

Oscillations of Power: Conducting Qualitative Research in a Foreign Country

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Introduction

One of the best understood characteristics of qualitative research concerns the privileged position that the researcher occupies vis-à-vis the researched in the research setting. This characteristic becomes all the more salient when the research is conducted in a setting in which the researcher is not just in a privileged position but in a clear position of unequal power and domination vis-à-vis the interviewee, as is often the case when researching “other” cultures. The methodological issue about how to minimize the power and control of the researcher over the researched therefore becomes of central importance and has been recognized and addressed since the 1980s in a number of important works. These include discussions regarding the more general theme of how to reduce the power of the researcher in shaping the behaviors and responses of the researched but also attempts at problematizing the transparency of the researcher when writing about other cultures (Clifford & Marcus, 1986); at addressing how a researcher engages him/herself in a colonization of an Other (Rosaldo, 1989); what the participatory responsibility of a researcher is in qualitative research (Weis & Fine, 2000); how to ensure the validity of a qualitative research that aspires to make the world more equitable through social research (Lather, 1986); or how to “work” the connection, or “hyphen,” of Self and Other (Fine, 1994). This paper addresses the additional issues that arise when, by virtue of the characteristics of the research setting, not only the researcher but the researched also occupies a position of power vis-à-vis the researcher. A situation like this arises, for instance, when the researched is aware of belonging to a more powerful social group than does the researcher and mobilizes this position in the interactions with the researcher. I would suggest that the best strategy to address this arguably more complex case consists in applying a methodology of translation, by which what I suggest to perceive as oscillations of power between the researcher

and the researched can be managed and negotiated.

The problem created by the simultaneity of power relations between researcher and researched became critical to my methodological concerns as I began conducting interviews for my dissertation research. I was a foreigner from an Asian country who conducted a qualitative study about the experiences of graduates from a women's studies program in the United States, where Women's Studies was born and has become far more developed than in Japan. My research participants felt superior to me because they saw themselves as having a much better understanding and greater experience than me in dealing with inequalities and with oppressions of race, class, sexuality, and gender. Somewhat paradoxically for women who were supposedly conscious of racial oppressions, they also betrayed a sense of superiority by the mere fact of being Americans and because of lingering sense of racism, especially among white graduates. Yet I also had power because I was the one who set up the research process, asked questions, directed the conversation, and interpreted their narrations. During the actual interviews these two powers were always present, in constant interplay. This is what I call the oscillation of power. Every moment, every question, and every response could trigger an act of othering, colonizing, labeling, and/or categorizing between me and my interviewees, yet it was also possible for us to bridge differences, to explore the subtle experiences of the others as well as of ourselves, and to transform our understandings accordingly. Becoming aware of the oscillations of power, I came to see the importance of a dialogical process (Bakhtin, 1986) between me as a researcher and them as the researched, which eventually led me to adopt and further elaborate a methodology of translation.

In the following section I present a brief description of my dissertation topic and of my position in the research setting. Then I elaborate the idea of oscillations of power as they manifested in the research site and discuss the methodology of translation and the necessity of a dialogical process in addressing such an interplay of power relations.

Research Background

My dissertation examined narrations about the sense of empowerment that former students from a women's studies program at a university in the United States claimed to have gained through their learning experiences. Inspired by the Women's Liberation Movement, the discipline of Women's Studies originated in the United States in the late 1960s (Kenway & Modra, 1992, p. 148), making,

precisely, “women’s experiences” and the liberation of women from multiple oppressions its central concern (Stimpson, 1986, pp. 12-13). As bell hooks (1982, 1989, 1994) explains, since academia in general discriminates against women and other marginalized groups and has historically been dominated by white, middle-class male perspectives, this same discrimination is also perpetuated within higher education. Women’s Studies therefore aimed at liberating women from patriarchal power and dominance by incorporating in their teaching practices perspectives from multiple, previously excluded groups of women and by fostering new social relations free of power. These aims manifested in efforts to empower students and eliminate unequal relations of power in and outside of the classroom, even in the relations between instructors and students. Students were encouraged to recognize their own discriminations and biases, confront their sufferings, exercise control over their own learning, and develop their own voices. Indeed, Women’s Studies and the Women’s Liberation Movement were closely related in their effort to empower and give voice to women (Friedan, 1963).

It is the realities of this goal of empowerment that I set to study in my dissertation. Women’s Studies attempted to create an environment conducive to empowerment by developing a new feminist pedagogy. This was based on the development of techniques meant to de-center the instructor’s authority in the classroom and have students take control of their learning, while at the same time indeed introducing multiple women’s perspectives and personal experiences in the practice of knowledge-building (Fisher, 2001; Kennedy, 2000; Shrewsbury, 1993). Through these techniques, feminist scholars tried to promote a movement whereby students can claim personal authority for the construction of their own learning.

My dissertation raised questions like: What did the women who completed their degrees in a women’s studies program understand by empowerment? Did they feel that Women’s Studies helped them to develop a sense of empowerment? Did they identify dimensions of power at work in their relations with instructors, and if they did, given the stated association of empowerment with the elimination of power relations, how did they account for their sense of empowerment within a context of power relations? I listened to their voices and explored the ways in which they weaved their narrations of their learning experiences with their perceptions of themselves and of others. They told about their sufferings and pains as women, about the process of learning to speak with their own voices, how they confronted their own practices of discrimination and their own biases against others, how their

instructors supported and challenged them in the process of their empowerment, and how their learning experiences in Women's Studies transformed the ways they perceived themselves and others. All the women that I interviewed claimed to having felt empowered, to have overcome their sense of inferiority, to have moved beyond the violences that disempower and "other" those who are different.

And yet during the interviews, I had to face some subtle, some less subtle forms of power as they unwittingly othered me. The same women who talked about their anger at the inequalities and oppressions that they encountered showed biases towards a racial minority and patronized me as a woman from an Asian country where, in their view, patriarchal practices had remained intact. They saw themselves as superior to me, as having a privileged understanding and experience as far as relations of race, class, gender, and sexuality were concerned. I was the naïve Asian student whom they enlightened. My difficulties with the English language only heightened their sense of superiority and their patronizing attitudes. Since I was not a native English speaker I needed to repeat myself many times when I could not make them understand. I stopped, mumbled, mis-communicated, misunderstood, and repeated so many times that it necessarily produced an imbalance in power between us, reinforcing the image they had of me as a "primitive" student. Especially among white students, statements were sometimes tinted with a lingering racism. I, myself, took the position of an admiring "outsider" who was yearning to learn about their experiences in Women's Studies and about the great achievements of Women's Studies and feminisms in the United States.

As a consequence, the relationship between us was not as simple as to allow me just to ask questions and listen to what I needed to hear for my research. The power relations between me and them were not as one-sided as they conventionally are in qualitative research. As a researcher I indeed had the power to decide what to listen, what not to listen, and how to interpret their narrations. I was an authority in re-presenting and inscribing them as Other. But what characterized our relations of power was precisely the oscillation of who exercised and who did not exercise power at different moments during the interviews. The question of how to navigate these oscillations of power became the major methodological problem of my study. Renato Rosaldo's understanding of Otherness helps to frame this methodological issue.

An Issue of Otherness

Rosaldo (1989) discusses in-depth the figure of an ethnographer who studies an

other and a society of others, for whom the Other is an object. Rosaldo problematizes the traditional figure of the Lone Ethnographer, “the story of the man-scientist who went off in search of his native in a distant land” (Rosaldo, 1989, as quoted in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 15). The Lone Ethnographer “encountered the object of his quest . . . [and] underwent his rite of passage by enduring the ultimate ordeal of ‘fieldwork’” (Rosaldo, 1989, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 15). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) summarize four beliefs and commitments around which the Lone Ethnographer organized ethnographic texts: “a commitment to objectivism, a complicity with imperialism, a belief in monumentalism (the ethnographer would create a museumlike picture of the culture studied), and a belief in timelessness (what was studied would never change” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 15). Denzin and Lincoln argue that this figure of the Lone Ethnographer still holds to the present day. In this picture, the Other is those who are studied by an ethnographer: they are presented as objects; they are colonized by a colonizer who uses the colonizer’s language and power to describe and represent them as harmonious, homogeneous, and unchanging (Rosaldo, 1989). In this picture, researchers as the colonizers are invisible, they hide themselves in interpreting and describing the Other with the language of the colonizer, and they never question their positions, all of which generates their power to describe the Other (Fine, 1994).

Villenas (1996) problematizes the colonizer/ colonized dichotomy in which the researcher is always in the role of the colonizer and the researched is always at the side of the colonized. Villenas (1996) asks, “What happens when members of low status and marginalized groups become university-sanctioned ‘native’ ethnographers of their own communities?” (p. 712). The researcher in her account is simultaneously the colonizer and the colonized: “[t]his ‘native’ ethnographer is potentially both the colonizer, in her university cloak, and the colonized, as a member of the very community that is made ‘other’ in her research” (p. 712). The case engages the insider/ outsider dilemma (Weis & Fine, 2000), while bringing in the notion of colonization and adding complexity to the power relation between the researcher and the researched. Drawing on Weis (1995), Villenas (1996) identifies “the co-construction of the ‘Western’ self and the Chicana ‘other’” (p. 715). Her research involves “[her] confrontation with [her] contradictory identities—as a Chicana researcher in the power structures of the dominant discourse of ‘other,’ and as a Chicana working with this marginalized Latino community” (p. 715).

My case adds another layer of complexity to the power relation between the

researcher and the researched. If I borrow Villenas' (1996) framework of the colonizer/ colonized, I am the colonized who learned the language and discourse of the colonizer and came to research the colonizer. The framework is not totally accurate to describe my situation because I am not colonized in the same way as the marginalized Latino community is colonized in the dominant majority American culture. That is, I am from a different society than that of my research participants. However, for the women taking part in my study, I was somebody who came from Asia, and because of that fact, as I mentioned earlier, they felt superior and more advanced than me in terms of gender relations and feminism. For them the Asian country where I came from was structured by very strong patriarchal principles. Indeed, they were the enlightened teachers, I was the "primitive," unenlightened woman from an Asian country in which gender equality and feminism were, to them, still largely undeveloped. Several of my interviewees presented images of an Asian country in which women were far more oppressed than in the United States, in which there still existed practices like foot binding, and where housewives showed great submission to their husbands. I was very perplexed with these images of Asian women precisely because they were from graduates of a women's studies program, from women who were supposed to be aware of the harm produced by gross misrepresentations of others.

Unlike the Chicana researchers that Villenas (1996) describes, however, my status as a foreigner allowed their accounts to open significant new understandings about myself. I learned about the efforts and struggles that women in the United States had to go through in order to empower themselves, as well as other marginalized and oppressed groups. It made me far more aware of the realities of Japan and Japanese academia, where indeed there is still much work to be done and many struggles to be fought in order to achieve what women in the United States have achieved. In that sense I indeed took the position of a student, again, unlike Villenas's (1996) Chicana. The relations between me and my research participants problematized the issue of the Other in qualitative research. For I was also the colonizer. I possessed power to control the research process, to interpret the participants' narrations. In this sense, the entire research process was one of positioning self as other, by me as well as by the women in my research. I was the colonizer/ colonized, but the terms of my situation were vastly different than the ones defined by Villenas (1996).

A Methodology of Translation

Recognizing the complex relations of power between me as a researcher and the women that I interviewed as the researched, I came to realize the importance of a dialogical process able to make me see my limitations as a researcher/ foreigner/ interpreter and to make me constantly review my understanding of empowerment in Women's Studies and reshape the research design itself. While from the very beginning I had the power to control the entire research process and I decided what questions to ask, how to ask and analyze them, and how to listen to the answers I was given (Weis & Fine, 2000, p. 93), over the course of the research process I also became one of the students, one who was challenged in her perspective, who had to rethink her research and refashion her own sense of self and other. The research fed me and I fed the research. There was always a dialogical process at work.

This dialogical process, I would suggest, operated as part of a methodology of translation. Given my position as an outsider to the community in which I conducted this research, the interviews were inevitably mediated by a process of language as well as cultural translation. Therefore, what was relevant for me was a researcher-as-translator model. All empirical studies involve, to some extent, a methodology of translation; but in my case the process of translation played a greater role. This translation began with the review of the appropriate literature and continued through the interview process, all the way to the analysis and interpretation of the data. I had to take a methodological stance in order to avoid the imposition of my categories of meaning not just because I had the power to interpret but because of the cultural gap between me and my research subjects, which added yet another dimension of methodological complexity to my project; I had to be careful not to assume that I would be able to "understand" their experiences even if I become fully aware of my power over them and of the consequences of my power. The stance draws on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1993). Spivak (1993) states, "Rather than imagining that women automatically have something identifiable in common, why not say, humbly and practically, my first obligation in understanding solidarity is to learn her mother tongue" (p. 191). Spivak (1993) suggests here that we should not assume that as women we (the women in the study and I) can understand one another, that we automatically have something common as women. Rather, she suggests that we need to admit humbly and practically the difficulty we have in understanding one another, that distance exists between me and the women in my research. But in order to "understand solidarity," she suggests that researchers need to be absorbed into

the interviewee's lived experiences in order to acquire their categories of meaning. Translation cannot be exerted according to linguistic logic. Researchers need to read what is outside of logic.

I would indeed suggest that this is possible precisely through a dialogical process in which the researcher and the researched listen to one another and exchange categories of meaning (Bakhtin, 1986). In the process, the researcher and the researched do not only bridge the semantic aspect of the relationship but navigate the power differences between them. In my research, playing the role of the student served that purpose well. By taking the position of a student who tried and always partially failed to learn what the interviewees experienced in the women's studies program, by humbly showing them her partial understanding of their narrations, by asking them repeatedly to repeat, clarify, elaborate their thoughts, and by clarifying to them and to myself my research interest that I could navigate the unequal relations of power relations and overcome the semantic limitations. In turn, they had to reformulate and rethink their narratives, they had to constantly revise themselves, often revealing new thoughts about themselves, and had to position themselves in my position in order to engage in the interview process. A methodology of translation enabled us to navigate the oscillation of power. It enabled us to see what we do not understand, to gain a sense of the boundaries of our respective understanding. Based on the recognition of our boundaries and of the oscillation of power it was possible to build a sincere relationship in which we could avoid the mere Othering of one another and I, as the researcher, could listen to the complex layers of their learning experiences and hear the multiple voices that spoke about experiences of empowerment.

Conclusion

To an extent, the method of translation that I am discussing shares a methodological intention with the oral histories of feminist researchers such as Frankenberg (1993) and Kennedy and Davis (1993). The approaches that they and I employ are similar in that both involve:

[a] personal relationship between the narrator and the researcher; in any successful interview, there is a bond of affirmation and understanding that can be very rewarding for both parties. The narrator has a chance to reflect only on her life with the interested attention of another person. The interviewer

has the benefit of learning valuable and exciting information that may be relevant to her own life. (Kennedy & Davis, 1993, p. 21)

But the methodology of translation that I employ, namely, rephrasing interviewees' responses and making sure that my understanding of them was appropriate, indeed adds a dialogical element to the interactions between narrator and researcher which is absent from oral histories. In oral history the researcher makes a conscious effort not to influence the narrative of the interviewee. In a dialogical method, listening to the researcher's rephrased words helped interviewees correct misinterpretations while prompting them to reflect on themselves and reconsider what they said much more deeply.

The dialogical movement denotes the interaction between the researcher and the researched, as well as the interaction with oneself that eventually leads to the transformation of one's perception of self and others. The oscillation of power and the dialogical movement point at something dynamic in a qualitative research process. The relation between the researcher and the researched can never be captured in static words. The moment that a word captures the relation, the relation immediately overflows the word, since both selves are transformed by the interaction, and so as a consequence is the relation. I would argue that a methodology of translation in a dynamic process enables a humble attitude to accept resistance to one's power and to promote transformation, yet at the same time connects two selves, even if temporarily. It then becomes possible to talk about ourselves and listen to others, which was precisely what Spivak (1993) called for.

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