

9 How to Work with Research Participants: The Researcher's Role

Fred Dervin

Summary

This chapter proposes to “reeducate” the researcher of interculturality. In order to do so, the author argues that critical reflexivity is essential in all aspects of research (theoretical principles, core hypotheses, research designs, and modes of interpretation and analysis). Most importantly the chapter calls for renewed relationships between the researcher and her informants, i.e. to “work the hyphen” between them in order to render research on the intercultural more ethical, fair but also political. The idea of discomfort in doing research in this field is also problematized through interdisciplinary discussions. Finally, the author advocates moving beyond “repressed reflexivity” by empowering researchers to position themselves while constantly questioning their work and ideologies.

Introduction

I would like to start this chapter by tackling a very basic issue that relates to the role of the researcher of interculturality (note that the term sometimes refers to an approach to Intercultural Communication, see Brandt & Mortensen, Chapter 20, this volume) in today's societies: *Why do we do research on the topic?*

In order to answer this question, I am inspired by two sociologists (Haag & Lemieux, 2012) and the French anthropologist François Laplantine (2013, p. 30). For

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Haag and Lemieux, researchers should aim at “thinking otherwise” and not merely reproduce what “commonsense,” or decision-makers such as supranational institutions like the European Union, think about intercultural encounters. The latter, for example, tend to “pollute” researchers’ discourses with polysemic or often empty yet politically laden keywords that spread through policies and calls for research proposals in Europe, and increasingly worldwide. These discourses can have a negative impact on how powerless individuals are talked about and treated.

Haag and Lemieux also suggest that researchers aim at identifying “mistakes” and inconsistencies that lead to social injustice in what they do and in others’ work, clarifying their critiques and, most importantly, provoking public debates to be useful to society.

I believe that this first set of objectives should be central to research on the intercultural, especially in its processual and critical format (we’ll discuss the idea of *process interculturality* in this chapter). A lot of research and practice on interculturality has contributed to the building up of stereotypes and prejudice against certain groups, bereaving them of opportunities to be treated in a fair way (Holliday, 2010). It is now time to assume our responsibilities, to unlearn the way interculturality used to be dealt with, and to be ready for real changes.

François Laplantine’s proposal (2013, p. 30) is also relevant to what we are trying to achieve in the multifaceted field of interculturality. For the anthropologist, research should consist in (but also lead to) permanent criticality, confusion, perplexity, and complexity to reflect our contemporary worlds. In other words, to paraphrase the philosopher Henri Bergson (1904), disengage from “terra firma” and get used to and allow sharing the “rolling and pitching” of the human experience. These visions of research on interculturality seem to correspond to current critical work and discussions around the topic (Byrd-Clark & Dervin, 2014; Dervin & Risager, 2014; Holliday, 2010, 2013; Piller, 2010; Zhu Hua, 2011).

Some weeks ago I challenged my adherence to these “values” while surfing on website “I, too, am Oxford” (<http://itooamoxford.tumblr.com/>). The website contains pictures of “minority” students holding a sign with controversial messages to demand that “a discussion on race be taken seriously and that real institutional change occur” (website). Many of the pictures have very strong messages but I was very much startled by the following one. Held by a Black female student, it read: “All the post-colonial and other critical theories you study do not entitle you to speak for me or over me... .”

Feelings of guilt and “hyper-reflexivity” (Byrd-Clark & Dervin, 2014) overtook me: As a “critical” theorist and researcher, following the aforementioned principles, had I ever done this to anyone, i.e. “spoken for them or over them”? Had I ever in my work “inadvertently (contributed to) the violence of low politics” (Sen, 2007: xvi) to which interculturality can lead under the guise of racism, xenophobia/xenophilia, etc.? Had I ever damaged anyone by, for instance, trying to flatten out the omnipresent discourses on culture in research on the intercultural that I find to be so problematic – having even called for the intercultural without culture (Dervin, 2013)? In my work I have demonstrated that discourses of culture can lead to explicit and implicit moralistic judgments; better and worse, more civilized people; hierarchies (politics of the closed door; insiders and outsiders); unjustified ethnocentrism (“racism without races”); etc. Yet, culture seems to matter to people involved in intercultural encounters. However, as a critical scholar, am I entitled to criticize them for

that and to say explicitly or implicitly that they are potentially “wrong” to do so, or that they are fooling themselves? In a similar vein, is it right to fight for everyone’s *diverse diversities* in research instead of the usual *essentialist selective diversity* which is often limited to the images of the Other, the one who has crossed a national border or simply the “immigrant” (Wood, 2003)? In our omniscient digital societies, where discourses circulate so quickly, and where researchers increasingly have to find outlets for their voices to be heard, shouldn’t we pay more attention to what we have to say about the intercultural, to how we say it and to whom? Make efforts not to hurt anyone’s feelings and to treat everyone involved as fairly as possible?

Let me illustrate these questions. In 2013 I experienced some discomfort with messages that I received from immigrants living in Finland after an interview I had given to Finnish national television. A journalist had gone undercover to see how different groups were treated by “Finns” in the areas of work and housing. The results showed that Russian and Somali people were discriminated against. There had been a persistent, obsessive societal discussion around the idea that Finns are racist. To me, as a researcher working from a postmodern paradigm, this assertion does not make sense, since racism is such a polysemic concept, and generalizing for 5 million people seems ridiculous. Of course I do not deny that racism does exist in Finnish society – as in all societies in the West, East, South and North. But I believe that by reiterating these ideas over and over, we are not going anywhere. When the journalist asked me if I thought that Finnish people were racist, I said exactly that. He wrote: “According to Helsinki University’s Professor Fred Dervin, the results are hardly surprising. He pointed out that similar tests had been conducted in other parts of Europe with similar outcomes. Dervin, whose work centers on multiculturalism, cautioned against drawing the conclusion that Finns are racist.” The messages that I received were both positive and negative but they all seemed to misunderstand what I had tried to say. I felt sorry for some of the people who contacted me because they felt that I had betrayed them by “defending Finns” – being myself an immigrant in this country. In a sense, they felt that I had misrepresented them while “speaking for them.” That was of course not what I was trying to achieve: I was not defending anyone, just positioning my views on these issues.

Talking to our readers, be they scholars, decision-makers, journalists, or people on the street is very challenging, especially when time is limited to explain the complexity of our messages. Few people beyond the academy are acquainted with our work, and we need to phrase things in such ways that do not distort our central message. The main problem is that most of the time we do not speak the same language, use the same words, or the same definitions. If I google my name, one of the first websites that pops up is that of the extremist “Tundra Tabloids,” a website about “Keeping tabs on the most outrageous happenings in the Middle East, Islamist extremism and Islamist hegemony in Scandinavia and on the political correctness that allows them to flourish.” The article, entitled “University of Helsinki Professor Fred Dervin, Multicultural Genius and Mastermind,” criticizes me for another interview that I gave to a national Finnish television channel about multicultural education. My views had been distorted by the journalist, who had had me say that “all cultures are equal and people should have the right to their culture in Finland.” The article was published without me having the opportunity to proof-read it. Any reader who knows my work would be well aware that I would have never claim such a meaningless thing... The article from Tundra Tabloids picked up on this erroneous view and argued that I

(“another multi-culti ‘genius’”) was trying to “inflict (my) version of utopia upon society”... .

So, as researchers we face the issues of interacting “properly” and respectfully with our research participants and disseminating our work in such a way that our main messages are not too distorted and can be useful to society. But how do we make sure we respect our participants’ voices? Or should we? What would that entail? Furthermore how do we transmit controversial ideas to the general public, which may not be shared by the people we interacted with during our study? In this chapter I would like to discuss working *with* researching participants – instead of *on*.

Critical Reflexivity and Process Interculturality

I would like to start by tackling the issue of reflexivity, especially critical reflexivity, which should be essential to our work (Byrd-Clark & Dervin, 2014). In all aspects of research on the intercultural, be they “formal,” such as theoretical principles, core hypotheses, research designs, and modes of interpretation and analysis, or “informal,” such as interaction with participants and society at large through, for instance, dissemination and mediatization, the researcher who works from an open approach to the intercultural – “process interculturality” – has to reflect and act constantly upon what s/he feels is acceptable and coherent with the principles presented in the introduction – or her/his own principles.

For Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002, p. 326) this corresponds to what they call *methodological fluidity*, or “where there were fixed boundaries, everything is now equally and immediately interconnected. Structures are replaced with fluidity.” Reality is not static “but (it) affirms itself dynamically, as continuity and variation. What was immobile and frozen in our perception is warmed and set in motion” (Bergson, 1911 [1998]). In other words, we researchers or our research participants are not static but dynamic, and influenced in our actions and discourses by an uncountable number of elements such as context, social position, emotions, intertextuality, etc. For Amselle (2010, p. 79), this means that we should hear our participants rather than merely listen *to* them. It also means that we should avoid “identity taxidermy,” or imposing solid identities, cultures, and even strong identity markers such as the contested idea of “mother tongue” on our research participants, throughout the research process and beyond (in our publications or in paratexts such as discussions with media). These elements need to be negotiated with them. This also requires back and forth movements between the discourses we (co-)create and how we behave and interact with our informants.

Another important aspect of reflexivity is constant criticality towards our theoretical and methodological positions. I feel that the tools that we have developed or borrowed to analyze data from a process interculturality perspective are not adequate to grasp its complexity. Methodologically, there are some issues, as an example, concerning certain substitutes that we use to replace the contested idea of methodological nationalism (or the nation-state as a way of explaining solely intercultural encounters). This paradigm used to be central in research on the intercultural. Many substitutes seem to have been smuggled to do the same thing today:

methodological cosmopolitanism (which appears to be elitist and create new hierarchies), neighborhood nationalism (choosing one neighborhood/district for a study and generalizing from this context), methodological ethnicity, but also such labels as East vs. West, global vs. local, Whiteness vs. the rest, etc. By using these substitutes for a demonstration uncritically we do not seem to be treating our research participants fairly. New categories and hierarchies are created to “box” them. They do not represent the realities of our worlds but they construct a very limited and contestable reality... .

Let me reflect further on the East and West dichotomy, or Europe and the rest of the world, as these have taken on increasing importance over the last years in research on the intercultural. For the last 200 years the West has caused much pain in the world by colonizing parts of it, or by imposing some of its worldviews. As a consequence the West is widely criticized within and outside its boundaries for its wrongdoings. Fair enough. Yet many critical scholars or thinkers seem to have a selective and shortsighted vision of history, which allows them to draw quick conclusions such as “Westerners are bad but the rest of the world is good.” If one looks at the world well beyond the previous 200 years it becomes obvious that no one has acted without fighting against, invading, and even destroying the Other. Phenomena such as power relations between places, tribal chiefs, within families, between neighbors, etc. and various forms of colonization (which are not named as such) have always occurred. Of course this is not to excuse what Europeans did. But it does demand a wider and even more critical dialogue on these issues. Many scholars make an attempt at de-essentializing their research, but by using this dichotomy they tend to fall into the trap.

Another issue relates to the current critiques addressed to the West and/or Europe in terms of how ignorant or biased towards others “they” are – read Africans and Asians. Ignorance about the other is a universal sin because it depends on the individual’s interests, her/his geopolitical and historical relations with others, etc. In an interesting novel called *Messages from Finland* (Sesay, 1996, pp. 22–23), an African student in Finland talks about his pre-arrival ideas about the country. It is interesting to see how he makes fun of his own ignorance: “I still recalled one of the books we used for Geography entitled, *Regions and peoples of the world* by Charles McIntyre. It was through this book that I first learnt about Scandinavia and of Finland. ... If this place were really so cold, with so harsh winters, then, the immediate reasoning was that life must be primitive indeed. This is true, because our geography teachers had always focused more or less on explaining about the climatic conditions up here. They wasted no time talking about whether there was electricity or skidoos or whether even airplanes dared to come here.”

However the most problematic issue in the not-so-new dichotomy of East and West is that of frontiers. Amartya Sen (2007, p. 19) rightly explains 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.” This is an important message for critics within the West who criticize Western countries for being this or that. Adrian Holliday notes for example the ideological nonsense represented by the notions of collectivism and individualism and how they are used by both the East and the West to oppose each other. He writes (2010, p. 9): “despite the claim to neutrality, it seems clear that individualism represents imagined positive characteristics, and collectivism represents imagined negative characteristics.”

Researchers – even so-called critical ones – should thus be careful about categorizing people in such groups. There are often differences within groups that need to be taken into account. For Gillespie, Howarth, and Cornish (2012, p. 392), social categories should be considered as being perspectival, historical, disrupted by the movement of people and reconstitutive of the phenomena they seek to describe. Such categories are perspectival in the sense that no category is “natural” but is always based on someone’s vision (the researcher, the participants, decision-makers who fund research, etc.). It is thus important in our work to clarify this aspect in order to reduce the othering effect (p. 393) but also contradictions. In relation to the historicity of social categories, Gillespie et al. (2012, p. 394) criticize the fact that a lot of work on the other seems to be “stuck in the past.” This seems to be the case, for example, in relation to the way that China and the Chinese are treated in research today. An overemphasis on the importance of the philosopher Confucius (551–479 BCE) – whose ideas are being ideologized again in this context after decades of neglect – to explain how and why the Chinese behave or think in such or such ways is problematic. This leads us to Gillespie et al.’s third point: social categories are disrupted by people’s movements in and out of contexts, social classes, genders, places, etc. but also moods and illnesses (p. 394). All of these impact on their status as others and should thus be taken into account to avoid, which is Gillespie et al.’s last point, “an unreflective use” which can result in the “same risks as those evidenced in lay thinking” (p. 395).

Co-constructing Research: Beyond “Repressed Reflexivity”?

Though the idea is not novel, our times are those of the recognition of multiple identities. For Amartya Sen (2007, p. 350), “Each of us involves identities of various kinds in disparate contexts.” Each of these identities, or an intersection of these identities, can have relevance depending on the interlocutor, the context and the situation. For Gillespie et al. (2012, p. 394), “People move between places, social roles, life stages, genders, abilities, social classes and even cultures – and in so doing, they move between many social categories.” The solid approach to culture that used to characterize work on the intercultural did not allow everyone to move between social categories in the same manner and to accumulate, co-construct, and negotiate roles and identities. The more of those, the easier it was to find one’s place in a society, and the more chances of succeeding like the others. However, success in relation to e.g. “immigrant” pupils still seems to be explained by their “cultural background” and rarely by other elements (e.g. “this child is not so good at mathematics because of his culture”). We need to look beyond this alibi to analyze contexts, power relations, language (e.g. how teachers talk to the children), discriminatory practices, “boxing,” etc., to propose some hypotheses as to why a child is not succeeding. When some of our pupils are “boxed” and sometimes segregated because of their culture (explicitly or not), the array of social categories they are allowed to navigate between is very limited. This is why researchers should rely on an understanding of interculturality “which shows that social categories come and go Once the social categories are

seen as temporal, they are destabilized, becoming peculiar, something to be interested in, but not something to be taken too seriously" (Gillespie et al., 2012, p. 399).

As a consequence researchers need to beware of how they categorize their research participants. In his criticism of Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*, Sen (2007, p. 54) explains that he misplaces India in the category of "the Hindu civilization," as it

downplays the fact that India has many more Muslims (more than 140 million – larger than the entire British and French populations put together) than any other country in the world with the exception of Indonesia and, marginally Pakistan, and that nearly every country in Huntington's definition of the 'Islamic civilization' has fewer Muslims than India has.

The more power people have to determine and construct their own identities (and movements between identities), the better it is for social justice, development and "integration."

Michel Maffesoli (2013) adds to this argument by asserting that current sociological research shows that "The spirit of the times is no longer of subjectivism, but an *outflow* of self, a loss in the other." This is an important argument for research on the intercultural: we should do away with methodological individualism, or the idea that our analyses and interpretation of data depend on what research participants claim, express and construct during our studies. First of all, for Brubaker (2004), research participants "have a performative character" (Brubaker, 2004), so it is difficult to take what they say for granted, since they most certainly play with their multiple identities with us researchers and for us. Secondly, interaction of any sort is about the entanglement of self-in-the-other and other-in-the-self (Gallagher, 2011). This means that in any research context what participants construct is always related to the presence of the researcher. Going back to process interculturality, what happens during research can be summarized as acts of co-construction of identities, discourses and actions. As R.D. Laing wrote: "No one acts or experiences in a vacuum" (Laing, 1961, pp. 81–82).

If researchers do indeed contribute to politics of identity, it means that we need to look into the concept of power. As such if we are not careful enough, we might contribute to othering our participants. It is thus increasingly important for researchers themselves to be critical towards their own potential othering of the research participants they work with. This is often related to some of the intellectual simplifiers that we use in research (culture, gender, ethnicity, etc.) but also to methodologies. For example, in the fields of Intercultural Communication and education the way participants are selected is often biased: either they are selected based on their nationality or on the neighborhood where they live, leading to different forms of "methodological nationalism" (see above). Drawing general conclusions about a people if researchers have not looked into other populations can result in othering. One of my students wanted to work on the problems faced by immigrant learners of mathematics in Finland, claiming that they have specific issues because of their different culture. I asked him to consider "comparing" the sort of problems that Finnish students face when learning mathematics so as not to draw unfair othering conclusions on immigrant children.

One interesting contribution for the field of the intercultural is that of Michelle Fine, who proposed to “work the hyphen” in research:

By working the hyphen, I mean to suggest that researchers probe how we are in relation with the context we study and with our informant, understanding that we are all multiple in those relations. I mean to invite researchers to see how these “relations” between get us “better” data, limit what we feel free to say, expand our minds and constrict our mouths, engage us in intimacy and seduce us into complicity, make us quick to interpret an hesitant to write” (Fine, 1998, p. 72).

She also suggests that by doing so researchers are able to discuss with the research participants “what is, and is not, ‘happening between,’ within the negotiated relations of whose story is being told, why, to whom, with what interpretation, and whose story is being shadowed, why, for whom, and with what consequence” (p. 72).

Dialogue around the act of researching within research is, therefore, essential. I believe that it would help us to go beyond mere “ventriloquation” of our participants’ discourses (Valsiner, 2002). As such, many intercultural studies create narratives, and do storytelling based on what the participants asserted during the interviews. This is very problematic as such approaches tend to objectivize interaction and the impact of context, situation, and interlocutors but also of contradictions, “lies,” power-led discourses, co-constructed utterances, etc. The participants’ words then become the “truth,” even though, because of, for example, power differentials, it may not be their “truth.” For Gillespie, Cornish, Aveling, and Zittoun (2007, p. 38) “the individual will internalize the voices of many different, even conflicting, communities.” If we take these words for granted without problematizing the many and varied voices, then are we doing a service to our participants and the “groups” they represent?

The form of reflexivity that should be advocated in research on the intercultural should go beyond this repressed form. Going back to my reaction to the comment from “I, too, am Oxford” mentioned in the introduction, “All the post-colonial and other critical theories you study do not entitle you to speak for me or over me...” maybe I felt uncomfortable because I interpreted it as repressing the researcher’s voice. Of course, the researcher is not a superior being, a God-like figure, but I am convinced that through our engagement with permanent criticality, confusion, perplexity, and complexity, we can contribute to changes in the way some issues related to interculturality are dealt with in our societies without having to repress our voices, but by questioning throughout the research process.

An example

In my 2014 article entitled “Towards post-intercultural teacher education: analyzing ‘extreme’ intercultural dialogue to reconstruct interculturality,” I explore the impact of a course on “process interculturality” given to a cohort of local and international student teachers studying to become newly qualified teachers in Finland. Through the use of a documentary set in Israel on extreme intercultural dialogue that the students discussed at the end of the course, I examine how they problematize such a

case of intercultural dialogue through what they have learnt and relate it to their future practice and research. The data are derived from a focus group between the student teachers that took place as a final activity in the course. The focus group was recorded straight after watching the documentary on a multicultural class in Israel. The analysis of the students' discussions derives from a linguistic and dialogic approach to discourse. In terms of results, the student teachers were able to discuss the central aspects of, for instance, marginalization in multicultural classrooms in a specific context (Israel) as well as the many and varied confused and confusing identity games taking place in the class. They were able to bring into their discussions some of the notions and concepts introduced during the course: the dangers of categorizations, their historical and perspectival dimensions, othering, multiple identities, etc. There is also some evidence of their relating what they had seen in the documentary to analyzing the power relations in the documentary. Sometimes the approach might push the students towards over-interpretation or one-sided analyses, especially in relation to marginalization and injustice – as if they were activists. I argue that further work on reflexivity is needed for the student teachers who are considered in the Finnish context as apprentice researchers. This means that even more critical reflexivity is needed in training students to do research on such issues in order to make sure that the principles of process interculturality that were proposed to them are coherently and consistently applied in all aspects of researching, for example, the documentary under scrutiny (see the idea of methodological fluidity mentioned earlier).

Conclusion

To conclude this chapter let us listen to Nietzsche's views on education (1874/1983): "real education is liberation. It removes the weeds and rubbish and vermin that attack the delicate shoots of the plant." In this chapter I have tried to propose a reeducation for researchers of interculturality, which consists mostly in unlearning certain ways of doing research and thus becoming "liberated." This means, amongst other things, that researchers should move away from God-like positions (pseudo-objectivity), take responsibility for their actions, and question and criticize systematically what they say and do. It also means that we should accept and put into practice the idea that research situations also consist in becoming aware of, recognizing, pushing through, and presenting and defending one's diverse diversities, and those of our interlocutor. In some cases, our research participants or media partners may not agree with this approach and feel that, by being reflexive – for example, not giving full answers to their questions about what we do – we researchers do not fulfill our roles as explainers of the world.

A student of mine was once faced with a difficult situation: she had gathered Finnish women who had converted to Islam for a focus group discussion, but had decided not to take part in the discussion, rather, she resolved to let them talk together without her. To her surprise many of the participants disapproved of her way of collecting data, arguing that "that's not the way research is done. We want you to be our spokesperson." The student then spent some time explaining why her vision of

research had urged her not to take part in the discussion to lead the discussion, and thus take part in othering them. The participants seemed to have understood her point but were still very disappointed... and my student rather frustrated. Paraphrasing bell hooks (1994, p. 39) when she talks about introducing new ways of questioning in education, we could say that there should be “some degree of pain in giving up old ways of thinking and knowing and learning new approaches.” This pain is a constant feeling of discomfort, which should be faced directly by the researcher and the actors involved in her/his work. Sharing the feeling of discomfort with research participants can help to diminish the usual power differentials between Us and Them. It could also help us to “give back to them.” This is something that is often ignored in research on the intercultural: research participants tend to be considered as what could be labeled as “discourse valves.” How ready are we to give them something back in return? This is where research on interculturality needs to be more involved, more political in a sense.

Key Terms

Diverse diversities The idea of *diverse diversities* is counter to that of mere *diversity*.

The latter tends to refer to the Other – the one who has crossed a national border – especially in relation to her (national) culture and ethnicity. *Diverse diversities*, on the other hand, open up the notion by including the intersection of many and varied identities (gender, religion, social class, etc.). Unlike *diversity*, they thus refer to any individual and avoid a politically correct hierarchy between the diverse and the rest.

Methodological nationalism The use of the nation-state as the only identity market and criterion for selecting research participants and/or explaining and interpreting research results. This perspective is increasingly criticized for ignoring the intersection of many and varied identity markers such as gender, age, social class, etc. as explanatory forces.

Othering The act of othering is a basic component of sociality. When meeting a person, one needs to compare self to other. In this comparative work, differences and similarities are considered. In the context of intercultural encounters these elements tend to be primarily related to people’s national identities and can easily lead to stereotyping and feelings of superiority.

Process Interculturality Process interculturality is in a sense a tautology (the same thing is repeated), as the root -ality in *interculturality* is used here to translate a processual approach to encounters between self and other. Process interculturality opposes a canonical understanding of the intercultural. It involves taking into account each individual’s multiple identities, the importance of contexts, the influence of power relations of interlocutors, etc.

Repressed reflexivity Repressed reflexivity occurs when researchers feel pressured not to be reflexive about what they are analyzing for fear of being accused of not respecting their participants’ subjectivity or agency. If identity is co-constructed by researchers and participants, participants’ discourses on who they are, what they think and what they do are related to the presence of the researcher and the

research context. Thus, repressing reflexivity about what a participant asserts or does in a study is counterproductive.

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Further Reading and Resources:

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