official at another ministry authorised me to refer to government documents for instrument construction. He straightforwardly stated that, 'I don't generally work for individuals, but because you are a White person and I'm interested in what you are doing, I do this for you' (I am not a "White person" but an Asian given my ethnic background; but in Tanzania, many foreigners regardless of their ethnicity are called 'White' or 'Europeans', translated as *Mzungu* in Kiswahili.) When I was in queues at several municipal councils, administrative staff would serve me faster than those who had been waiting before me. At another time, gaining permission for my school visits from a district education officer and the paperwork for the permission took one day. My research assistant, a former secondary school teacher who had used to visit the council for document approval, whispered to me at one point: 'it would usually take more than two weeks. Government officials in Tanzania tend to act quickly for the request from "White" person. The Director as well as other officials are kind to you because you are not "Black"'. Such occasions convinced me that I received exceptional favours and attention at several government offices. My perceived social status seemed to make it easier to access the government organisations and obtain research permission compared to a situation where I was not a 'White' person.

Power imbalance and the ethics procedure

When I started to visit schools, having received the government permission, it became apparent that layers of authorities were at play between the government and the schools as well as within the schools. The interplay of various powers turned the informed consent into a contract, consequently obliging the participants' research involvement. Signing the consent forms became a way for them to prove their respect to the power, rather than 'consenting' to their voluntary participation in my research.

To get permission for my research at the schools, I first went to see head teachers as the gatekeepers in order to explain the research purpose and procedure. I presented the official permission letters with signatures of the government personnel either upon their requests or voluntarily. Soon after their quick glance at a series of research permits, they readily signed the 'informed consent'. Some of them did not even read through the consent letter. The institutional power hierarchy motivated the head teacher to sign the consent form, but their consent was directed to the government and not to myself or my research.

The ordered relationship was naturally carried on within each school and classroom. With the approval of head teachers, the teachers raised no question about their own and their pupils' participation. Most teachers took less than a minute to go through the two-page consent letter and sign at the bottom. One teacher even told me to show the head teacher's signature instead of my consent letter, indicating her dependence on the head teacher's judgment to decide whether to sign or not. After my noting their spontaneous signing, I orally reminded them of their right not to participate in or withdraw from the research at any time. However, my verbal explanation made little difference to their signing action.

The teachers' agreement to participate in my research in turn made their pupils comply with their teachers. Following the ethical code recommendations to give younger children an option to sign individually (BSA 2002), I provided them with a child assent document. All of the 1024 pupils signed their names. The fact that their teacher and a privileged foreigner were in the classroom surely impacted on the pupils' decision. Therefore, all the signees at each level in the school seemed to feel compelled to participate in my research without acknowledging their right to refuse or withdraw their participation.

Beyond the problematic research ethics

The above account demonstrates the profound effect of the power differential on research ethics. My advantaged positionality, coupled with research permission from their superiors, 'forced' the participants' involvement in my research. The standard ethical approval did not guarantee their informed decision or choice of participation; rather, it resulted in silencing and even violating their voice for voluntary participation. As Guillemin and Gillam (2004) and Rivière (2011) argue, there exists a clear division between pre-contracted ethical procedure and ethical conduct in real research. Ticking the box of ethical guidelines, completed in a de-contextualised place from the field, cannot assure 'ethical' research. Once in the field, it is the researcher's responsibility to carry out the study ethically based on her own ethics and research experience (Guillemin and Gillam 2004). I tried to make what Rivière (2011) call an 'educated guess' (203) of what is ethical and what is not based on my research experience and contextual understanding of the field site.

To address the likely-uselessness of 'informed consent', I made several on-the-spot decisions to enable me to be a more 'ethical' researcher. The interviews with teachers and focus-group discussions with pupils began with my repeated request for affirmation of their willingness to participate. I first thanked them for being there, while reminding them verbally of their right not to participate or say nothing during the research. I highlighted that there were no right or wrong answers in order to assure them that whatever they told me would be heard and appreciated. I also assured them of my confidentiality in that I would not share any of their responses with anybody – especially with other teachers or head teachers for the teachers and with the teachers or parents for the pupils. Lastly, I reminded them that I was using a voice recorder, which was stated in the consent letter, and asked the participants if they were comfortable with being recorded. Even with such actions, however, every participant answered 'yes' to all the points I raised, implying that these may not be perfect to eliminate ethical complexity.

The process of obtaining participants' consent in my research demonstrated the problem of the 'one-size-fits-all' informed consent. The ethical process used in social science has a conceptual and practical basis in human rights ideas that are predominantly Western-oriented (Tikly and Bond 2013; Kitchener and Kitchener 2009). However, different societies observe diverse practices and ideas of human relations and their rights. The informed consent obliged by academic institutions with more individual-based values common in the Western world is meant to protect the individual participant's right; but the consent letters used in my research did not provide for the more powerful bureaucratic dynamics. As a consequence, the letters of approval from the government ministries appeared to exert a greater force on the choices made by participants to be involved in my research, thus undermining their own individual choice to be involved as sought by the original intention

of the individual consent forms. This exemplifies that the Western-dominated expectations of human rights and code of ethics can be inappropriate in another society. Adherence to such guidelines in cross-cultural settings may yield contradictory and harmful outcomes.

International and comparative education, and more broadly social science research, needs alternative research ethics, such as socio-ethical research (Skovdal and Abebe 2012) or situated ethics (Tikly and Bond 2013). These approaches suggest that reflexivity practice throughout the research process proves a necessary exercise but not a sufficient one. Ethical concepts are diverse and situated within a particular context (Tikly and Bond 2013). Rather than depending on the universalised ethical procedure of the Western style of ethics discussed above, researchers need to have a space for dialogue with the research participants on what is ethical and what is not. By presenting honestly the research aims and procedures, the researching and the researched persons should continually negotiate what it means to be ethical for the latter (Skovdal and Abebe 2012). In my research, reflexivity practice through writing field notes and conscious awareness of the self allowed me to unpack the ethical implication of power imbalance; but this did not necessarily lead to 'ethical' research, although I made immediate decisions and adopted a particular ethical means. Having noticed the participants' automatic signing action, I could have negotiated their expectations in taking part of the research and their stance toward 'ethical' research conduct. Socio-ethical research and situated ethics might provide ethical considerations not imposed from above but negotiated with the researched population throughout the research process.

Unexpected changes in research design: unexpected benefits?

Sara Young

The process of data collection is often presented in a way that belies the actual disorderliness of fieldwork (Bryman 2012). Yet challenges in the field often oblige the researcher to alter the initial research design. Here, 'fieldwork' is used to mean the process of data collection; accordingly, the 'field' refers to the space, or setting, in which that data collection takes place and is not meant to indicate an ethnographic study. Drawing on my experience of doctoral fieldwork, I argue that rather than design changes being glossed over, the organic nature of a research project should be recognised; reflexivity on the part of the researcher is therefore paramount. Reflexivity may be understood as transparency, that is, the 'willingness of the researcher' to explain 'the reasoning behind the decisions' taken when conducting a piece of research (Rossman and Rallis 2010, 384). I will also argue that, often, complications in the field that may initially appear to be to the detriment of the project, can instead actually enhance the study.

Overview of the study

My PhD research investigates ethnic and linguistic identity construction in bilingual Polish-born adolescents living in the UK. I was interested in how Polish teenagers positioned themselves in a Britain that was becoming increasingly hostile to migrants from member states of the European Union, especially Poles (Spigelman 2013). To investigate this, the research was designed as a qualitative study comprising of in-depth interviews with Polish-born adolescents aged between 11 and 16.

Fieldwork

Participants were recruited from two schools in the UK, based in towns with small Polish communities in the UK , both located in semi-rural settings. Fieldwork would be undertaken at Grovesham School,[1] a mainstream state secondary school, and St. Ferdinand's, a Polish complementary Saturday school in the town of Steadton. The fieldwork was scheduled to take place during the spring term of 2016, as by the summer term, the students might be too involved in exam preparation for interviewing to be possible.

In designing the study, the researcher was strongly advised that a pilot study should be conducted. Pilot studies are considered especially valuable for novice researchers; they may allow a researcher to refine her interview technique (Kvale 1996; Silverman 2010). Indeed, it can be said that it is only through interviewing that a researcher learns how to conduct interviews (Roulston, Demarrais, and Lewis 2003).

The decision was therefore taken to hold a short pilot study at St. Ferdinand's, while the main study would concentrate on the participants at Grovesham School. Pilot studies are usually held some time before the main study (Janesick 1994), allowing for a period of reflection. In this instance, however, this was always going to be impossible, given the time limits on the study.

Time constraints applied to both sites. St. Ferdinand's was only open on Saturdays; classes were scheduled from 9.30am to 1pm, and interviews with the students could only be held either side of classes. Participants from St Ferdinand's had been recruited by the School Director, and four adolescents had expressed interest in taking part in the study. At Grovesham, the situation was more complex. Nine participants had been recruited from the school through the Polish teacher there, Jo Malinowska. However, no school time could be allowed for interviews and Jo felt that students might not attend sessions conducted outside lesson hours. She therefore suggested that interviews could take place during the Polish lessons held after school. Participants would be allowed to leave the class for interviews, and then re-join the lesson. Unfortunately, the timetable was somewhat erratic. Between January and February, Polish lessons only took place once a fortnight, as Jo was heavily pregnant. Jo was due to go on maternity leave during the data collection period; there was some uncertainty as to the situation following her return, and when this might be.

Original timetable and revisions

Three main elements impacted on the timetable of the study: (1) the general school timetable; (2) the imminent maternity leave of the Polish teacher at Grovesham School; and (3) the (un)availability of the translator. The original timetable and the way it was affected are set out below.

The data collection was scheduled for the spring term of 2016. In November 2015, the consent letters were to be translated into Polish so as to be sent out to participants and returned to the researcher before the Christmas break. This would allow the pilot study at St. Ferdinand's to be held in early-January 2016; it would comprise of two one-hour group interviews with the four interested participants.

Meanwhile, the main study was to be conducted at Grovesham School from late-January to May 2016. This would principally consist of group and individual interviews with a total of nine students. There would be a short break during February–March to allow for

Jo's maternity leave, during which Polish lessons were suspended and so interviews could not take place.

However, several issues transpired that made it difficult to adhere to this timetable. The first delay came in November, when the original translator became unavailable due to unforeseen circumstances. A new translator kindly stepped in, but there was a lengthy delay in sending out consent letters. This meant consent forms from St. Ferdinand's were not returned before the two-week Christmas break. This delay was compounded by the fact that throughout January and much of February, the students at St. Ferdinand's – of whom only two out of the initial four participants remained – consistently forgot to return the consent letters.

In the meantime, fieldwork commenced at Grovesham School. It was possible to have three sessions before Jo's maternity leave: these were held in January and early-February. The sessions consisted of discussions conducted in groups of three or four participants, made up of whichever students were present at Polish class that day. It was rare that all nine students turned up every time. In mid-February, sessions at Grovesham were suspended. However, by this point the consent letters had been received from St. Ferdinand's; two interviews there were subsequently arranged for mid-March.

The second period of data collection at Grovesham was primarily delayed by the Easter holidays, which coincided with the end of Jo's maternity leave. A further postponement was caused by the Polish lessons being given over to preparation for the students' oral exams in early May. This meant the lesson time could not be used for research interviews. Fortunately, weekly lessons were resumed thereafter, which allowed for three interview sessions to be held throughout May.

Impact on the study

Changes in timetable and the uncertainty engendered clearly impacted on the project. Most significantly, it meant that the pilot study as originally conceived had to be abandoned, and the data collected at St. Ferdinand's became part of the main study. Meanwhile, it seemed that the sporadic nature of the sessions at Grovesham School might result in a somewhat disjointed data collection. Mindful of Tracy's (2010) suggestion that a rigorous study requires the use of 'sufficient' and 'abundant … time in the field' (840), I was concerned that the seemingly erratic nature of the data collection would mean that the research design might not appear to be rigorous enough, and that not enough data would be collected.

Yet the necessary changes may also be seen as having a positive impact on the study. Firstly, the enforced hiatus between sessions allowed interview transcriptions to be completed in the meantime. It also allowed for a preliminary analysis of the data to be undertaken; this guided the subsequent interviews, where questions became more focused and data-driven. Issues that emerged from discussions at Grovesham School fed into interviews held at St. Ferdinand's in March, which in turn fed back into later sessions at Grovesham. One such example was that of a discussion about the difficulty the adolescents faced when their parents had separated, with one parent living in Poland and the other in England. The openness with which the adolescents at St. Ferdinand's spoke about this issue gave me more confidence in broaching the subject with the participants at Grovesham. Thus one setting informed the other and the study at the two sites gained a coherence and unity, which might otherwise have been absent.

It also transpired that the amount of data elicited during the interviews held at St. Ferdinand's was much greater than anticipated. That there were only two participants allowed those taking part to speak a lot more and a number of topics were covered in the limited time available. As the pair format used for these interviews had proved effective, it was adopted for later interviews held at Grovesham, where the format was equally productive.

Conclusion

With hindsight, the data collection appears to have been a relatively smooth process. The interviews were conducted on time and the data gathered deemed to be sufficient. In being written up, the process is to be presented as a coherent whole, and the challenges faced reduced to a short paragraph in the section outlining limitations of the research. It is easy after the event to forget the fears of failure that can accompany data collection. Yet this aspect should not be forgotten so quickly. What happened during this study illustrates that while research design may be compromised during fieldwork, and through the process of data collection, such changes are not necessarily detrimental to the research. Indeed, through the process of renegotiation, a more insightful study may emerge.

This paper thus argues for a more open discussion of how enforced changes can impact on a study. This is of still greater importance in an era when academics are under pressure from funding bodies to produce increasingly fixed research designs (see Tracy 2010). Coherence and rigidity are not the same thing. Acknowledging the role of happenstance in qualitative research of social and behavioural sciences does not undermine the validity of a research project. Rather, it can serve to enhance it (Morse 2004). Recognising this would also offer reassurance to less experienced PhD researchers, already 'vulnerable' by dint of circumstance (Ballamingie and Johnson 2011). Under pressure to establish themselves as competent researchers, doctoral candidates may feel unable to admit their challenges in the field when such struggles seem to be so rarely acknowledged in the wider community. PhD work can be an isolating process, especially if a researcher feels her project is falling apart during the seemingly chaotic stage of data collection.

A more honest conversation about how initial setbacks may be turned to a researcher's advantage would thus benefit the academic community at all levels. Such a discussion would help researchers at whatever stage to (re)negotiate their own studies and to justify with greater confidence changes made therein.

Researcher's positionality and reflexivity in qualitative research on Indo-Pakistani relations

Kusha Anand

Reflexivity is a process of persistent internal discourse and self-assessment of positionality of a researcher (Bradbury-Jones 2007), which is often influenced by personal characteristics including gender, race, ideological stances and beliefs (Padgett 2008). The first part of this contribution describes the research project, followed by a discussion on the 'insider/outsider' dilemmas and the role of reflexivity. The next part highlights the influence of recognising my positionality on the research process. This contribution also examines the benefits and challenges of being an insider or an outsider through a collection of interview vignettes of

fieldwork engagement. Interview vignettes illustrate how I negotiated my positions and the views while interacting with research participants.

The research project

Since the 1947 partition of British India along the lines of religious identities, India and Pakistan have been in a perpetual state of conflict. Partition was a historical event in which a million or more were estimated to have died, 75,000 women were raped, families were separated and homes destroyed on both sides of the divide (Aziz 1993). The two nations went to war in 1947, 1965 and 1971 and had a major conflict in 1999–2000 over a boundary area, Kargil. To date, the disputes over Kashmir, water, terrorism, border confrontation and trade continue to be sources of the perpetual conflict (Lee and Maslog 2005).

The above-mentioned context has a serious bearing for my research as these events are presented differently in the educational curricula in both countries. India and Pakistan have been using national curricula to shape the mindset of their young generations about each other. Moreover, teachers are at the heart of our understanding of the role of education in Indo-Pakistani relations (Smith 2010; Nayyar and Salim 2003; Batra 2005). However, little attention has been paid to the views of teachers of social sciences about the *other* country and Indo-Pakistani relations, as many researchers have only focused on education policies and curriculum concerning negative comments about the *other* country and biased reviews of history. Addressing this research gap, my data sources include textbook analysis, semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. I visited 21 schools each in New Delhi (India) and Lahore (Pakistan) in 2015. The fieldwork started with semi-structured interviews with teachers, conducted face-to-face, in private and one-to-one. Classroom observations were carried out to explore how teachers teach and whether what they say they do corresponds with their actual behaviour in their lessons.

Insider-outsider dilemmas and the role of reflexivity

It is important to note that identity construction in Indian and Pakistani communities has been in light of the refutation of otherness (Nayyar and Salim 2003; Batra 2005). Both countries have constructed an identity that negates the presence and legitimacy of the *other*. I am an Indian national (Hindu) and grew up in New Delhi. I speak fluent Hindi and advanced Urdu. I felt that I had built up an adequate level of intercultural competency that would assist me to establish rapport and trust with the participants in Lahore. Despite the competencies, in Pakistan, my nationality, religion and limited knowledge of their classroom context positioned me as an 'outsider'. My status as an insider or outsider, therefore, was shifted by the situation, responding to the social, political and cultural values of the situation.

My key strategy in the given context to engage with participants in both countries consisted of a consistent internal dialogue and self-evaluation of sensitives around my identity, which could have influenced the research process (Guillemin and Gillam 2004). I set my reflective journal to gain understanding and then to be able to view the situation from the perspective of both sides. I was prepared for the fact that such negotiation is complex as each group might be convinced that the *self* is right, and the *other* is wrong, thus creating my boundaries to the research. I used several questions for myself to stimulate reflexivity regarding conflicting positions, feelings and events. These included:

- What do I think about India/Pakistan and Indo-Pakistan relations?
- How do I think I know it?
- Will my knowledge affect the research, and if so, how?

Constructing alliances

The concept of identity in India and Pakistan serves to reinforce the religious and national boundaries that divide the region into Hindus and Muslims and set clear boundaries. The constant suspicion was a challenge to rapport building, due to Hindu Nationalism in New Delhi and being a Hindu/Indian in Lahore. At times, I used silence as a strategy to build rapport with my participants by avoiding conflictual situations. I became receptive and silent to requests for sharing my ideological beliefs, particularly about Indo-Pakistan relationships, as I was interested in knowing their beliefs. I responded with short answers, in a low pitch and polite tone, and demonstrated an outward appearance of being agreeable and supportive. In New Delhi, there was an advantage in being an Indian national when accessing teachers. I was known to the formal and informal power structures in the field. My hesitation to disclose personal information about my attitudes towards Pakistan became apparent in the reflective process:

Vignette 1: a dialogue between an Indian teacher and me

Participant: So, you are working on Indo-Pakistani relations?

Me: Yes

Participant: I suggest you Pakistan is not a safe country. See Muslims are living in Delhi, but they do not think they are a part of us [India]. We are a Hindu country.

Me: [nodding]

Participant: What do you think about Pakistan? I am confident you will find out they are wrong.

Me: [nodding]

My reaction above had two reasons. First, my discussions with the supervisor showed me to minimise bringing my knowledge to the interviews and to amplify the space for interviewees to recount their story. Second, I desired to distance myself from the pejorative words and phrases about the *other* country and Indo-Pakistani relations. This had evident ramifications for data collection. Adopting silence as a strategy nonetheless had its own challenges as I had to make sure it did not terminate the conversation. I shifted my strategy from silence to negotiation to build a space in which my participants are comfortable and open. I aligned with my participants' attitudes and did not contradict them.

In Lahore, my identity as an Indian/Hindu challenged the process of recruiting participants. Research participants expressed suspicion and distrust towards my research when I contacted them through email or phone. I used Skype to meet my participants before going in the fields. In response to the email, participants resisted participation and stated that they cannot participate in research on the political topic. However, when met and spoke on Skype, they were willing to participate in my research. Skype also increased participation, decreasing related confusion regarding my background and research objectives. A Skype discussion gave me an opportunity to clarify the nature and motivation behind my research,

my background and the interview procedure. It also permitted me to instantly address the participants' misinterpretations or reservations:

Vignette 2: a dialogue between a Pakistani teacher and me

Participant: You are studying in London.

Me: Yes.

Participant: Are you a Hindu?

Me: Yes.

Participant: Are you an Indian?

Me: I was born in Delhi.

Participant: [quiet]

In the above vignette the participant's questions showed their beliefs about me - a Hindu or an Indian. I asked myself the following questions 'How much of my background do they have to know?' and 'How had their responses contrasted when they had realised that I am a Hindu/Indian?' I struggled to decide 'How much to share, in which way and when?' I found that these questions and my answers accentuated and communicated the alienation, which I sensed with respect to loyalty these participants expected of me.

Outside influences or external factors

The Vignette 3, below, shows sharing political beliefs is another challenge for an Indian researcher, working on Indo-Pakistani relations:

Vignette 3: a dialogue a Pakistani teacher and me

Participant: Modi's [Narendra Modi] government is hard for Muslims.

Me: [nodding]

Participant: Do you think the Modi government is good for Indo-Pak relations?

Me: [quiet]

Participant: What do you think?

Me: It's too … early … to say. Let's … see.

The vignette above exemplifies the political conversation on Indo-Pakistani relations. I knew that the political differences confront obstructions to access the teachers' attitudes. I ensured that I stayed calm, limited the conversation or kept the political views out of the meeting. I used three strategies. First, I changed my role and welcomed the participant to take the expert position and to edify me about the specific situation. Second, I chose my answers carefully. I used pauses to construct my answers. Third, I stuck to the composed interview questions and did not probe for more broad reactions.

Emotional negotiations

The discussions moved from the political discourse to the impact of partition to the lives of the citizens in India and Pakistan. The participants used oral narratives they had heard in their families. In these narratives, the *other* was the aggressor and *self* is the victim. I utilised undivided attention and acknowledgement to hear agonising stories:

> My grandparents had tragic memories of India-how Hindus evacuated their homes and murdered our relatives. (Teacher, Lahore)
>
> We were rich before partition. Pakistan just destroyed everything. These mullahs [Muslims] are responsible for our suffering. (Teacher, New Delhi)
>
> When I boarded an auto rickshaw [vehicle], there were anti-India posters, for example, kill Indians. (Field journal, Lahore)

I felt that my emotional experiences could prompt a distortion of the data. I used debriefing as a strategy to defeat my emotional experiences. Debriefing enhanced critical thinking and acknowledged any feeling that may cause judgement and generalisation (Dickson-Swift et al. 2007). I conducted de-briefing sessions by phone, Skype calls and face-to-face meetings with my supervisor, fellow researchers and friends. These sessions helped to remove any unwarranted generalisations about Pakistan. They also helped in maintaining my emotional wellbeing in the field by conquering my sentiments of isolation in Pakistan.

Conclusion

This contribution reviewed the methodological considerations and implications of the insider-outsider debate for qualitative research on teachers' attitudes towards Indo-Pakistani relations. It also reflected upon the role of reflexivity in the methodological opportunities and dilemmas of insider-outsider. Reflexivity can help to prepare and tackle the issues of data collection in the politically charged context. The vignettes of interview transcripts showed how I co-constructed identities/positions. The silence and minimalist information were necessary to construct long-term rapport and elicit attitudes. Reflexivity helped to gain understanding and then enabled me to view the situation from both sides' perspectives.

Note

1. The names of locations and participants have been anonymised.

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