

Beyond Insiders and Outsiders in Migration Research: Rejecting A Priori Commonalities. Introduction to the FQS Thematic Section on "Researcher, Migrant, Woman: Methodological Implications of Multiple Positionalities in Migration Studies"

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Abstract: This editorial discusses the main strings of debates linking the discussions of insider research, gendered identities and concerns of methodological nationalism and groupism in migration studies. The insider/outsider dichotomy has been discussed in the academic literature for many years and in migration research this usually takes the form of ethnic/national categories. We suggest that researchers now need to think of abandoning these narrow and static views of their participants so as to challenge the dominance of the ethnic lens in migration studies. In this introductory article and in the articles that make up this thematic section, we aim to open a critical discussion of gender, identity, sameness, difference and ethnicity to explore the complex, shifting and multilayered dynamics that under-pin research encounters. Far from the assumed commonalities usually associated with "insider" research, we suggest instead that starting from a position of "uncertainty" challenges taken for granted groupist notions and enables researchers to be open to a wide array of possibilities in their encounters with participants.

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1. Introduction

This article introduces the scope of the thematic section addressing the implications of doing research among migrants while being a migrant/foreign researcher him-/herself. The contributors consider how the intersections of migratory self-experience and gender identity in qualitative research of migrants raise important methodological considerations. In this article we provide an overview of the discussion on the so called "insider research" and that researchers need to stop thinking of their research participants in the categories of insiders and outsiders in order to go beyond the ethnic lens in migration studies. [1]

The authors to this thematic section draw on a vast literature discussing the issues of researchers who are "insiders" (MERTON, 1972). In this discourse,

"insider" researchers share a cultural, linguistic, ethnic, national and religious heritage with their participants. In the positivist tradition, a researcher ought to maintain analytic distance from the object of study. By contrast, interpretivism has highlighted the subjectivity and social construction of meaning in the research process. Postmodern research, action research and feminist traditions have further encouraged involvement with participants and the cultivation of self-reflexivity. In migration research the methodological considerations go beyond the issue of proximity and distance as makers of quality of interview (ROULSTON, 2010): the "insider-outsider" dichotomy inevitably ends in the question on the meaning of group categories such as ethnicity and nationality for the design and conduct of the research and beyond. [2]

We give voice to those researchers who work with migrants, and open a critical discussion on gendered identity, sameness, and cultural heritage. The authors ask what it means to be an "insider researcher" if ethnic and national belonging and gender are multi-layered, culturally constructed concepts (NOWICKA & CIESLIK, 2014). They place the process and experience of migration, their personal trajectories and that of their research subjects, at the centre of their reflection. By reflecting upon their own migratory pathways, the contributors challenge the latent understanding that common gendered origins produce "common individuals" and offer new insights on how migrant researchers relate to the migrant group they do (not) belong to. [3]

Thereby, they disclose the processes of bonding and bridging, of taking and abandoning positions, of constructing and de-constructing commonalities that involve a strategic play with group categories and fixed concepts of ethnicity, nationality, and gender. This is possible when we conceive of an in-depth social science interview as a situation of social encounter that involve a conversation guided by its own rules and dynamics, and participants' intentions, assumptions and positions. [4]

In the result of their intense engagement with the research situation and their deep methodological reflection, the authors to this thematic section make a claim to abandon the scheme of insider-outsider research as this scheme prioritises one particular kind of difference—most commonly the ethnic or national—over other categories of difference. To reject the dialectic thinking of insider-outsider has far reaching consequences for how we design and conduct research with migrants. We argue that researchers should give up the idea of any assumed, a priori commonality with their research participants and instead set out to conduct research from a position of uncertainty. We believe that abandoning taken for grant assumptions and embracing a sense of uncertainty in encounters with research participants is a fruitful strategy in enabling migration studies to move beyond methodological groupism. [5]

2. Research as Social Encounter

The contributors to this thematic section apply qualitative methodologies in their research, in particular qualitative in-depth interviews. Interviewing, of various degrees of standardisation, is the most popular technique for scientific inquiry. As HOLSTEIN and GUBRIUM (2003a) write, interviews are special forms of conversation. The researchers now increasingly acknowledge the interactional character of the interview. In a sense, there is a certain tension between the experience of interviewing as conversation and the conventional understanding of interaction during the interview as a source of error and bias that negatively impacts the quality of research results. Conventionally thus, the researcher follows the sophisticated technology of interview control, asking questions in a particular order or manner to reduce the "errors", but at the same time intuitively attunes to the research participant to keep the narration going. [6]

Our common experience in our role as researcher and as a person is that communication—talking with someone—requires us to formulate our message in such a way that increases the probability that this message is comprehended by our conversation partner. This involves adapting the content of the message and the style of speech to what we believe the listener already knows about the given subject, to his/her current emotional state, and to the listener's background. As RYAN and GOLDEN (2006, pp.1191-1192) note:

"Research that requires a communication of knowledge, opinions, feelings and experiences from the participants to the researchers needs to overcome, at least temporarily, any boundaries that may inhibit that communication. These boundaries may be, for example, physical, temporal, ethical, socio-cultural or religious and thus will be influenced by the gender, age, ethnicity and social classes of participants and researchers." [7]

In social psychology, the way conversation partners attune to each other is in focus of the so called perspective-taking models of interpersonal communication (KRAUSS & FUSSELL, 1991, 1996). For MEAD (1934), both speakers and hearers "take the role or attitude of the other" in the process of generation of self-consciousness. The role of knowing what others know is axiomatic; messages are formulated to be understood by a specific audience. In order to be comprehensible the speaker must take into account what that audience does and does not know (BROWN, 1965, p.342). Other's perspective includes, according to KRAUSS and FUSSELL (1996), background knowledge, beliefs and attitudes, plans, goals, current interpretations of events, social and physical context and various personal attributes such as speech style, emotional state, and state of message comprehension during the conversation. Accordingly, miscommunication may occur when the speaker assumes more similarity in perspective with the listener than actually exists, or when or when the speaker's understanding of the listener's perspective is based in prejudice and inaccurate stereotypes (KRAUSS & MORSELLA, 2000). [8]

Some scholars consider interview not as text which would reflect the reality, personality or structures of meaning but primarily as interactions in which interviewer and interviewed negotiate the meanings (SILVERMAN, 2011). In a conventional view on interview as text, interview conversation is a "pipeline for transmitting knowledge" (HOLSTEIN & GUBRIUM, 2003b, p.68), and the flow of knowledge is uni-directional, from the research subject to interviewer. Alternatively, DOUGLAS (1976) proposed to productively use the situational factors in interview; his flexible "creative interviewing" techniques include types of questions otherwise considered "improper", for example diverging, provoking, probing or reflecting interviewees opinions. Reflecting the phenomenological tradition, it emphasises knowledge as interrelational, interwoven in networks. Drawing on postmodern conceptions of knowledge and resonating the critiques formulated by feminist scholars, HOLSTEIN and GUBRIUM (1995) argued for the necessity of acknowledging interviewer's active role in the process of knowledge production. Understanding knowledge as "situated" (HARAWAY, 1988)—embodied, localised and shared, connected—they present an alternative epistemological view on interview. In "active interview", knowledge is negotiated between the interviewer and her research subjects. Accordingly, the analysis of interview focuses equally on "what" kind of knowledge and "how" this knowledge has been produced. Understanding the "how", so HOLSTEIN and GUBRIUM (2003a), helps to understand the "what" (see also DEPPERMAN, 2013). Also interviewing techniques that are rooted in psychoanalysis (KVALE, 1999) acknowledge how knowledge is produced through open conversations and to some degree emotional interaction between the participants. [9]

Interpretations of an interview as interrelational conversation address unequally the role of the conversation partners: DOUGLAS' proposal of "creative interviewing" (1976) assigns more attention to the respondent; HOLSTEIN and GUBRIUM's "active interviewing" technique (1995) considers rather the interviewer, KVALE (1999) focuses on both partners, and DEPPERMAN (2013) is primarily interested in internal structures of narrations as result of interaction. Unlike in conventional interviewing, the interviewer is requested not only to create rapport with the research subject but to enhance narrations in multiple ways; provoking narrations might involve sharing interviewer's own opinions and emotions with the research participant; to assign an active role to the respondent means to acknowledge the situational mode of respondent's knowledge production. [10]

In recent years there has growing interest in the emotional dimensions of migration and in particular how these emotions are encountered and negotiated by both research participants and researchers (SVASEK, 2008). A study of emotions can enable new approaches and insights into the experiences of migration (SKRBIS, 2008). An understanding of the personal emotions in migration narratives can provide important insights into the complexity of diverse emotions involved in stories of leaving home and moving into a new society. Where the interviewer is also a migrant, interview encounters can be emotionally charged experiences which raise potentially sensitive personal issues for the interviewer as well as the interviewee (RYAN, 2008). This raises questions about

the positionality of the migrant researcher which are discussed in the next section. [11]

3. Insiders and Outsiders in Research and Society

All the above sketched accounts consider primarily the situational aspects of knowledge production. The focus is thus laid on interview-situation exclusively. The research inspired by the perspective-taking models of communication demonstrates yet that the assumptions on the partner's knowledge impacts the way the conversation proceeds, and which and how the messages are passed between the participants. One of such sets of assumptions relate to the shared group or social category membership of the conversation partner (KRAUSS & FUSSELL, 1991). The contributors to this thematic section all share exactly this kind of experience, and they reflect upon how the research process, at different stages, is influenced by the way they and their research participants think of each other as members of groups. [12]

Nowadays, more and more studies are done on migrants by researchers who have migrated themselves. This trend is facilitated by the growing transnational connectivity of educational institutions and the increase in number of students and faculty who study and work abroad (ALTBACH, 2005; DE WIT, 2002). Migrant researchers often have easy access to migrant groups by virtue of speaking the native language. Furthermore, in the age of budget cuts in higher education, financial reasons compel many researchers to do research at least partly in their native country. The common heritage classifies these researchers as "insiders" to the studied groups. MERTON (1972) defined "insider" position as such when the researcher shares the knowledge of the studied group because of her cultural, linguistic, ethnic, national or religious association with it. Also professionals who carry out their research in their work setting are insiders. Thereby MERTON considers of a group as based on ascribed rather than acquired statuses and identities (p.11). [13]

The notion of "insider" has been contested; the dichotomy of insider-outsider was redefined as a continuum (SURRA & RIDLEY, 1991), and redefined as contextual (CHRISTENSEN & DAHL, 1997). It was widely acknowledged that people can be multiple insiders (DEUTSCH, 1981), and that the insider status is subject to negotiation between the parties involved in the research (ANDRADE, 2000). Feminist approaches and reflexive anthropology point to how researcher's positionality impacts data generation and analysis (MULLINGS, 1999). The authors to this thematic section draw on this vast literature to reflect upon which positions they inhabited during the research, and to recognise the dynamics involved in multiple positioning in research. [14]

The contributors share the experience that the presumed "insiderness" matters at each stage of the research process. LEUNG (2015), for example, secured access to her research subjects thanks to others perceiving of her as a member of the particular ethnic group (also CHERENI, 2014) despite that her feeling of belonging quarrelled with this categorisation. For WILLIAMS (2015), the definition

of the field of study was related to how she perceives of herself as a member of a particular diasporic group. All authors used their linguistic skills as cultural capital to establish contact to research participants (TEMPLE & KOTERBA, 2009). Yet while such commonalities may get confirmed, strengthened or capitalised prior to the research, the in-depth interview might put this situation upside-down. Assumed commonality of ethnic origin might break into a myriad of other positions, based on age, education, or gender of the researcher and her participants. In conversation, then, some positions facilitate rapport, while others might hinder mutual trust, as RYAN shows in her comparative research with Irish and Polish migrants (2009, 2013, 2015). At each of the research stages, both the researcher and her participants actively and in relation to each other negotiate positions. Researcher might strategically use different techniques to create such temporary commonalities in conversation, for example by abandoning academic jargon (COLLET, 2008; MIHESUAH, 1988) or already prior to it, for example by adopting a certain dress code (CARLING, ERDAL & EZZATI, 2014; LISIAK, 2015). [15]

4. Beyond Ethnic Groups: Methodological Challenge for Migration Research

Researchers who are members of minorities or are migrants themselves have especially drawn our attention to how ethno-national categories are presumed by the public, the researchers themselves, and the research participants, and how they are questioned in the course of the research (BOLAK, 1997; KUSOW, 2003; MUNTHALI, 2001; NARAYAN, 1993; OIKONOMIDOY, 2009; ORIOLA & HAGGERTY, 2012; PARAMESWARAN, 2001; RYAN & GOLDEN, 2006). Contributions to this thematic section show that researchers who are migrants find themselves in an ambivalent position: they may play the "ethnic card" to secure funding for research and access to the sample (JACOBS-HUEY, 2002; LEUNG, 2015) but they also meet the suspicion of fellow academics and research funders who suspect they lack objectivity (MINKLER, 2004; RYANG, 2005). As result, they need to constantly renegotiate their status vis-à-vis their research participants. [16]

Parallel, migration scholars are vividly discussing the methodological challenge on ethno-national categorisations in migration studies. The "ethnic lens" (GLICK SCHILLER, ÇAĞLAR & GULDBRANDSEN, 2006) has dominated the research on immigrant communities within the traditions of acculturation theory and of multiculturalism. It fits the imaginary that territorial and cultural borders are congruent and define a nation. This "methodological nationalism" has been criticised within studies on incomplete and commuting forms of migration (AMELINA & FAIST, 2012; FAIST & ÖZVEREN, 2004; NOWICKA, 2006; WIMMER & GLICK SCHILLER, 2003). An alternative position claims that it requires empirical research to determine the relevance of ethnic-cultural differences for everyday practices of immigrants and their peers (ÇAĞLAR & GLICK SCHILLER, 2008), and that the ascription of ethnic difference to a group and its members is an exercise of power to exclude others (WIMMER, 2004).

Thereby, the concept of a group is in particular problematic if taken for granted in the study of ethnicity, race, nationhood (BRUBAKER, 2003) and migration. [17]

Several proposals have been made on how to overcome the methodological "groupism" and "nationalism". Thereby, basically four alternatives to defining the research participants beyond ethnic or national groups have been probed empirically: first, the research takes spatial units of observation, such as urban centres or neighbourhoods (BAUMANN, 1996; ÇAĞLAR & GLICK SCHILLER, 2011, WIMMER, 2004); or transnational social spaces or fields (FAIST & ÖZVEREN, 2004). Second, some authors approach the question of how ethnic difference matters through the focus on groups based on social class (e.g. LAMONT, 2000; WATERS, 1990). Third, an individual, his/her network and life histories, is a preferred unit of analysis (e.g. DAHINDEN, 2012); fourth, the studies dedicated to the paradigm of intersectionality consider multiple lines of differentiation and their interplay (e.g. ANTHIAS, 2012; EREL, 2009). [18]

Another approach is to adopt a comparative perspective and avoid the narrow ethnic-exceptionalism which often marks migration research (MAHLER & PESSAR, 2006). Many migration researchers focus on one specific ethnic or national group but it has been suggested that a comparative lens may be a way of exploring shared features across, as well as differences within, so-called "migrant ethnic-communities" (ibid.). RYAN's work on Polish and Irish women migrants in London (2009, 2013, 2015), for example, has illustrated how comparisons between migrants in specific socio-cultural and spatial contexts complicate assumptions of ethnic specificities. [19]

Further, the role of self-reflexivity has been acknowledged as a helpful instrument in reaching beyond methodological groupism and nationalism in migration studies (RYAN, KOFMAN & AARON, 2011; SHINOZAKI, 2012), and NOWICKA and CIESLIK (2014) suggested that the research situation between migrant researcher and participant as such puts national and ethnic categorisations in question. [20]

Contributions to this thematic section engage in the self-reflexive discussion of how the insider-outside dichotomy becomes obsolete in their research; thereby, they draw the attention to how ethnicity, age, gender and other categories of commonality build temporal rapport in research. They consider thus their research experiences from a boundary-work perspective which looks into which, and when and how, certain categories become relevant (DAHINDEN, 2012). [21]

5. Gender, Qualitative Research and Migration

Gender is a central category of presumed commonality, and for the contributors to this thematic section it plays a shifting and ambivalent role. Unlike ethnic and linguistic belonging which is openly articulated as a social category by researchers and their participants, gender tends not to be naturalised, omitted and neglected as a factor that impacts the research design and conduct. The marginality of gender puzzled us when we invited and reviewed contributions to

this section as it turned out that despite high level of self-reflexivity on issues of ethnic belonging, our authors struggled to broach the issue of their gendered identities in research, and how they intertwine with other categories of commonality. [22]

Feminist studies on migration contributed significantly to reworking a range of canonical approaches in migration research (HONDAGNEU-SOTELO, 2005; PESSAR & MAHLER, 2003; overview by KOFMAN, SALES, PHIZACKLEA & RAGHURAM, 2000; SILVEY, 2004). Since the pioneering work of MOROKVASIC (1984), an increasing number of scholars bring "women" back in migration studies. And yet the figure of the female research is rarely placed in focus and this despite the general increase of women researchers accompanied by a pertaining unequally high proportion of women in social sciences, in particular at doctoral and post-doctoral levels. Increasing feminisation of migration studies and migration discourses goes also hand in hand with the expansion of qualitative methods in migration studies related to a growing interest in issues such as identity formation, the role of social capital and networks, ethnic discrimination, and the complex nature of the causal mechanisms linked to migration (IOSIFIDES, 2011). Yet methodologies are gendered (OAKLEY, 1997, 1998; WESTMARLAND, 2001), with qualitative methods traditionally being associated with interpretivism, non-scientific, subjectivity and femininity. [23]

Despite that a few female researchers practicing reflexivity significantly contributed to our understanding of how gendered identities challenge the social scientific research (GATRELL, 2006; RIESSMAN, 1987; SCHEYVENS & LESLIE, 2000; VISWESWARAN, 1992) there are very few systematic accounts on the intersections of ethnicity and gender in the study of immigrant groups, and even fewer that consider insiderness (but see CHERENI, 2014). Some attention has been given to intersections of race and gender; black feminist authors showed, for example, how hierarchies of power, for example racism or sexism, must be negotiated throughout the research process (BROWN, 2012; FEW, STEPHENS & ROUSE-ARNETT, 2003). With this thematic section we hope to at least partly close this gap. As the contributors show, gender and gender-relations transform in migration. Researcher's and participants' personal trajectories impact on how they conceive of their own gendered identities, and how they relate to each other. The overlap of cultural codes and gendered identities poses a challenge for researchers in creating rapport but also in protecting themselves from too much emotional engagement with research participants. [24]

6. Contributions to this Thematic Section

The contributions vary in their geographical scope and approaches while all authors draw on their research experiences in multiple sites. The view from two neighbouring disciplines to social sciences, namely linguistics (WILLIAMS, 2015) and cultural studies (LISIAK, 2015) enable us to enlarge the perspective and include the analysis of the research process beyond the situation of an interview. LISIAK focuses her article on the complex process of preparing for the visit to the field, which includes qualitative in-depth interviewing. Following GOFFMAN

(1959, 1989) and drawing on feminist works that consider performativity, she shows how qualitative research involves non-verbal communication, through style of dressing that reveals one's habitus. WILLIAMS (2015), on the other hand, whose preparations for research to a large extent rely on reading migrant writings, reflects upon how the presumptions on author's belongings clash with the ways they position themselves during the interview encounters. Other contributions focus more strongly on how the research participants negotiate gendered, class and ethnic identities in conversation with the researcher. [25]

The contributors have all experienced multiple transitions in their national and local positioning and they identify themselves as migrants. The word migrant, as opposed "immigrant", implies continuous mobility between places of work and residence, which is often enforced by their professional mobility. The ethnic, national, gendered, and other identities of the contributors to this thematic section were transformed and informed through their travels. In this section, they speak from the unstable, mobile, and shifting locations and identifications; this particular position allows them to productively engage with the notion of space, time and mobility. [26]

LEUNG's (2015) own complex migration trajectory, together with her origin in an ethnically, religiously, linguistically and socially highly diversified society, put her in the position of constantly negotiating and managing her own identity when encountering her informants. She demonstrates how, by way of such management, the researchers of migration scratch the seemingly smooth and coherence surface of "co-ethnic/conational identities and uncover what lies below these markers" (§5). LEUNG claims that assumed and factual belonging to 'a community of strangers' crosses the ethno-national categories of belonging in the context of migration research. [27]

The articles in this thematic section also reveal the dissonances between the authors' self-understandings as members of particular ethnic, cultural groups, and the perspectives of their research participants, both underlined by public imaginaries of ethnic, national and cultural divisions. Drawing on their double experience as an apparent 'insider' in some contexts, and as an apparent 'outsider' in others, the authors challenge the fixed and unitary identities associated with these ascriptions. They carefully distinguish between any categories which can, but do not necessarily, contribute to assumed, constructed or negotiated commonalities between the researcher and her informants. [28]

MOROSANU (2015) approaches the research field as an apparent "insider", a Romanian migrant researching other Romanians in Britain. There are clear examples in her article of shared cultural background, for example familiarity with a well-known Romanian comedian. However, MOROSANU also shows how differences of gender, rural/urban background and educational experiences impact on her interactions with her research participants, creating some misunderstandings and challenging any simplistic understanding of her "insider" status. [29]

The complex, mobile trajectories of researchers and the researched reveal when and how other categories, in particular gender, transform the relations between people who share origin in one ethnic or national group. Trajectories of life can both distance people or create unexpected commonalities that bring them together for a certain moment in time. [30]

Two contributions explore the experiences of researching across linguistic, ethnic and national boundaries. BOTTERILL (2015) reflects on her experiences as a young, English woman researching young Polish migrants in Scotland. Although they share a status as migrants in a Scottish context, BOTTERILL considers how linguistic and socio-cultural differences may impact on the research encounters. In addition, she adds another dimension to the discussion by reflecting on the issue of sexuality and explores how trust and rapport are actively negotiated through layers of cultural norms and expectations in the interview encounter. In so doing, she challenged some of her own previous concerns and assumptions. [31]

RYAN, an Irish migrant living in London, critically reflects upon her research with Polish migrants but goes further and presents a comparative perspective by also addressing her research with Irish migrants. By adopting this comparative approach, RYAN (2015) questions the usefulness of notions of insiderness and outsidership by demonstrating how a range of diverse factors including age, gender and parental status, impacted on the different research encounters. Using the metaphor of dance (LIN, 2014), RYAN (2015) shows the fragility and fluidity of interview dynamics which can shift from moments of understanding and rapport to moments of tension and misunderstanding. Like WIMMER (2004), she shows the salience of age, and the specific experiences associated with stages in the life course, in establishing rapport and trust with participants regardless of nationality or ethnic background. [32]

Clearly, the experiences described by the contributors to this thematic section demonstrate the need to critically question the usefulness of thinking of research with migrants in terms of insider or outsider research. While the dichotomist understanding of insiderness versus outsidership has already been rejected by various authors, thinking of engagements with research participants in categories of commonalities still prevails. This has consequences for how we conduct the research, as it may give us a false sense of security prior to the research encounter. Thinking of participants through a lens of insiderness or outsidership, risks reinforcing specific "groupist" assumptions about how people may behave, think, speak. By contrast, we suggest that a starting position of uncertainty, a rejection of groupist assumptions, could be a very fruitful for migration researchers. When no a priori commonalities are presumed, trust and rapport with research participants need to be achieved in the course of the interview beyond the reference to ethnic, national, linguistic or gendered groups and identities. Starting research with few expectations on the research participant is admittedly a difficult exercise but it also allows us to move beyond the ethnic, or gendered, lens in migration studies. [33]

We hope that this thematic section is a useful resource for young and senior scholars who research migrants. We believe it adds to the literature on methodological nationalism as well to the ongoing discussion on positionalities in qualitative social research. We would also like to enhance the more general debate on what social sciences can contribute to understanding the processes of human differentiation and categorisation, and encourage scholars to focus on processes and trajectories instead of more or less fixed categories. We believe that such critical self-reflexivity among scholars of migration helps to overcome the reduction of complex social worlds through the use of simple categories that fix people to groups and places. [34]

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