

## **Taking *Researching With* Vs. *Researching On* Seriously: A Detour Via the Intercultural?**

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“Our every interaction is political, whether we intent it to be or not; everything we do in the course of a day communicates our relative power, our desire for a particular sort of connection, our identification of the other as one who needs something from us, or vice versa”.

(Lakoff, 1990: 17)

### **Introduction**

Let me start with a vignette. Many years ago a colleague of mine researched and compared Finnish students' and French student's skills in the French language. Based on ten participants in total, she had discovered that the Finnish students (who were specialists of French) wrote more “quickly” and “correctly” than the French students (who were from different disciplines). I remember how the Finnish media had “advertised” for her work, boasting that “Finnish people are better at French than the French themselves”... I remember how upset I was at this blatant misuse of the media for personal promotion – when a PhD is defended in Finland, it is important to “advertise” for it in the media and it is the media themselves who decide who gets printed, hence the need to make PhD results marketable. But that was not all. My colleague had asked me and other “language people” to take part in her study to “mark” the students' writings. No instructions were given on how to do it: she claimed that it would allow her to see how we conceptualised the marking of written tasks. When she defended her PhD, I was sitting in the audience – so were some of the other correctors and students who took part in her study. When she presented her results, she kept asserting that the correctors were not always unanimous about what was ‘good’ or ‘bad’ writing skills and that the gap in the grades they had awarded demonstrated that for them marking the papers was more of a lottery game than an academic exercise. I remember how annoyed I got, especially because she had named, thanked and “shamed” the correctors in her thesis... Being surrounded by the students who had been the “victims” of our misjudgements, I felt humiliated.

After this rather unpleasant event, I started thinking about my own work and wondered if and how many people I had named explicitly or implicitly and how many I had used, abused, misinterpreted and shamed in my research. This is when I decided to revisit my own work. What I discovered was embarrassing: never was my own voice analysed in my results, it was only the participants' – even when I had “forced” them to give an answer to a question I was myself unable to answer; I had clearly oriented and “boxed” them by using research methods that were not critical enough (interviews/questionnaires/uncritical content analysis disguised under the label of discourse analysis); my starting point was always biased: working on identity, I always used one ‘token’ identity to examine my participants' experiences. Clearly I was doing research *on* people not *with* people, creating “partial knowledge” (Somekh, 2002: 90). I was also ignoring the many and varied political aspects of “human relationships (...) by which power creates and defines those relations” (Lakoff, 1990: 17) in research. Finally, I was being a self-centered and selfish researcher who obtained everything from his participants but did not actually provide them with anything in return... My problem was that I was never really taught or that I never

self-learnt about these things. During my scientific training, we never talked about the participants; they were there just to provide us with some data. Until today in Finland there has not been any formal national agreement on such aspects of research.

## **Emancipating the Researched**

The book that you are holding in your hand offers some important answers to these ethical, philosophical but also methodological issues. It represents a serious step towards taking *researching with* vs. *researching on* seriously. The authors are interested in the role, influence and importance of research participants in the process of researching. They consider research contexts and experiences as both subjective and intersubjective phenomena, i.e. encounters between persons (lat. *Persona* = masks) rather than between an omniscient, God-like figure (the researcher) and the researched. Significantly they also emphasize the importance of considering the before, during and after of their research.

The choice of the verb “reimagine” in the title of the book reflects a major change in the way education research but also human and social sciences at large are conceptualised today, which I would like to call the “justice turn in research” or *the emancipation of research participants*. The recognition and the centrality of imaginaries and imagination in sociality – and research – has been noted by many a scholars and thinkers (Bauman, 2004; Maffesoli, 2010). The basic rights of the researched should include giving him/her (critical) voices and agency in research but also reducing the power imbalance between them and researchers. Cook et al., in their chapter, examine and discuss how the researched is often named, framed and sometimes shamed in research and the lack of leeway s/he has in controlling such experiences.

But this is not all. A direct consequence of reimagining research participants entails taking and discussing the researcher’s responsibilities before, during and after the research process. In her chapter, Grace gives a good example of how she has reflected on this by attempting to influence decision-makers and practitioners. The volume contains many strategies and suggestions which will be useful for (novice) researchers to deal with this issue.

## **Reimagining the Researched to Better Reimagine the Researcher?**

The reimagining of research participants goes hand in hand with the reimagining of researchers: as many authors in the volume assert, it is impossible to put the researcher on one side and the researched on the other (Rossi), some even suggest that the boundaries between them must be blurred today (Makar). R.D. Laing (1961: 81-82), amongst others, reminds us that “we cannot give an undistorted account of ‘a person’ without giving an account of his relation with others. Even an account of one person cannot afford to forget that each person is always acting upon others and acted upon by others. The others are there also. No one acts or experiences in a vacuum”. Reimagining both the researcher and the researched but also research experiences consists in bearing in mind that “Each person is the other to the others” (Laing, 1967: 68). For the anthropologist Alban Bensa (2010: 42-43) this renewed way of doing research has also some influence on the potential reader or listener of research who do not just “consume” knowledge, but are made to experience the encounters between the researcher and the researched.

The question of the role of researchers in our postmodern era is thus central in this volume, especially as the authors consciously move away from objectivist approaches to theories, data collection, analysis and interpretation. In other words, we feel that, after a couple of centuries since the birth of science as we know it today, the researcher is entitled to be a “social/human being”.

The alternative methods presented and “tested” by the authors contribute immensely to emancipating research participants and renew education research: Actor-Network Theory (Luck; Mewburn), Queer critical ethnographic resilience research (Grace), a discursive framework (Andreotti and Anehakew); Narrative Discussion Group Method (Midgley); a Dialogical Approach (Riddle); etc. Sometimes theories “can make a major contribution, often inadvertently to the violence of low politics” (Sen, 2006: xvi) if researchers are not careful. In one of my fields of interest, intercultural communication education, this is translated by the “partitioning” of people “into little boxes of disparate civilizations” (ibid.: 4) which contributes to new forms of racism, discrimination, etc. Very often researchers start with a national, cultural and ethnic identity and research them as if they were static elements. Hardly any discussion of e.g. intersectionality (the interaction between many and varied identities) is identified in the field or is timidly appearing (Holliday, 2010). There seems to be a strong agreement today that “one task of the intellectual is the effort to break down the stereotypes and the reductive categories that are so limiting to human thought and communication” (Said, 1996: xi). In order to do so the researcher needs to work *with* the researched and not consider that s/he only has the power to construct knowledge.

### **Remaining Myths**

Regardless of the fact that many of the ideas presented in the volume seem to be accepted by many researchers worldwide, obstacles to reimagining these elements remain in today’s research worlds, not always in geographical terms but in terms of “academic tribes”, field traditions, researcher training, etc. Many authors comment upon them in the book. I qualify these obstacles as myths in what follows.

The first “myth” that I would like to touch upon is that of data collection. This is what R.D. Laing has to say about it (1961: 89): “The “data” of research are not so much given as taken out of a constantly elusive matrix of happenings. We should speak of *capta* rather than data”. The field of anthropology, a modernist and rationalising science at birth, is constantly questioning the way anthropologists enter their fields and collect data “as if they were picking mushrooms” (Bensa, 2010: 39), especially since the central concept of culture has been deconstructed and rejected in its essentialist and solid form (Abu-Lughod, 1991, Cf. Cook et al.; Andreotti & Anehakew in this volume). As such “culture” was often used by anthropologists to essentialize the ‘Other’ and even sometimes as a tool for “colonizing” (Wikan, 2002). The field has now moved on to “*capta*” rather than “data” as suggested by Laing and can serve as a good example for improving the researcher-researched relation in education.

The second “myth” is related to the idea that some data is more acceptable than others, more “objective” than others in research projects. In his chapter, Riddle gives the example of story-telling, which, even though it is becoming more and more present in research, is still perceived as too “subjective”. The same goes with e.g. literary works for which many researchers doubt the quality of the “lived experience” compared to e.g. interviews or focus groups. But the researcher is not the only one to

be blamed in the creation of this myth. One of my Master students was recently rebuked by her research participants because she has opted for a focus group and decided not to sit with them but to let them talk amongst themselves. Her idea might have been that it could provide her with more “objective data” since she was absent from the situation and thus not influence the data. Her research participants were very talkative during the focus group and discussed very important issues, yet they felt that they had not been taken seriously because the student was away from the focus group...

My third “myth” is related to the still widespread idea that the researcher should not be heard in her/his research work, that the work should not be “visceral”. Though sometimes denounced as “navel-gazing” (Jarvie, 1988), reflexivity and voicing are essential to reimagine both participants and researchers, to turn research into a real “political” experience rather than a structural exercise (Bensa, 2010: 21). Too often, researchers who try to be reflexive, intersubjective and critical satisfy themselves with mentioning either at the beginning, in the methodological section of their work or in the review of the results, the necessity to take into account the fact that the results are based on the co-construction of discourses and actions between the researched and the researcher but they fail to integrate it throughout the work. According to the anthropologist Eric Chauvier (2010 156), the processes behind producing and constructing a study should be considered as an object of the study to be examined.

### **Areas Where Further Work Could Be Carried Out**

While reading the manuscript of “Reimagining Participants in Education Research”, many contested areas emerged. I propose in what follows to review some of them.

The first area where further work can be carried out is that of the choice of contexts and research participants. In the volume most of the participants can be “catalogued” as “marginalized”: students with disabilities (Cook et al.), sexual minority and gender variant youth (Grace), Asian American students (Gordon), participants from rural areas (Walker-Gibbs), etc. The choice of such participants seems to rely on the idea that these individuals are often presented and constructed as different and “even deviant” (Cook et al). In our times of hyperindividualisation where being different appears to be a norm, it might be a good idea to look beyond such groups and work on what is considered as “normal” in societies or examine how people who consider themselves as “normal” construct themselves with researchers and compare with discourses/actions related to marginalization. Any act of research, being with the “majority” or the “minorities”, can essentialize. By concentrating on marginalized population, do we contribute to marginalize them? Do/can we really help them by making them visible e.g. in doing popularization work or talking to the media?

Reflexivity, ethics and intersubjectivity cannot find their places in all research projects and thus need to be treated with care. Harrett’s chapter about member checking is interesting in the sense that it questions the ‘wished for’ transparency, reflexivity and cooperation between the researcher and the researched. Harrett goes as far as asserting that asking his research participants to do member checking might be potentially harmful to them as it would reveal speculations from the researcher. This is a central moral issue that needs to be tackled: who controls whom in research? Who really has the power? The authors talk a lot about the researcher-researched

dichotomy but more could be said in the future about a third actor: sponsors, funders and employers. Surely they have a role to play in collecting data, analysing it and presenting results. In Finland, as in many other countries, PhD students now need to have either a scholarship or a research contract to register for doctoral studies. I have met many PhD candidates who were hired by Finnish institutions to do research for them and write reports. These students all seem to face the problem where they are told not to be too theoretical and to give “concrete results” that can be used by the institutions.

My third point is about the limits of giving a voice to the researched. As asserted several times in this book, it is important that we listen carefully to our research participants and let them choose certain aspects of our research design or focus. This is what I called the emancipation. Some researchers have used the phrase “decolonizing research” to express this idea (Mutua & Swadener, 2005). In Midgey’s chapter about Saudi students in Australia, the researcher wishes to “de-emphasize the Western influence of the researcher” and to give a voice to Saudi culture. Personally I have a problem with both goals: What is the West and the East? What is Saudi culture? For the first question, Amartya Sen (2006: 129) reminds us that “given the cultural and intellectual interconnections in world history, the question of what is “western” and what is not would be hard to decide”. I remember sitting through a summer school in Finland entitled “beyond methodological nationalism” where everyone seems to agree that the Nation-State poses problems for analysing data and yet most of them kept repeating the “mantra” of the East vs. the West... As much as research participants might not like to be labelled Spanish or Filipino, they may not like the idea to be Western or Eastern. Adrian Holliday (2010: 3), in his important book *Intercultural Communication and Ideology*, demonstrates in a very convincing manner that this dichotomy and e.g. the attached values of individualism and collectivism are biased. As to the second question, as soon as the word culture is used in research, we need to make sure that we take it critically as “it can easily and sometimes lead innocently to the reduction of the foreign Other as culturally deficient” (Holliday, 2010: ix, cf. also Phillips, 2007). We need to remember that when interacting with a research participant, we co-construct who we are (not) and research participants do also ‘do’ the essentialising game. They may present one cultural habit, opinion, attitude, etc. as being theirs but actually they might merely construct an image that they expect us to expect. It is thus on the co-constructive aspect of our interaction with the researched that we need to emphasise in our analyses, and observing how words and concepts that are put on the table evolve and are negotiated between us. There is ideology behind the (re)presentations of an identity and it is important to look critically at them (ours and the others’). Again and to conclude on this point, it is not because a culture is presented by a participant as being her/his own that it is to be considered as the “truth” because it comes from him/her, rather than being imposed by us (Amselle, 2010: 79). Brubaker (2004: 19), in reference to Bourdieu, puts it this way: “we should remember that participants’ accounts (...) often have what Pierre Bourdieu calls a performative character. By invoking groups, they seek to evoke them, summon them, call them into being. Their categories are for doing – designed to stir, summon, justify, mobilize, kindle, and energize”. For the anthropologists Augé and Colleyn (2004), participants can also essentialise the researchers.

### **Towards Researchers’ Intercultural Competences?**

This last section asks a provocative question: should researchers develop intercultural competences in order to do research? The concept of intercultural competences is a polysemic and highly criticised one (Hoskins & Sallah, 2011; Dervin, 2012). In 1986 French scholar Martine Abdallah-Preteuille had already professed that there was a tautology in the phrase intercultural communication as, she argued, communication is always intercultural. In a sense I believe that the same applied to intercultural competences: they are not exclusively devoted to so-called intercultural encounters (i.e. across countries and “cultures”) but they are general skills for everyone. Hoskins’ and Sallah’s views on intercultural competences seem to add to the discussion of this book as they summarize quite well the main messages of the authors. On p. 114, they define a list of components of the competences. The followings are directly in dialogue with the main messages of this volume

- “Knowledge of key concepts of discrimination and inequalities; sexism, racism, colonialism and class both at a structural and on individual level”.
- “Understanding of power relationships and the skills to analyse where power relationships exist and understand the consequences for representation”.
- “Knowledge of the complexity of multiple forms of difference and to have the skills to identify which aspects are salient at a particular moment”.
- “Critical thinking towards your own beliefs and actions and towards others”.
- “A willingness and interest to be involved in politics”.

A change from researching on to researching with cannot but take place if such competences are taken seriously, coherently and systematically in research – that is in training, development and actual research work.

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