

Roundtable on Positionality

Held at King's College London on Wednesday 8th May, 2019.

Report

Report: Katalin Zsiga and Saskia Hoskins.

Organiser: Dr Jelke Boesten, DID, Gender Studies Network

How do we manage our own positionality when confronted with our research 'subjects'? What kind of identity markers shape our questions, and what kind of vectors of inequalities may shape the responses? Are there identities that make it difficult, or even impossible, to do certain research? Do identity markers intervene in our research, perhaps even constrain access or put us, or our research participants, in danger? Thinking about positionality may help us think through the opportunities and risks of asking certain questions and being in certain spaces. At the roundtable, participants were invited to reflect on how their positionality as a gendered person affects their research activity in the field. Not only the gendered dimensions were discussed, but other intersectional elements, such as socio-economic status, culture, and their own norms and values. It was recognised that each of us brings our own bias to our research. Understanding your own position in terms of vectors of inequality is essential when conducting research. For example, the simple fact of doing a PhD at a Western University automatically puts you in a position of relative power compared to many of our research participants. Of course, doing fieldwork is not limited to researchers from the global North researching the global South.

The concept of positionality originates from feminist epistemology. Authors such as Sandra Harding and Nancy Hartsock emphasised the importance of understanding the power relations that underlie our research and encouraged constant reflexivity towards this. Harding, the creator of Standpoint theory, criticised the notion of feminist empiricism, arguing that it was impossible to write an 'objective' feminist literature. According to the epistemology of standpoint theory, each individual researcher will always analyse a given issue from a different viewpoint, given that the questions you ask as a researcher are always influenced by your worldview and your own expectations. Recognising your own positionality will not be enough to make your work 'neutral.' As part of a feminist epistemology, researchers should, however, constantly review their own research during the fieldwork to minimise the impact of their own bias.

During the roundtable, we heard from five late-stage and recent PhD researchers based at the School of Global Affairs: Andrea Espinoza, Dr Ife Okafor-Yarwood, Dr Antonella Mazzone, Kyunghoon Kim, and Anna Grimaldi, who kindly shared their experiences of their own positionality in the field whilst researching for their PhDs.

1. Andrea Espinoza, Department of International Development – Class and race difference in the field and in analysis

Andrea is an Ecuadorian PhD student writing up her PhD thesis on 'Surviving violence in a plural legal system. Violence and silence from the Ecuadorian Andes.' During her fieldwork, she spent five months conducting ethnographic research in a rural indigenous community, in Llin Llin Pucará, Chimborazo province, Ecuador. Her work focused on violence against women in a setting where indigenous justice and statutory law coexist and are presented as 'options' to resolve cases of domestic violence and gendered based violence.

Before conducting her research, Andrea thought that she would experience few barriers due to her position as a Spanish-speaking, Ecuadorian, mestizo woman. However, as soon as she arrived in the community, it became clear that there were obvious differences that identified her as an outsider, a foreigner. For example, she was traveling alone, she was the only woman always wearing jeans. Similarly, when it rained, she was the only one who would cover herself with a plastic poncho. For men, behaviour such as this presented Andrea as someone to be protected, someone who is 'fragile.' For women, Andrea was perceived as a person that they could not completely relate to.

Acknowledging the differences proved to be valuable to Andrea's research. She found that people were interested in her and would ask lots of questions. For example, 'Why are you not married?' or 'Are your parents allowing you to be here?' These questions showed the communities' gender expectations. Those expectations make visible important hierarchies and gendered roles like the subordination of a young woman to her parents and the importance of marriage. When Andrea explained that she was doing the project for herself, they were surprised. Some questions were also revealing about their class expectations. For example, 'Who is paying for your studies, are you rich?' Andrea noted that in the context of the community, she was seen as 'rich' and potentially powerful but not because she was studying for a PhD but because she spoke English and lived abroad.

Through formal and informal conversations, Andrea noticed that to address different members of the community required different types of interactions. When speaking with younger women, they talked about music, movies, life in the city, hobbies. When talking to older women, they will talk about traditions and memories. Moreover, when speaking about domestic violence with older women, Andrea noted that they thought that Andrea would judge them and felt the need to justify their actions. Andrea's experience highlights how intersectionality is important in research as being a woman is not in itself enough to create 'automatic bonds' between the researcher and the research participants. Indeed, as she pointed out, the context in which one becomes a woman is different in different cultures, and there will be different ideas of what it means to be a woman.

The difference between the researcher and the community she was working with were not only focused on material differences and perceptions on race and gender. They also did not share the same understandings of what is violence and what gets categorised as violent. Before starting fieldwork, she thought violence would be 'easy to spot' and identify. However, after arriving in the community, it became clear that violence was not something obvious. For instance, there was not a Kichwa word to translate the word violence, which means that she had to modify her questionnaires to stipulate specific actions such as hit, kick or shout. However, these actions were difficult to link with emotional violence or with the idea of violence as something recurrent and systematic. It was noted that her research frameworks changed during the data collection phase, and that this retheorising of the research was part of letting participants speak and be heard.

Andrea noted that creating relationships with the research participants was crucial to the research and that it happened organically as she stayed with the community. As time passed, many of the community realised that they had something in common and their perceptions about her changed, allowing her to ask questions and receive more open answers. In general, even though many members of the community didn't understand the research project, the majority were happy to co-operate and explain her their ideas, to help her understand their concepts, practices and beliefs.

2. Dr Ifesinachi Okafor-Yarwood, African Leadership Centre – Insider/outsider identities in fieldwork

Ife has recently finished her doctorate, and her thesis title was 'Nigeria in the context of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing in the Gulf of Guinea: human and national security dimensions of maritime security.' As part of her research, Ife spent time on the field in Nigeria. Ife hoped that her research was unique as being Nigerian herself she believed that she was offering a new research question. In that, the focus for researchers has almost always been on issues such as pollution in fisheries or piracy, but as an insider, Ife was able to focus on a different research question, in a way that an outsider might not think of.

Before the fieldwork, Ife felt that the research would be easily accessible, given that she was Nigerian herself. Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) advice was not to travel to the area due to security threats and reports of kidnappings of foreigners, but Ife felt secure as a Nigerian, and she even highlighted 'I am Nigerian' on her ethical approval form. However, when she arrived, it quickly became apparent that she was coming from an outsider perspective. Whilst she was from Nigeria herself, she was very unfamiliar with the area and encountered situations that she had never experienced before, such as having to run for cover whilst the police were shooting at armed robbers. Representatives from the communities initially did not want to talk to her, believing her to be from the government. Whilst she would tell them, 'I am your sister, I am from Abia State,' the representatives would reply, 'we understand that we are all Nigerians, what do we gain from this exercise'? Access to the Island was also more difficult than first expected. To travel to the island that Ife was investigating it was necessary to know someone working in the oil and gas industry to gain access to the company's transport vessel as public transport ships were deemed far too dangerous. She had to make many calls in order to put her name on the travel list, and as a result it took much longer to start her fieldwork.

Gender had not been an element of Ife's research until she went on fieldwork, as she felt that the theoretical framework was already too large. However, once in the field, it became clear to her that the impact of gender relations was evident. For instance, the fishmongers themselves were predominantly women, and so the depleting fisheries resulting from illegal and unreported fishing had a largely gendered impact. Ife's position as a female researcher also impacted on how she was able to conduct the research. For example, when speaking to fisherfolks in the coastal communities, the men responded better to her brother, who was travelling with her, as culturally, it is not expected for women to travel alone in some cases. He was able to speak 'man-to-man' with them. Her brother also was able to get more open responses to specific questions. When her brother disclosed that Ife was pregnant at the time of the research, Ife found that the fisherfolks empathised with her more. Ife also found that due to gender hierarchies, women would not always respond to her directly, but would

first look towards their husbands to get a nod that allowed them to speak. She, therefore, changed her approach to the research, first asking the husbands, 'do you mind if I ask your wife...'Ife reflected that respecting cultural practices was not always an easy task and recognised that in this case she was forced to engage in dominant patriarchal hierarchies in order to elicit responses from research participants. In this case, Ife reflected that it had been necessary to park her pride.

Ife's experience of elite interviews, however, were markedly different. For example, in Abuja, Ife was able to present herself without concealing any aspect of who she was – living in the UK and well-travelled. In the Niger Delta, however, Ife had introduced herself as studying in the UK, but, living in Abia state, and married (without disclosing much about herself), to emphasise the commonality between herself and the research participants. Nevertheless, even during the elite interviews, Ife had to be flexible. For example, she was unable to obtain interviews with certain people as they were not in the state but did manage to arrange to interview them over the phone, which turned out to be just as helpful.

Both Ife and Andrea admitted that because their interviews related to sensitive topics, they understood that research participants would not and could not always be completely honest with them. Both reflected that at times they would have to triangulate information to ensure that what they were being told was correct. In Ife's case, there were many instances when what she was being told could not be corroborated. In terms of the illegal fishing, Ife had to present herself as balanced within interviews, and would not openly call someone's act illegal. For Andrea, Geertz' concept of deep-handing out in ethnographic research was helpful to getting closer to the truth in terms of domestic violence against woman, as informal conversations and observations allowed her to challenge what people had initially told her.

3. Dr Antonella Mazzone, Department for International Development – The gendered risks of being in the field.

Antonella recently completed her PhD in 'Energy Transition in the Brazilian Amazon. A Gender Perspective,' and spent time in the field in Brazil. Antonella had considered her fieldwork to be low risk; she had planned to conduct the research with a host institution who had pre-approved her research and had offered to host her for six months. She would be spending a month in each isolated community and all the expenses related to traveling and living in the communities such as gasoline, food as well as the payment of a boat driver were supposed to be covered by the institution.

Having previously lived and studied in Brazil (Rio de Janeiro City), she did not feel like a foreigner. She was fluent in Portuguese and when she told people that she was Italian, they remarked 'do you mean Brazilian Italian?' and considered her to be one of their own. However, the reality of the research was a stark departure from her expectations. Antonella remarked that she had paid the price of her overconfidence because the Amazon region is fundamentally different from the urban Rio. When she arrived in Brazil in Rio, she discovered that the institution that had promised to host her had folded due to the financial crisis, and they were no longer able to support her research. In addition, they asked Antonella to pay R\$ 5,000 if she wanted to proceed with her research in the communities. Because that was an unplanned expense, she was faced with the possibility that she would potentially have to return to the UK to reconsider her trip, but due to financial constraints, as well as her previous

experience with her pre-doctoral research, she decided to continue onto Manaus and carry on with the research, which she reflected was already stepping outside her ethical approval.

Upon arriving in Manaus, Antonella experienced difficulties with finding information about the communities. She needed, firstly, to identify the areas which would suit her research design, and secondly, to find gatekeepers introducing her to the community and gain permission to conduct research. However, the identified institutions who could help with access to key information had initially ostracised this process. During the initial period of fieldwork in Manaus, Antonella was not accepted as she had envisaged; her position as a white, western woman worked against her, and the energy engineers and technicians, who were almost all men, did not trust her when she said that she was a student. Previously, they had negative experiences of westerners posing as researchers and using false research as a front to extract their resources in the Amazon. Antonella noted that there were indeed ethical complications of a white woman entering such a community, evoking memories of colonialism. One of the engineers mentioned that previous researchers had to 'insist' to gain the local institution's trust.

Following the advice, Antonella persisted and eventually gained the trust of the institution, which then helped to identify and then gaining access to the communities. On a couple of occasions, she went accompanied by another woman, the only female engineer who acted as her gatekeeper. She found that once in the communities, although she certainly stood out being a white woman in predominantly Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian communities, the people were more likely to trust her because they had associated her with NGO workers who often came to the community to give vaccinations.

While in the communities, Antonella felt mostly accepted and safe, in urban Manaus, instead, she grew insecure about her personal safety as a woman because of increasing unwanted attentions. The lack of an institution *in-loco* supporting Antonella created an evident situation of vulnerability, which led Antonella experiencing harassment. Antonella advised to be aware of local gendered power relationships and vulnerable environments for women. She reflected that, in face of such instability, personal safety and wellbeing should have come first.

The roundtable reflected that a number of circumstances in the field can very easily deviate from what is written during the ethical approval process and risk assessment for the research, and that the university could potentially do more to support students, such as producing guidelines for fieldwork in remote areas; and providing emergency funds for fieldwork. Antonella advised that having your own place to stay whilst on fieldwork is highly desirable, and that having an institution to aid you during the research is vital. There should also be a second call in case the fieldwork deviates significantly from the ethical approval, risk assessment and original fieldwork plans.

4. Kyunghoon Kim, Department of International Development – How are our questions and answers shaped by our fears of being against the mainstream?

Kyunghoon is currently writing up his thesis on 'State Capitalism as development Policy Tools: Political Economy of State Activism in Indonesia.' His project focuses on how state-owned enterprises are mobilised in emerging economies' national development strategies. Nevertheless, reflecting on

his own positionality has sometimes led Kyunghoon to ask himself whether it was a wise decision to choose the research topic that he is currently studying.

Since the global financial crisis, there has been a revival of interest in industrial policies, both in the academic world and in practice, and East Asian developmental state literature has become more widely accepted by the mainstream. Kyunghoon put forward that if we consider these changes, one might think it is a great time to study the developmental role of state enterprises. However, it's not that simple. The mainstream literature mainly focuses on industrial policies that are relatively 'marginal' such as providing tax incentives, creating business-friendly environment, and subsidising research and development and continues to focus on emphasising the detrimental effects of state-owned entities. As a result, Kyunghoon is now concerned whether his research topic will affect which jobs will be open to him in the future and has reflected on whether he has been impractical to praise the positive aspects of state-owned enterprises, when it would probably be safer to criticise.

These fears or concerns are not unrelated to Kyunghoon's past experience of working for organisations with strong anti-statist stances. In the military, seminars are given where lecturers criticise communism and state activism and talk about the superiority of liberal market economy and the democratic system. Ha-Joon Chang's *Bad Samaritans*, which criticises neo-liberalism, but is by no means a Marxists text, was included on the list of books that is banned from military barracks in 2008. These anecdotes tell us how strongly anti-statist or pro-neoliberal stances prevail in the military, and more widely in the Korean society. Another example is Samsung, the largest private conglomerate in Korea, where Kyunghoon used to work. Samsung was a beneficiary of industrial policies under the developmental state. Nevertheless, the company is now strongly pro-globalisation and pro-liberalisation in its outlook. Whilst Kyunghoon had the freedom to write what he wanted to write during his time at Samsung he believes that his past research was influenced by this company's stance. He also reflected that experience such as these have shaped his identity and he believes that his position as a relative insider to this environment has led him to worry since he has decided to study the positive role of state enterprises.

In Indonesia, many elite academics had been exposed to the negative outlook concerning state-owned enterprises. Some economic institutions did invite him to speak on the subject, but they were looking for negative stories. At times he felt that he was letting his opportunity go and he presents a weaker argument than he otherwise would have given the prejudice against state enterprises. Kyunghoon also reflected that his angle may have affected how his research participants viewed him. Often participants would insist on focusing on just the negative things, although some participants admitted that his take was a fresh interesting view. Nevertheless, he was met with many challenges during the data collection due to this prejudice. To mitigate this, when he wrote to individuals and organisations asking for interviews he would include a lot of statistics, demonstrating some of the positive contributions of state enterprises. At the beginning of interviews, he would also mention the negative aspects of state-owned enterprises to demonstrate his knowledge of the subject.

5. Anna Grimaldi, Brazil Institute – Decolonising Archives of Solidarity

Anna is currently writing up her PhD, entitled 'Brazil and the Transnational Human Rights Movement: 1964-1985.' Anna's experience of positionality is one more of ideas and ideology than with people. Anna's PhD is concerned with human rights and how human rights have changed over time while once we were mostly concerned with political and civil rights, we now live in a world where the environment itself can have rights.. Anna noted that her own understanding of human rights had been largely influenced by human rights narratives of the global North, for example, France's Declaration of the Rights of Man. However, in Brazil, human rights practices, seen in social movements such as the MST, have stemmed from a very different tradition. Noting that the leading human rights narratives are predominantly of the Global North, Anna had to think outside the box in order to give visibility to narratives from the global south. She consciously avoided incorporating ideas from large international human rights organisations such as the UN or Amnesty International.

Anna tried to step outside the European narrative. To avoid contributing further to the dominant narrative, Anna used grounded theory. As a result, it became apparent that contributors to social movements in Brazil at the time were not using the language of western human rights. For example, what we might call a right to autonomous development, in Brazil would be understood as the practice of 'conscientisation'. Liberation theology, such as Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, provided a very helpful context to understand the Brazilian way of 'doing' human rights. However, such texts were not written in the language of human rights, but in the 'language of the oppressed'. As part of her research, Anna found that this 'Brazilian' way of human rights had contributed to wider global norms, such as that of environmental rights.

Anna also experienced issues with gaining trust with her research participants given her position as a UK researcher. Whilst she originally went to Brazil thinking that she would get access to former political prisoners it proved very difficult to locate participants and arrange meetings. With those she did manage to interview, other problems emerged. One woman who had been tortured during the Brazilian dictatorship by a machine sent over to Brazil from the UK, only wanted to talk about this particular experience with Anna on account of her being British, in which case her position as a UK researcher was contextually very difficult. Overall, Anna noted how interviews did not turn out to be as helpful as she thought, given that the majority of those who had been fighting against the human rights violations during the Brazilian dictatorship had already been interviewed multiple times, and although Anna was asking very new questions, interviewees continued to present well-rehearsed answers. Indeed, some of her interviewees repeated almost word for word things they had said in other interviews. In this case, where participants were experiencing research fatigue, Anna realised it would be necessary to change tact and to amend her methodology. In the end, Anna's data collection relied much more on archival work than at first expected, but this change in methodology proved to be extremely fruitful.

Guidelines and tips

Reflexivity and Flexibility

- Be open to your research changing. Your framework of analysis as written down in the first year will inevitably change after fieldwork. Embrace it.
- Be prepared to build on what you learn in the field. This may lead you to change your research practice but is part of proper reflexivity in research. You may, for example, need to re-adjust or rephrase questions to adapt to the expectations and needs of your research participants.
- During fieldwork, you should be prepared to write notes while interviewing, as you may not have the opportunity to actually record voices. When recording interviews, there may be times where you will have to be prepared to switch off the tape or to stop writing things down, if somebody is giving you information that is sensitive. This is critical to ensure trust between yourself and the research participants, but also for respecting participants' wishes, and in some cases may be crucial to protecting their interests and safety.
- Having a gatekeeper/openers can be essential to accessing isolated and hard to reach communities.
- In terms of interviews, in some cases interviews will not work out; participants may have 'research fatigue', for example, or be unwilling to speak about certain issues and experiences. Instead of flogging a dead horse, it may be possible to change your approach, your questions, or to seek new participants, in the current area or in a new area. You may even need to amend your methodology. Again, flexibility is key.
- Be open to repaying the kindness; when someone has shared information with you, you may want to share information about your own life and worries. However, know your limits, as it might backfire to share too much information

Safety (of yourself and your participants)

- Your safety is a priority during the fieldwork. You should not feel that you should compromise your own safety in order to collect your data.
- The safety of your participants is also paramount.
- Have a contact in the UK, other than your supervisor, with whom you are in contact every day, such as a partner, sibling or parent, who will be able to flag any unexplained lack of contact from you. In addition, organise regular online or telephone appointments with your supervisor. The university also has an emergency phone contact which you can reach out to in the case that you cannot reach your contact or your supervisor.
- Research the place that you are going to and listen to local informants. If you identify people who are trustworthy, who tell you directly 'you need to make alternative arrangement, don't go alone,' listen to this valuable local experience.
- Learn from a gatekeeper about what may be considered appropriate behaviour in the local context and how alternative behaviour may be perceived. For example, smiling and laughing may in some contexts be seen to be flirtatious, even though this is unintended.

- A particular suggestion for female researchers is to wear a wedding ring and to present yourself as married; be aware that this will not protect you from harassment in all situations, but it gives you an excuse.
- Safety is not just relevant to female researchers, but to researchers of all genders. Be frank and honest in your risk assessment. It is your responsibility, but also the responsibility of the university and your supervisor to ensure your safety during fieldwork. If there are situations in which the university does not allow you to go to where you originally intended, then you should take this seriously. There are some situations where research is not currently doable and with reason.
- When writing up your research, it is important to take requests for anonymity seriously. One way to use sensitive data is to use an ethnographic tool of amalgamating different people's experiences into a fictional persona. Consider how your research participants would feel if they read your paper; always take informed consent and promises of anonymity seriously.
- In the case that your research is sensitive and potentially triggering, where possible, try to ensure that there are services that you can refer people to afterwards.
- In the case of any problems, be honest with the university in order that it can support you. Stay in touch with your supervisor(s) and tell them what is going on.
- The university offers all researchers travel insurance – be sure to fill out the necessary [paperwork](#) before you go.

Consequences of Research

- When conducting your research, be aware that your current research may have implications for future research projects. If you are investigating something potentially contentious in that country, will that affect your future research prospects in that country? Travel to certain regions, for example, may also affect your chances of obtaining a visa in other countries. Do not be discouraged but be aware that you will not always be able to have it all, and that you may need to compromise.
- If researching something potentially contentious in a local context, it is advisable to find a respected local institution or person, such as a respected intellectual, to support you during the research and to give your research local legitimacy.

General Advice

- Carrying business cards demonstrating that you are a PhD researcher of the university may help you to appear more 'serious.' The university can help you to create these.

NB The participants of the roundtable recommended that the University should make available an **emergency fund** for students who find themselves in danger or in other difficulties during their studies. Participants also recommended that where possible the university should fund the cost of accommodation during field research in order to ensure that PhD researchers are not having to stay in compromising situations. After discussing this with the Department and School it has been agreed that such emergency funding will be made available to PGR students at the School of Global Affairs. Any need for emergency funds would need to be discussed with supervisors and/or the PGR lead or Senior Tutor, whoever is available at the moment of crisis. We will make sure this possibility is announced and included in the student handbook of 2019/20.