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Situated knowledge in cross-cultural, cross-language research: a collaborative reflexive analysis of researcher, assistant and participant subjectivities

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Abstract

This article analyzes situated knowledge through the lens of the author and her three field assistants. This work is written self-reflexively and is based on geographical fieldwork in Eastern Africa. It seeks to capitalize on the personal and professional relationships of the researcher and her field assistants to improve both research outcomes and working arrangements. Reflecting on episodes of failure, anxiety and misunderstanding, it disentangles the power geometry of situated knowledge and sheds light on the vital role played by the assistant/interpreter and by his/her positionality 'in the making' of cross-cultural, cross-language research. Grounded in a feminist epistemological perspective, this article shows that methodological reflexivity should engage not only the researcher or the participants but also the field assistants. This praxis is crucial to enhancing the validity of studies conducted in a cross-cultural, cross-language environment across social science.

Keywords

cross-cultural cross-language research, feminist epistemology, field assistant, positionality, power, reflexivity, situated knowledge

Introduction

Situated knowledge, brought forward by Haraway (1991) as a critique to positivist generalization and objectification, highlights the contingent, hierarchical, contextual,

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experiential and relational nature of knowledge production. According to Rose (1997), situated knowledge involves the examination of the nature of the research process by looking inward – self-reflexivity – and outward – reflecting on the relations with others involved in the research. The latter has become a constant preoccupation among feminist geographers who have sought to disentangle processes of ‘interpretation, translation, stuttering and the partly understood’ (Haraway, 1991: 195), which situated feminists are concerned with. Autoethnography, which this article is built upon, is one popular methodological tool among feminists geographers, used to show how power relations develop in the field (e.g. Ellis and Bochner, 2005; England, 1994; Kannen, 2012; Kobayashi, 1994; Mandel, 2003; Robson, 1997). These reflections do not only shed light on the limitations, struggles and vulnerability of the researcher; they also show that research is a constitutive process that requires negotiation in relation to both knowledge and identity (Rose, 1997). Thus, situated knowledge is the result of mutually immanent social relations among researcher and researched, who collaborate and settle for a mutually agreed upon knowledge (Haraway, 1991; Kobayashi, 1994).

Reflecting on these processes, in order to subvert the power-loaded relationship between researcher and researched and let the voices of informants and interviewees be heard through the text, is an intrinsic principle of feminist epistemology (Edwards, 1990). Moreover, by bringing together one’s personal, professional and political everyday experience, the researcher allows the reader to fully grasp the contextual nature of knowledge production, thus increasing the trustworthiness of the research (Ellis and Bochner, 2005). Yet, by focusing on her individual positionality, the researcher does not necessarily bring to light the relational and hierarchical process of situated knowledge negotiation (Domosh, 2003).

According to Temple and Edwards (2002), in cross-cultural, cross-language research situated knowledge is bound by the existence of a ‘triple subjectivity’ in the field: researcher, research assistant¹ and researched. These three figures shape and condition the development of field research by seeking, contributing to, eliciting or limiting the attainment of data. Hence, while the term ‘triple subjectivity’ helps to envision the presence of these three subjects, their subjectivities are multiple. In fact, researcher, assistant and participant embody multiple positions in relation to one another, depending on several axes of intersectionality (i.e. gender, culture, economic status, educational background, etc.), which can be challenged over the course of the investigation and determine their inclination to facilitate or hinder the research process (Molony and Hammett, 2007; Turner, 2010). For instance, when interviewing a friend or a neighbor, the assistant has to assume a more distant position from the participant and a closer one to the researcher, whose questions are being conveyed, bridging the cultural, knowledge and language gap between the two.

Hence, without the assistant the field would be completely closed off and indecipherable to the researcher. This person plays the pivotal role of translator, cultural broker, and mediator and gatekeeper in cross-cultural, cross-language research. Yet, while the voices of the researcher and the researched are often heard through reflexivity, autoethnography, direct quotes and collaborative writing (Edwards, 1990; Ellis and Bochner, 2005; Nagar, 2013), the voices of assistants are rarely present in texts; rather, these contributors are just briefly acknowledged and thanked in dissertations (Molony and Hammett, 2007;

Turner, 2010). With the exception of a few studies on the researcher–interpreter relationship (Molony and Hammett, 2007; Robson, 1997; Temple, 2002; Temple and Edwards, 2002) and on translation techniques (Temple and Young, 2004; Williamson et al., 2011), the lack of engagement with the figure of the field assistant is a missed opportunity for scholars ‘to engage with the consequences of their ethnocentricity’ (Temple, 2002: 846) and to reflect on the construction of situated knowledge (Regmi et al., 2010; Williamson et al., 2011).

This article is based on almost a hundred pages of field diaries, collaborative writings and joint reflections, recorded and transcribed by myself and three female field assistants who acted as translators, interpreters, gatekeepers and researchers during fieldwork in Kenya and Tanzania from 2011 to 2013. By adopting a feminist epistemological perspective and reflecting on our four distinct research experiences, this article shows how the process of situated knowledge production in cross-language and cross-cultural research is influenced by the subjectivity and positionality of researcher, assistants and participants. Finally, it aims at contributing to the debate on language and on ethical, personal and epistemological dimensions of employing an interpreter/translator/assistant (see also Edwards, 2013; Temple and Young, 2004; Williamson et al., 2011).

The article is divided into three main sections relating directly to the three subjects involved in the research process: the researcher, the assistants and the participants. Within each section the multiple positionalities of the individual in question are discussed in relation to the other research subjects and to how power relations are mediated among them. Lastly, a summary of conclusions is provided.

Researcher

In this section the position of the researcher is problematized vis-à-vis the assistants and the participants. In fact, the researcher leads the research process by shaping the practicalities of it and deciding whom to hire, but she is also dependent on the assistants for translation and safety matters.

Fieldwork arrangements

Fieldwork took place in two remote villages of East Africa: Tot in the Rift Valley of Kenya and Engaruka in Northern Tanzania. I spent more than six months in the field during several sessions between 2011 and 2013. My research focused on the gender dynamics revolving around the local irrigation systems, their management and landscape changes (see Caretta, 2014; Caretta and Börjeson, 2014).

In both locations I hired locals who had already worked with other researchers beforehand. Although the research project was carried out in collaboration with local universities, I never contemplated hiring a professional interpreter. I was worried that bringing in an external person would have created a bigger gap between me and the research participants, because an outsider would also have opinions and biases towards the local community and be faced with long periods of fieldwork without breaks, as described by Turner (2010). Yet, the advantage in hiring a professional interpreter is that he/she will ‘only’ translate and not give a romanticized version of the local situation gathered

through interviews with selected respondents (Temple and Edwards, 2002). This advantage in my mind was outweighed by the opportunity of hiring an insider, a gatekeeper with several useful contacts who would ensure my personal wellbeing and safety (see also Edwards, 2013; Molony and Hammett, 2007).

These considerations were not necessarily relevant in Engaruka, where I hired the only person who could translate Kimaasai into proper English: Catherine, who is a primary school teacher.

In Tot I first hired Helena, a single mother who had been a field assistant for anthropologists for a long time. During the first fieldwork, I met Florence, a recent graduate who spoke perfect English and had two small children, whom I hired during the second fieldwork. Being of different ages and having different social status, Florence and Helena had access to different people, which provided a more nuanced picture of the local community.

We worked from early morning to evening carrying out interviews, observations and focus groups, and in the hot hours of the afternoon we would review the data gathered in the morning and prepare for the following day. We followed the principle of respondent validation (Temple and Young, 2004) during the semistructured interviews. The assistants would translate back to the interviewee my interpretation of the response to avoid misunderstanding between the three of us: researcher, assistant and researched. This working dynamic was very arduous for all of us. Even though I could not understand Marakwet, I was extra attentive that the process of translation be direct, as Florence, field assistant in Tot, Kenya, recalled: *'In the first focus group Martina told Helena, "Just translate, don't give your version." That was a moment of strong disagreement to me. Helena was trying to explain things better to women.'*

Catherine, field assistant in Engaruka, Tanzania, commented:

Fieldwork was tough. In the morning I had to work with Martina, and in the afternoon I had to give classes in the school. I became so tired. The process of translation was also a challenge. People talked a lot, and I had to make sure I translated everything correctly to Martina. At times people got confused and would not remember all the facts Martina was asking about. I panicked because I wanted Martina to get good answers, and I didn't want people to think that I was not able to translate. It was very difficult.

Focus groups, on the other hand, were carried out autonomously by assistants, following themes and modalities that we had discussed and rehearsed together. These group activities were taped, so that in the afternoon we could not only transcribe the content but also discuss and clarify statements or results that the assistants had perceived to be representative or not of the local reality.

Florence remembered:

Martina gave us freedom to organize our working schedule, though she gave us guidelines, and she was very, very strict with time. At first it was not easy to keep time for me, but after a while I adapted to her culture. She said she preferred to wait for people rather than having them wait for her. It was difficult to organize a focus group and get women together. I had never done it before. Talking in front of a group was scary at first, and I had to clarify questions over and over again to women. By the end of our work together I had improved my communication skills. The job overall was very tiring and walking around all day made me hungry.

The psychological and physical strain that the researcher and field assistants were under during the research is evident from our reflections (see also Mandel, 2003; Turner, 2010). Despite being tired, I got as much work done as I could every day. This strategy created uneasiness among assistants, as the intense working schedule made it difficult to juggle work, family and research. Even though I felt I gave them the liberty to arrange the schedule, they still thought that my demands in terms of time and accuracy of translation were too rigorous. We had to adapt to each other's working styles through a process that included stress, tiredness, anxiety and attention to time management. This lack of reciprocal comprehension shows that the conditions of knowledge production are not always ideal, even when they might be perceived as favorable from the researcher's point of view.

Negotiating understanding: language

At the beginning of my study I learned Swahili to facilitate my interactions with local people. This decision was driven by my background: being Italian, educated in English, living with a Spanish speaking partner and working in Sweden made me deeply aware of the implications of speaking the local language. Learning Swahili gave me the opportunity to better grasp what was going on around me, gave locals a chance to get to know me directly without the filter of the interpreter and helped them perceive my openness to their questioning and my general curiosity towards their work, their families and their culture. According to Watson (2004), learning a language provides the researcher with a better understanding of how the spoken word and local expressions are linked with the spatial and cultural identity of people. Thus, comprehending Swahili gave me insights into, for instance, the local toponymy, local descriptions of weather and landscape changes, and the character of the language used towards women and towards me as a white foreigner.

I was nevertheless aware that due to my condition of being white, female, and a solo researcher, even though I could speak Swahili, I would still benefit from having an assistant to act as a gatekeeper. This condition became even more evident when I reached the field and realized that in Tot, Kenya, everyone primarily spoke the local language of Marakwet, and that in Engaruka, Tanzania, even though Swahili was widely used, Kimaasai was the predominant lingo. Conducting interviews in Marakwet and Kimaasai made it possible for participants who did not feel at ease with Swahili to express themselves in their mother tongue, which, according to Edwards (2013), often results in more detailed data. Most importantly, as did Edwards (2013) and Williamson et al. (2011), I started off fieldwork by instructing the assistants on the topic of the research and on the ethics of interviewing participants: assistants should not push people either to be interviewed or to answer questions they feel uncomfortable about, and they must not sanitize answers.

Correspondingly, my assistants suggested I should take up a local name. Helena said one day:

I have been thinking about it. Your name is too difficult. People will never remember it, and they will always call you lechimin ['white person', in Marakwet]. I don't think you want to be called like that. I don't think you like that. I don't think it is ok that they call you like that. We should find you a local name.

This episode was a turning point in my fieldwork in Tot. I became *Chepkemoi* [born at night during spring], and after that, people referred to me with this local name. Helena's statement showed her engagement in the research project, but most importantly her awareness of my lack of knowledge of local customs and of the difficulties people were encountering in, quite practically, placing me in their community. They understood I did not want to be remembered as 'the white lady'; thus, by wanting to name me, my assistants invested me with legitimacy in the eyes of the locals and demonstrated respect towards me. I tried to make an extra effort to be accepted in the local community by calling people by name when I would meet them. This attempt was recognized by Florence, who wrote:

Learning key words in Marakwet was very important to Martina. Remembering people's names and faces was not a struggle to her. People commented positively and were surprised when she would address them in Marakwet. This was a clear indication that Martina wanted to make them cooperate more during the interviews.

These instances illustrate the pivotal role of cultural broker played by the interpreter, acknowledged by several scholars (Edwards, 2013; Molony and Hammett, 2007; Temple, 2002; Temple and Edwards, 2002). In fact, the research assistant not only shifts semantically between two languages but most importantly renders comparable interpretation and meaning of a phenomenon from one culture to the other (Regmi et al., 2010). Moreover, the process of translation is influenced by the interpreter's gender, whether she is a native speaker or she understands closely the sociocultural context of the research site (Temple and Edwards, 2002).

Negotiating obliviousness: safety

One aspect in the process of knowledge production that was touched briefly upon by Molony and Hammett (2007) is researcher's safety. If the researcher does not feel secure, this will affect the quality of fieldwork. Guaranteeing the researcher's safety in a remote and culturally distant location is often part of the responsibilities of the assistant. In Engaruka, Catherine invited me to live at her place, a small, three-room shack by the school, with no running water or electricity. I accepted, because I did not feel safe living by myself, and I truly needed someone to help with daily tasks. For example, I did not know where to fetch water or how to cook or anything else about local practicalities.

My position as a solo, white, unmarried, childless woman, however, also drew a lot of questions from interviewees. In fact, I did not fit into any social or cultural categorization in these two villages (cf. Robson, 1997; Miraftab, 2004), as Florence admitted once: '*It is true that you are considered a child in our culture. In church, for instance, people over 30 that have no children are categorized as youth and will sit somewhere else: you would be included in such a group.*'

My whiteness and my womanhood were undeniably two defining elements that conditioned my fieldwork in terms of how people perceived me and how I critically perceived my condition (see also Edwards, 1990; Kannen, 2012; Kobayashi, 1994). Florence wrote: '*When we were walking around plots we could hear children from far away*

shouting, "there is a white person." This was very unusual to you: more than twenty children following you and shouting at the same time "lechimin" [white person].⁷ Probably *mzungu* and *lechimin* were among the first words I learnt in Swahili and Marakwet, and with time I got used to children shouting to me, or crying or running away when they saw me: I was a source of both attraction and alarm for them. Sometimes I just wished I were not so visible: it was frustrating, especially when I wanted just to conduct research and focus on work. I also received a lot of unwanted attention from men from the villages. Florence recalled:

The issue of whether you were married was the order of the day. Men would ask me in Marakwet if they could have a relationship with you. I had to tell men that you came to Marakwet to carry out research on human geography and agriculture, not looking for a relationship. One day one of the police officers asked me if you were married and if he could propose to you. I didn't tell you because you were some steps ahead.

Catherine added: 'Even A. once asked me if you were married because he wanted to marry you.'

Florence and Catherine had not shared these two episodes with me before we wrote our diaries. In fact only once had I realized that such an incident was going on with Helena, who wrote: 'At the beginning of our work together the chief asked Martina if she was married. She got nervous and I had to tell the chief that it is not ok to ask these questions.'⁸ Given my uneasy reaction, it became clear to my assistants that I did not want to be in such situations again, which prompted them not to share with me comments that men were making or questions they had that might have upset me. Since I could not understand Kimaasai or Marakwet, my assistants did selectively translate what men were saying in order for me to continue my work without any reason for frustration or worry: in this way they protected me.

These instances express the cultural production of what it means to be a woman in the Kenyan and Tanzanian rural context: being a woman is equated to being married and having children. When these criteria are not fulfilled the researcher is interrogated and bothered by indiscreet comments and unpleasant requests. Thus, I was neither considered an 'honorary man' – because my level of education would endow me with a higher status than local women and with equal access to both sexes as happened to Oboler (1986) – nor had I lost my sexual identity in the eyes of the locals as described by Wengle (2005). Consequently, the assistants had to become my protectors as reported by Molony and Hammett (2007): not only was I dependent upon them to ensure the smooth advancement of research and the arrangement of focus groups and interviewees, but I counted on them to ensure my own safety.

Assistants

Research assistants shift between being gatekeepers and being outsiders in their own communities, two positions that they need to continuously account for both to the research participants and to the researcher (Turner, 2010). Moreover, the assistants, as locals, can try to capitalize on the research process to trigger debate and transformation

within their own communities. Accordingly, in this section their opinions and views are reflexively analyzed to yield valuable insights into the locality and the context where the research is carried out (see also Temple and Edwards, 2002).

Negotiating data access: insider and outsider

As Molony and Hammett (2007) show in their work, being close to a researcher can cause resentment and uneasiness among locals or colleagues, due to the assistant's acquired social status as a white researcher's employee. Such an instance was confirmed by Florence, who recalled people saying: *'Martina is feeding you well and you have soda every day.'* Moreover, when assistants were carrying out research autonomously, *'Some elderly people refused to have pictures taken because they said that we [Florence and Helena] would make money by selling the photos.'* Catherine shared: *The other teachers think I am making a lot of money by working with you and they would like to work with you too, but they recognized that their English is not as good as mine.'* However, Catherine was adamant: *'Colleagues are not making envious comments, but the fact that you made a donation to the school of books put you in a better light to the school director and all the teachers.'*

Instead of paying participants to encourage them to contribute, making a donation to improve the local school was a gesture widely perceived as positive by locals. Moreover, it improved my relations with Catherine's colleagues, and the school director responded by being less strict about Catherine's working schedule. I was well aware of all the difficulties my presence was causing to her, her colleagues and even her students, so we tried to concentrate our work in the mornings and late afternoons, so that she could teach at least a couple of hours after lunch every day.

One incident describes the difficulties female assistants are faced with, due to their acquired status of English-speaking employee, which breaks the local gender cultural norms that assign them to a subordinate position within the community. Florence and I went to church on a Sunday when a special collection was taking place. After mass, I was invited as a special guest – the only woman among 20 men – to go and have lunch with the priest and the authorities. I felt very uncomfortable to be elevated to this role, but I agreed in order not to offend the authorities present. Even though I had rarely directly interacted with or interviewed any authority, I wanted to maintain respectful relations with them and avoid any interference from them. Florence, who was with her children, followed me inside, where the lady serving food refused to give Florence water to wash her hands, claiming that Florence had to leave because she was not a special guest and children were not allowed inside.

Florence, the only local woman joining the authorities, had trespassed local boundaries whereby women are relegated to the roles of cook and maid and are expected to eat outside sitting on the ground along with the rest of community. As I felt sympathetic towards Florence as both a woman and a friend (see also Bondi, 2003; Nencel, 2013), I told the priest that my assistant could not be treated in such a disrespectful way. In this way I consciously challenged the local patriarchal and hierarchical norms in several ways. First, as a researcher, I gave up any attempt not to influence the local research context. Second, against my feminist egalitarian ethics, I had to play Florence's 'boss' to make sure she was given the respect she needed, as she could not directly challenge the priest. Finally, as a woman, I voiced my concern straight to the authorities, which is

unheard of in a culture where women rarely communicate with authorities and certainly never in a reproachful tone. While it is not new that the researcher's presence can cause internal tensions in small communities (see Robson, 1997), these are episodes that merit more attention in the reflective research process.

Nevertheless, Helena, Florence and Catherine agreed that their work as research assistants improved their status within their communities and most importantly, their lives. Helena wrote:

When Martina and I first started to work together I had a small plot within my compound. One day we interviewed a very proactive farmer and I decided I also wanted to be like him. I rented a plot to produce vegetables. Before starting doing research I was only selling kale and onions and now I have four beds. Now, Florence and I are making money to pay school fees for our children and I could also construct two new latrines by my home.

Moreover, Florence got a job during the 2013 Kenyan elections, 'Thanks to the letter of recommendation you had written to me, the employer said he gave me the job because I could show international experience of having worked with a white person.' The advantage in associating and working with a *mzungu* is evident also in Catherine's account: 'Working with Martina has increased my respect among the community members as now people call me a researcher.' Moreover, Florence wrote: 'I am also researching, I am also getting to know new things and places, and sometimes I ask questions you are not asking so I get to learn more about the soil and the crops.'

Hence, the assistant is not a mere transmitter of sentences, but rather an active researcher who moves across cultures and meanings (Temple and Edwards, 2002). The field assistant guides the researcher in the initial stages of research and thus becomes an active researcher who autonomously leads the research process, hence contributing to the production of situated knowledge. Moreover, these statements demonstrate how both assistants and researcher gained status from their interaction, and they show the pragmatic improvement in living conditions that assistantship brought about. Assistants were not shy in bringing up these changes, but rather proud of their achievements and independence as women and workers, which indicates that being involved in the research process can have an empowering effect for assistants as well as for participants (Scheyvens and Leslie, 2000).

Negotiating the research agenda

As a feminist geographer I entered the field with the aim of unveiling the power structures that hinder women from accessing resources to the same extent that men do. My personal and political convictions were soon understood by my assistants. Florence, in fact, recalled:

It was clear for us from the beginning that you were on women's side. We understood your opinion in different instances. For example, you told a man who approached our focus group that, instead of praising us for gathering women and making them aware of their agricultural knowledge, he should go and start telling men to collaborate more in subsistence farming.

As was the case for other researchers (e.g. Bondi, 2003; Edwards, 1990; Mandel, 2003; Robson, 1997), the personal became political. The instances of gender subordination I witnessed in the field drove my research. My political and personal attitude was seen and experienced as an opportunity for Florence, Helena and Catherine. They felt that my presence in their community could represent an opportunity for women to become more aware and critical towards their condition. Helena admitted:

Yes, we used your presence to bring up issues. At the end of the focus group a woman said it is good to be in a group and we can learn a lot from each other. I then took the chance to encourage them to start a small savings group to become more independent from their husband and pay their children's school fees. I know I did not need to translate to you right away because you would have supported me in saying this.

Helena's statement shows that 'translators are active producers in research rather than neutral conveyors of messages' (Temple, 2002: 846), as they exercise power over meaning across languages.

Often, after interviews, both my assistants and I would encourage women to ask me questions. Florence asserted:

When you answer to their questions and you tell them that you have a partner, but you provide for yourself that makes them reflect. They ask you how you implement family planning, which options exist in your country and how your husband feels about it. They are curious to know how you do it, because their husbands do not allow them to use family planning.

Helena adds: '*It is important to talk openly about family planning with young women because most men and elders do not like to hear about it.*' Moreover, women would share the abuses they suffered by their husbands. These stories were not new to Florence and Helena, so by making reference to my independence they would encourage women: '*You should leave your husband and go back to your family*' and '*Come to our self-help group; we gather money and help mothers in need.*' While I could not identify from personal experience, I did certainly empathize with them and was forced to shift 'between positions of observation and participation within an interview [...] and [...] move beyond familiar and well-rehearsed accounts into spontaneous self-exploration' (Bondi, 2003: 73).

In Engaruka, where Maasai girls are married off at the average age of 14 or 16, Catherine would tell mothers: '*You should not let your daughter to [be] married off so young*'; '*Don't let your husband decide for you and your children: daughters must get an education too. They are no different from sons.*' A girl's access to education was Catherine's personal mission in Engaruka. She became an elementary school teacher because she attended school thanks to an international long-distance adoption scheme. Thus, at every possible occasion when meeting illiterate young Maasai mothers, Catherine took the opportunity to encourage them to challenge their husbands' choice to send only their sons to school. She would punctually mention the issue at the end of every interview, without even asking me for my opinion. In fact, she asserted:

I always tell women to bring their children to school when I meet them in the streets, but having them gathered in a group for your interviews was an opportunity I could not miss to sensitize them. After I would mention this to them, you would always support me. That made my point stronger: people think you are also a teacher and they believe you.

Analyzing these episodes is crucial not only to acknowledge the inherent character of situated knowledge that is the contextual and contingent nature of field data production (Rose, 1997) or the influence that I exercised in the researched environment (England, 1994), but especially to account for the reflective nature of the assistants' experience and positionality. Additionally, these instances show that I was not in control of the research process when Florence, Helena and Catherine brought up issues they wanted to sensitize women about. They took the lead in the research process and decided to drive their own research agendas because they knew I would have supported them.

Assistants capitalized on my presence and our friendly relationship to push for a cultural change, namely, women's empowerment, which they expressed by encouraging women to form savings groups, use family planning and send their daughters to school. In this sense, it can be said that the feminist principle of dialogical, non-hierarchical collaboration between researcher, assistant and research participants materialized in these instances (see also Domosh, 2003; England, 1994). By prompting participants to reflect on and challenge the system that makes them subordinate, this type of interaction can be empowering for participants with a deprived background, and it 'can increase women's self-esteem by affirming their self-worth' (Scheyvens and Leslie, 2000: 127).

It must, though, be noted that my presence acted as a trigger for empowerment and participation. I drew attention in the communities with my appearance and my status of childless, single woman. This situation represented an opportunity for Helena, Florence and Catherine to spread the message that women need to come together to have their voices heard within their households and their communities. In such discourse I became only a shadow in the background. I could not fully grasp the topics of those conversations: only some bits and pieces were translated for me when I requested it. When such dynamics became routine, I knew my assistants would have mentioned those topics to women, and I seldom intervened; only when we were leaving would I ask for a brief summary of what participants had said.

Hence, field assistants are not only independent researchers but can also become community builders and organizers (Edwards, 2013; Turner, 2010). This dynamic can occur if the researcher understands and shares the motivation behind the social struggle, and steps back and facilitates the interaction between the assistant and the community independently from her research motives (see Molony and Hammett, 2007). Acknowledging and analyzing the contingencies of situated knowledge gives rise to the possibility that the research process, if left in the hands of research participants and assistants, can trigger community reflection and change.

Participants

The involvement of participants in the research process as an attempt to subvert the 'power geometry' (Massey, 1993, as quoted in Nagar, 2013) of knowledge production

has become a cornerstone of feminist epistemology (Bondi, 2003; Domosh, 2003; England, 1994). This section discusses how the participants' position and messages are mediated through the subjectivity of the assistants and the participants' perception of the researcher.

Mediating knowledge production with assistants

In cross-cultural, cross-language research participants' knowledge is mediated by the interpreter/assistant. Thus, knowledge production is not a value-free process leading to situated knowledge, as interpreters can be influenced by their own beliefs and preferences in the selection of participants and in the rendering of their statements (see also Edwards, 2013; Temple and Young, 2004; Turner, 2010).

During the study, in fact, assistants were sometimes skeptical about people's – especially men's – willingness to freely partake in dialogues and participatory activities done through focus groups. Helena, Florence and Catherine unanimously wrote: *People, when they see the white lady, they think about money. Many asked us if you could pay school fees for their children and we had to tell people that you, yourself are a student.* This legitimate desire for economic support is manifested in different ways. Florence mentioned:

Shopkeepers were competitively asking me to tell my boss to buy soda from their shops. Moreover, men in focus groups would complain that they were not getting enough payment to participate. We would emphasize that it was just a token to thank them for their contribution.

Catherine added: *'That men's group was expecting you to help them monetarily, but when I explained that you are a student then they said "Ok, let's continue with her questions."'*

Similarly, during walks from one field to the other we would have time to discuss the answers people gave us and Helena would note, *'She is very knowledgeable in the community. You should ask her more questions, especially about the history of our place'*, while Catherine often pointed out that some sources were not reliable, such as when she said: *'He keeps on saying he doesn't know, even though I have tried to ask him the same questions in different ways several times. We are wasting our time here.'*

Assistants have their own opinions and judgments, which transpire in their work and attitude towards respondents (see also Edwards, 2013; Turner, 2010). Nevertheless, these statements also show that they felt sufficiently at ease with me to actually voice their points of view. Most importantly, they were willing to collaborate for the best outcome of the research process by avoiding taking into consideration unreliable accounts and by redirecting and leading the research by pointing to trustworthy sources.

Negotiating participation

Misunderstandings with locals about my position were not only limited to money matters, as Florence recalled: *'People were thinking that you are a soil expert or an NGO expert who could help them to improve their yields. Some were disappointed when they understood that you were a student there to learn from them.'* Helena also shared:

Many were calling me and asking me, 'when will you come to check my plot with Chepkemoi [Martina]? I have done well in cultivation this year.' They were under the impression that you would make some sort of list of who was the best and worst farmer. They wanted to show off and know if they were the best.

While maintaining that I was not a soil expert, I often addressed doubts and questions by supporting farmers' activities or by asking why they were not following in the footsteps of their more successful neighbors. I never gave a professional answer, but rather, these conversations allowed me to better grasp people's uncertainties and vulnerabilities, and to contend that they were the ones who knew their land best. I could only ask questions and bounce off ideas with them.

Whereas research participants in a feminist epistemological fashion are encouraged to ask questions and integrate local perspectives about the research itself (see Falconer Al-Hindi and Kawabata, 2002; Miraftab, 2004), striving towards such dialogical process does not erase the possibility of misunderstanding (see Miraftab, 2004), particularly if the research relations cannot be linguistically conveyed directly by the researcher but have to go through the assistant. Moreover, these instances indicate that, even though the researcher aims at establishing honest, participative and open communication with participants by sharing her background and the research purpose, this goal is not always well understood. The impossibility of erasing these communication and status boundaries can be perceived as a failure by feminist researchers who are constantly working to debunk the unequal 'power geometry' (Massey, 1993, as quoted in Nagar, 2013) between researcher, assistants and participants (see also Falconer Al-Hindi and Kawabata, 2002). Participants, in fact, consider the researcher the 'boss' of the assistants. The assistants are in the difficult position of having to mediate the misunderstandings that materialize. Ensuring the smooth continuation of the research collaboration means negotiating with the researcher how the research aim has to be conveyed and, persuading research participants that, even if they did not stand to gain economically, collaborating in research can be a learning experience.

Concluding remarks

Through a feminist epistemological analysis, this article investigates the situated knowledge production in cross-language and cross-cultural research by showing how this process is influenced by the multiple subjectivities and positionalities of researcher, assistants and participants. By presenting our relational, personal and intersubjective perspectives, Florence, Helena, Catherine and I examined the 'power geometry' (Massey, 1993, as quoted in Nagar, 2013) that endows the researcher with the role of elite knowledge producer (see also England, 1994).

In the spirit that 'reflexivity is about doing research differently' (Nencel, 2013: x) we experimented with writing a self-reflexive text (cf. Nagar, 2013) that seeks to capitalize on our personal and professional relationships to improve both research outcomes and working arrangements (see also Turner, 2010), as Florence wrote: *I had never thought of something like a diary, but this is good to improve our work by having this open discussion.*

This self-reflexive exercise brought about three main features in the multiple subjective process of knowledge production.

First, my positionality as researcher was deconstructed. By disclosing the emotional involvement that fieldwork required, I relived unsettling experiences and showed that true reflexivity can also mean letting go of control (see also Falconer Al-Hindi and Kawabata, 2002) and letting yourself be guided and protected by your assistants (see also Molony and Hammett, 2007). Striving towards such accountable positioning not only exposes me to the scrutiny of peers but, most importantly, sheds light on the 'journey over the destination and eclipses the scientific illusion of control and mastery' (Ellis and Bchner, 2005: 744). In fact, as much as I tried, and Florence, Helena and Catherine facilitated my interactions, participants still had a hierarchical perception and distorted expectations towards me, which epitomizes the failure of a research project grounded on feminist participatory principles. Moreover, assistants' suggestions were crucial in the selection of participants (see also Robson, 1997). Florence, Helena and Catherine safeguarded my safety by concealing men's sexual proposals, but they also took advantage of my presence to bring up with women participants issues close to their hearts: violence against women and girls' education.

Second, deconstructive reflexivity shows that the relations and personal perceptions shaped by our convictions and backgrounds are not self-evident or alike (see also Nencel, 2013). Hence, when analyzing the process of situated knowledge negotiation in a cross-cultural setting we should be more attentive to how the interplay of researcher's, participants' and assistants' positionalities shape the research process (Temple and Edwards, 2002) and how the evolution of the research can, in turn, affect one's identity and one's perceptions of the others' identities (see also Kobayashi, 1994). Yet, reflexivity does not necessarily equate to a research-reliable account (Domosh, 2003), but the inclusion of this multiple lens can enhance the multifaceted and changing contingent character of situated knowledge. Consequently, a truly feminist methodological approach should aim at engaging not only the researcher herself or the participants in this reflexive process, but especially the assistants who play a vital role in cross-cultural, cross-language research (Temple and Edwards, 2002).

Third, during the research process intimate knowledge is shared among the researcher, assistants and participants, which leads to collaborative relationships. During fieldwork Florence, Helena, Catherine and I developed a distinctive reciprocal understanding. The fine balance between friendship and professionalism was a constitutive element of our relationship (see also Molony and Hammett, 2007). Our mutual comprehension allowed us to critically reflect on the research process by discussing, reading each other's diaries and writing together the material that fed into this article. Conversely, we never forgot the aim of our joint endeavor. The social, cultural and economic gaps existing between us could not be erased and had to be acknowledged in the self-reflexive process, not only to enhance the study's validity but also to disclose that the assistants' socioeconomic features influenced for good and for bad the attitude and responses of interviewees (Mandel, 2003; Temple and Edwards, 2002). In fact, 'you cannot have feminist theories that explain differences without them actually being grounded in those differences' (Edwards, 1990: 478).

Studies conducted in a cross-cultural, cross-language environment ought to include an analysis of the roles played by interpreters/assistants and by their positionality in their methodological reflections, as this will enhance any study's validity and trustworthiness

(see also Williamson et al., 2011). By arguing for this methodological recognition and advancing the discussion on translation and cross-language interviews (see Temple and Young, 2004; Williamson et al., 2011), this article contributes to the vast array of feminist epistemological works exploring the dimensions of situated knowledge, adding a crucial aspect to it: the interpreter/assistant. In fact, the use of participatory field methods does not only consist of rendering and validating respondents' points of view, but it also means accounting in a reflexive fashion for the involvement of the field assistant in the process of situated knowledge production. Most importantly, such attentiveness is not only purposeful within feminist research but should be adopted in all cross-cultural, cross-language qualitative studies to expand ethics and trustworthiness considerations.

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Note

1. By using the term 'assistant', I argue for a diametrically opposite view to the earlier anthropological approach that 'the interpreter should be nothing more than just an agent for transferring messages between the informant and the fieldworker – a kind of passive instrument for the anthropologist' (Phillips, 1960: 298). In this paper the assistant is an interpreter, a cultural broker and a gatekeeper.

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