



Negotiated positionalities and ethical considerations of fieldwork on migration: Interviewing the interviewer

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Abstract

The ethics of the interview process is an essential part of empirical field research with migrants, especially when the work involves individuals who are in a partially vulnerable situation. The unprecedented numbers of migrants who recently tried and/or succeeded in entering Europe now find themselves extremely vulnerable within its borders. Research involving these migrants is particularly challenging, as it needs to take into account migrant susceptibility while conducting field research. This paper discusses a research method that aims to disrupt the asymmetrical power hierarchies that exist between researcher and interviewee by allowing the research subject the opportunity to interview the interviewer about her personal life as well as national perceptions and discourses. By negotiating the power and performative agency of the interview process, this method worked to transfer some of the power of the researcher to the participant and diminish the constitutive violence of interviewing. By sharing some of the vulnerabilities of an interview, this method resulted in an increased number of interviewees, generated enthusiastic participation, and enriched conversations. This methodology can be effective in assuring participation and quality of information gathered in a variety of difficult research environments.

Keywords

Migration; Europe; ethics; asylum seeker; interviewing

Introduction

This paper examines the ethics of interviewing, especially individuals at risk like international migrants. More specifically, this investigation focuses on work with migrants in asylum camps in Europe. It also advances the conversation about the ethics of interviewing by focusing on positionality and hierarchies of power as well as efforts to prioritize the voice of the research subject over that of the researcher. The aim of this project was to upset the structural inequalities that exist between the researcher and the interviewee by highlighting the voice of the migrant and allowing the individual to turn the gaze¹ (Foucault, 1972) back on the researcher. In order to recognize and interrogate ethical concerns regarding the role of the researcher and the inequality of the constituted power relations in research, the author worked to disrupt the operations of researchers' power by inviting interviewees to share in the interview. In addition to answering the research questions, the author encouraged each interviewee to ask the researcher about personal and national perceptions, discourses, and media coverage of the migration "crisis" in the US and/or other questions they had about the researcher. This resulted in a productive examination of how power relations are negotiated throughout the interview process.

The article begins by framing the ethical considerations of interviewing, especially with those individuals who may be particularly at risk by participating in this project. This article also investigates the position(ing)s of power and the role of the researcher and research participants. Subsequently, it discusses the background and preparatory considerations that preceded interviews in the asylum camps. The article then analyzes individual interviews with migrants, paying particular attention to when participants were asked to share in the interview process by generating their own questions. This methodology was a modification of the reciprocal interviewing methods that had previously been employed in classrooms to help foster a welcoming environment for students (Case et al., 2008). Indeed, as Maillet et al. (2016) argue: "If research is to be a form of resistance, then it must be used to challenge dominant narratives around 'vulnerable' populations, including those which (re)produce violence through the creation and enforcement of social hierarchies" (18). This methodology can also remind the researcher of some of the power imbalances and simultaneously enrich the research data that is produced and render both participants vulnerable in the process. Through this article, the author argues that an examination of the negotiation of power and positionality of

¹ For a discussion of Lacanian and Foucauldian "gaze" see J. Urry, 1992; H. Krips, 2010.

researchers working with international migrants is an extremely relevant platform to contribute to current discourse on ethical considerations of interviews. The author concludes that negotiations of research positionality can be a fruitful approach in efforts to actively transfer some of the power of the researcher to the participant in fieldwork.

While large numbers of migrants enter Europe each year, the unprecedented rise in the number of international migrants who arrived or died trying to reach European shores in 2014, and particularly in 2015, was so startling that the media quickly branded it “a crisis”². Migrants fleeing civil wars, armed conflict and persecution from states such as Syria, Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq and Eritrea faced long and arduous journeys, violence, inhumane treatment, imprisonment and death as they traveled to and within Europe. By September 2015, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker presented European Union-Member States with a set of measures that built upon outlines published in May of that year that intended to accelerate the processing of asylum applications by creating a “list of safe countries of origin” and relocate 120,000 people “in clear need of international protection” from Greece, Italy and Hungary³ to other EU-Member States. It also stressed “Member States have to satisfy adequately and speedily the most immediate needs of asylum seekers for housing, supplies and services” (European Commission, 2015). However, some of the living conditions and treatment they received in a variety of camps such as transit camps, asylum camps, detention centers or “processing centers” where migrants were housed throughout Europe are appalling (European Commission, 2017). Many of the European camps are contracted out to private companies that often impede media, researchers, local community members and social activists’ access to the facilities.

In addition to the challenges of entering camps in Europe, in any interview it is important to acknowledge that the research process is often conducted within reiterative and imbalanced power relations that exist between the interviewer and interviewee (for example, see McDowell, 1992). A researcher’s identity is often positioned relationally in regards to the identities of the interviewees (Rose, 1997). It is also important to note that this strategic (re)-constitution of positionality is a power element present during interviews, and this power imbalance is coupled with the trauma and substantial stress that these individuals suffered along their routes to Europe and time in asylum camps. This research also included a variety of interview subjects, including migrants of various ages, genders, religious or spiritual backgrounds, social classes, and levels of citizenship. Despite of the aforementioned considerations regarding the power dynamics of interviewing as well as the challenges of working in diverse sites with an array of individuals and

² The term “crisis” is controversial as it seems to suggest that the crisis is for “fortress Europe” receiving the migrants and not the plight of the migrants themselves (for example, see Dempsey, 2016b).

³ Eventually this only applied to Greece and Italy (BBC News, 2016).

regulations governing access to migrants, this research is valuable nonetheless. Indeed, as Hyndman (2001) asserts, fieldwork that engages the “messiness” of researching human migration in a careful manner is more invaluable than if one were to refuse to investigate topics that appear too difficult.

The author was mindful of the challenges of positionality, representation, and voice in interviewing and data processing/analysis due to previous field research conducting qualitative interviews. Prior to this project, the author conducted ethnographic fieldwork for a total of 1.5 years in a rural community in Spain that was embattled by a regional political controversy and for two consecutive summers in a subsequent project in contentiously divided neighborhoods in Northern Ireland (for example, see Dempsey, 2012; Dempsey, 2016a). However, because this new project included interviews with migrants, the author drew from recent geographic literature that focuses on research that emphasizes social justice for groups who are marginalized as a result of international migration (for example, see Connell and Conway 2000; Lawson 2000).

In order to address the added dimensionality of working with migrants, feminist geographic research with international migrants provided additional considerations for the framework for this project. For example, many who conduct field research with migrants acknowledge that interviewing is often wrought amid asymmetrical power relations that exist between the interviewer and interviewee, but feminist geographers have long focused on how hierarchies of power, power relations, and positionality are constructed and negotiated with their own field research (for example, see Rose, 1997; Browne, 2003; Bondi, 2005; Vives, 2012; Mountz and Loyd, 2013). Moreover, because this project also included collaboration and interviews with European academics, the Red Cross, social workers, migrants who arrived prior to 2015, and various translators, feminist geographic literature also shed light on working with individuals who possess a variety of understandings in relation to different feminisms, collaboration with colleagues outside of the discipline, volunteers and local activists (Bondi, 2005).

This project is based on 39 1-3 hour long interviews conducted with migrants in 15 different asylum⁴ camps⁵, which ranged from tent camps, portable accommodations/modular constructions, former prisons, and some modest private accommodation located throughout various cities and the countryside of the Netherlands in 2016. The majority of these accommodations were privately run by the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) which is an

⁴ Asylum camp is the official term for these living accommodations as determined by the Dutch Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA). The politics of language and labeling migrants will be discussed below.

⁵ Most migrants had been in several camps before the author encountered them in their current location. Of the 39 migrants interviewed, 26 had been in 2-4 camps in the Netherlands before their current location.

independent administrative body that the Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice contracts to “provide for the reception, supervision and departure of asylum seekers and aliens” for the Netherlands (<https://www.coa.nl/en>). Copies of visitor’s (and researchers) passports were kept on file and an international background check was conducted before being granted permission to enter the camp. Migrants are permitted to leave the camp premises during the day, but required to return before the gates closed for the evening in order to be granted re-entry⁶. Video surveillance cameras and security guards were located throughout all but one of the asylum camps.

Cognizant of various forms of migrant vulnerability (see Maillet et al., 2016) present in research conducted in asylum camps, the research method that was employed for this fieldwork was designed to unsettle some of the inequitable power relations and prevent exploitative research by empowering the participant to generate their own inquiries for/about the researcher and shift some of the scrutiny onto the researcher. The result was progressively greater enthusiasm on the part of interviewees that led to unsolicited volunteers and franker dialogue resulting in richer fieldworkings.

Negotiating ethical considerations and power relations in fieldwork

Understanding the complicated situation that international migrants face in their new environment in Europe is of great importance at the scale of the individual as well as for geopolitical relations at the national and supranational level. In addition, volatile geopolitical narratives as well as numerous local, national and supranational laws also affect the extremely unstable socio-political situation of these individuals in Europe and intensify the urgency of this fieldwork. In order to develop an ethically focused research project that involved interviews with international migrants, the author drew on feminist research methodologies. In this way, the author could build on previous research and also tailor the research methods to best fit the specific parameters of the research. For example, in the case of Maillet et al. (2016), one of the researcher’s investigations of individuals in remote detention centers revealed that access to asylum seekers and migrants was very limited in these isolated locations. Their work revealed that the migrants in these centers had restricted mobility and researcher’s access to these individuals was extremely limited or in some cases impossible. In comparison, the Dutch asylum camps permitted full mobility to all registered within the facility during operational hours and COA lacks the legal ability to deny visitors and researchers’ access to migrants and/or the premises. However, there were instances in which COA entry guards actively tried to limit access to or intimidate certain advocates

⁶ One female asylum seeker reported being locked out of the camp when she missed her bus while returning from grocery shopping and was forced to sleep on the ground outside the gate before the following morning when she was granted re-entry (personal interview #2, 2016).

from returning to the camps. For example, after Chris⁷, a Dutch social worker began teaching asylum seekers in the camps how to use their government loans⁸ for educational classes at universities instead of COA-run general language classes⁹, he/she was verbally threatened by a COA guard and informed that he/she was no longer permitted to enter the camp (personal interview #37, 2016). Because Chris had formerly worked for the Dutch government, he/she knew the laws and explained that legally COA could not stop anyone from returning to this camp as an invited visitor. This same social worker had a similar problem in one other camp and later learned it was due to the fact that he/she had been added to a list of people that COA wanted to monitor while visiting their camp.

While Chris was subsequently able to enter asylum camps, the verbal threat from the particular COA guard impacted this individual's sense of security while in the camps. As a result, he/she began covertly meeting with migrants in their private accommodations throughout the camp or met with them outside the camp. Chris was not only apprehensive about her/his own safety, but that of the migrants as well. One particular concern was the possibility that any asylum seeker could potentially face repercussions or harassment from COA staff members for listing Chris as an invited guest/visitor on the official COA sign-in sheet. When the author learned about the situation in this camp, interviews were rescheduled with participants to days on which Chris, who accompanied the author, knew that particular guard was not on duty. In addition, once the author and this social worker arrived at the aforementioned camp, Chris sent the author in to register before he/she entered and signed-in separately in order to avoid COA from realizing that they had arrived together. The interviews conducted in these two camps with more combative staff were specifically held in private rooms in the camps or outside of the camp premises,¹⁰ based on the participant's preference.

Other ethical considerations included interviews with unaccompanied minors and women in the camps. In order to be particularly sensitive to these individuals' age and/or gender vulnerabilities within the camps, the author strictly followed all protocol stipulated by the approved Human Subjects Institution Review Board Protection (IRB) for this research project. These interviews also were held separately in a private room located outside of the camps. In an effort to

⁷ Chris is a pseudonym.

⁸ In addition to pre-citizenship class, migrants who are granted asylum status in the Netherlands can accept a government loan of 5,000 Euro, if literate, and a 10,000 Euro loan if illiterate. COA does not tell individuals who accept the loan that they can use the funds for university courses, rather COA prefers migrants use these funds to take COA sponsored language and cultural classes despite the fact that do not count for university credit or assist with job placement in the Netherlands.

⁹ In contrast to university classes, COA's do not count toward a degree and have high reported rate of instructor absence during the scheduled classes (personal interview #17, 2016).

¹⁰ Other COA run asylum camps helped organize migrant support groups and classes. These camps were more supportive of this research project and all migrants voluntarily opted to conduct interviews in less absconded locations.

avoid any unintentional or indirect repercussions from other migrants in the camp or having them labeled as problematic by COA staff members for participating in this project, the author preemptively arranged a private interview room in nearby Red Cross facility, based on the recommendation of both the migrants as well as local volunteers.

These examples demonstrate some of the ethical considerations and vulnerabilities¹¹ of those who are involved in interviewing international migrants in European asylum camps. This article will also reflect on how migrants were not the only people who were made vulnerable by participating in the fieldwork in the evaluation of field notes below. However, this project was developed with the aspiration to have these asylum seekers' stories and experiences included within the current discourse on human migration. This was especially true for those who had recently been denied asylum in the Netherlands and would soon be forced to return to their home state. These individuals were particularly interested in having the author record and share their stories. The author was committed to conducting research in a respectful, responsible manner and in a way that would not speak on their behalf or make anyone vulnerable for participating in the project. This, of course, is difficult to do, as the author will discuss in further detail below.

If one is to continue to unpack the ethical dimensions of interviewing and vulnerability, it is also important to consider the power of language. Language, which can have the ability to be highly provocative and emotive (Bauder, 2013), when used to describe migrants (e.g. categorical labels assigned to various migrants) is highly political and can put them at greater risk. For example, the impact of the categorical differentiation between terms such as "combatant" and "civilian" is highly significant as the realities manifest as separate forms of international humanitarian law and protection (Barnett and Duvall, 2005). Similarly, as Maillet et al. (2016) remind us, there are special international legal protections and responsibilities for refugees and asylum seekers, so how should we as researchers label and describe migrants? Even the BBC acknowledges the power of language by including a disclaimer about their terminology at the bottom of its news coverage of the migration in Europe stating:

the BBC uses the term migrant to refer to all people on the move who have yet to complete the legal process of claiming asylum. This group includes people fleeing war-torn countries such as Syria, who are likely to be granted refugee status, as well as people who are seeking jobs and better lives, who governments are likely to rule are economic migrants (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34131911>).

¹¹ For a discussion of notions of migrant vulnerability see Maillet et al. (2016).

Indeed, when considering ethical considerations for fieldwork one must contemplate issues of representation and salient power relations that exist between the researcher and participant. As Jenkins, Jones and Dixon (2003) contend, “This implies a sensitivity to power relations within the field, an awareness of the ethical role of the researcher and a commitment to the progressive deployment of research as well as an understanding of how the researcher and the researched have been gendered, sexualised, raced and classed” (58). Feminist scholars have contributed to debates on the asymmetries of power that exist in fieldwork and the dangers of speaking on behalf of or representing a participant in research (see for example, Nast, 1994; Behar, 1996; Valentine, 1997; Bondi, 2005; Brydon, 2006). The author was therefore very cognizant of and worked to disrupt both the author’s positionality and any power imbalances during this fieldwork by emphasizing non-hierarchical interactions through the mutual interviewing process that the author developed for this project. This also applied to the author’s data collection and reporting methods (Moss 2002; Bondi 2003) in order to be both mindful of and address power relations and issues of representation (Spivak, 1999). The author agrees with feminist scholars who have argued for the importance of analyzing reflexivity in research (for example see, Katz, 1994; Rose, 1997; Hurd, 1998; Moss, 2002). Accordingly, while conducting fieldwork, the author remained reflexive about her positionality (see Rose, 1997) throughout the research process as well as the politics of production of knowledge in regards to the context of how it is produced, collection methods, and how data is reported.

Scheyvens and Leslie (2000) have even argued that interview fieldwork, if conducted in an appropriate and reflexive non-exploitive manner, can help to increase the self-esteem or work to empower marginalized women. For example, several of the female research participants mentioned that they were surprised and appreciative that someone from the US would be interested in hearing their stories and opinions, especially since they felt much of the coverage of migrant stories focused on men and small children. Through this research, the author endeavored for participants to have what Barnett and Duvall (2005) consider “productive power,” in which interviewees’ voices are deemed invaluable and critical elements for studying and comprehending international human migration.

Within human geography, the “participatory turn” has resulted in an increase of participatory research (Fuller and Kitchin, 2004), in which the research is “effectively and ethically engaging people in processes, structures, spaces, and decisions that affect their lives, and working with them to achieve equitable and sustainable outcomes on their own terms” (Kendon, 2010, 518). At the same time, we are encouraged as researchers to be aware of geopolitical hierarchies and maintain research that is politically engaged (Cresswell, 2012) in order to address exploitative inequalities of class, gender, education, and economy and power. The author’s own understanding of negotiations of power and what Butler describes as the “constitution of subjects through the reiteration of discourses of power” (1997) were enhanced when the author allowed migrants to interview her, thus shifting

and sharing some of the traditional framework of power that exist between researcher and subject (Rose, 1999).

This style of reciprocal interviewing has been used in the classroom setting to help foster a welcoming and productive learning environment for students by allowing them to inquire about the class, the instructor, and offer insight about course expectations (Hermann and Foster, 2008). Allowing migrant participants the opportunity to interview the author not only helped to foster a more balanced interaction working with migrants in qualitative fieldwork, but the author's own experiences of discomfort that arose from answering questions about the author's home state (i.e. the United States) and her personal life made her acutely aware of the inherent power hierarchies that the author was working to unsettle. Empathy and awareness of the balance of power in the research process is also vital. By surrendering control of "traditional interview" processes, in which the author alone would ask questions and record participant responses, the participant was invited to share the power to inquire about an individual's personal experiences, perceptions and private life. This in turn, created a space in which a migrant's positionality and "performative agency" (Nelson, 1999) was continuously negotiated to help challenge any structural violence that may have been part of interviewing migrants and the disempowered position of a participant. Indeed, in order to participate in ethical research and contemplate the role of the researcher in fieldwork, particularly when working with vulnerable populations, it is imperative that we examine discussions of reflexivity, positionality and power relations throughout the entire research and reporting process.

Preparing for fieldwork

The first priority for fieldwork with migrants was always to conduct interviews in a manner in which many would consider "doing no harm" (e.g. Mackenzie, McDowell, & Pittway, 2007), by ensuring that no participant was made more vulnerable by participating in the research. All of the interviews with migrants were semi-structural interviews conducted in English or facilitated through a translator, based on the respondent's preference. In order to create a list of interview participants, local social workers were contacted as well as the migrant ambassadors in each camp to see if they would be interested in participating and inquire if they knew of other migrants who may also be willing to participate in this research as well.

While this project focused on fieldwork with migrants, the author also interviewed local social workers, Red Cross employees, and the translators who either helped to arrange the interviews with migrants or worked directly with migrants in the camps. Interviewing these individuals helped to better prepare research methods and gain insight into how other actors perceived their responsibilities and role in the migration "crisis," as well as that of their national government and COA. While many of these participants were not migrants (some were former migrants who had since gained citizenship in the Netherlands), the

author was keenly aware of the potential for vulnerability extended beyond the migrants who participated in the fieldwork. Because participation in the project could also impact social workers, Red Cross employees, and translators, interviews were always conducted in locations and at times of the day when each participant would not be made more vulnerable by participating. For example, if a particular interview could potentially increase a participant's vulnerability if it were to be held in the camp or at an employee's office at work it, that interview was relocated to a safe third location outside of the camp or office of employment. This was particularly important for underage migrants and single women in the camps, as the author will discuss in the subsequent section.

Other considerations included the role that religion may have on the research process. For example, the author was conscious that some of the interviews were conducted with migrants, translators, social workers and local volunteers during the month of Ramadan. The country's northerly latitude contributes to particularly long summer days, so Muslim participants who interviewed and were participating in Ramadan were also fasting from 3:30-22:30. While not all research participants were Muslim or fasting, the author was particularly sensitive to the possibility that some were fasting during that particular month of the research project and accommodated interview times that participants listed as most convenient for their schedule. Additionally, since arriving in Europe a small number of these asylum seekers had elected to convert to Christianity. Although all information shared during interviews remained confidential; including discussions pertaining to religion, which is particularly important in order to reduce the possibility of any retributive actions within the camps, most individuals in the camps were reluctant to discuss religious affiliation, even during Ramadan.

Finally, the author considered the role that her age, gender, or appearance may play during fieldwork. While some female researchers like Cupples (2002, 386) appreciated the "male attention" they received in the field, the author neither appreciated nor wanted her gender or relative age to particularly influence her fieldwork. Thus, while researching in asylum camps, the author also intentionally dressed in manner that might be perceived as more professional and conceivably more "gender neutral," but casual enough to hopefully not alienate migrants or exacerbate power relations with migrant participants.

Migrants' experiences, voices and fieldwork

Interviewees participated in this fieldwork for three main reasons. The first was that local social workers or Red Cross employees asked migrants they knew if they would be interested in participating after they had described the project, interview methods, and a brief description of the author. The personal connection that many migrants had with these advocates was well established, and in some cases, predated their arrival in the camps. For example, Chris had personally helped migrants climb out of boats at the European coastline, offered council about asylum in Europe, and was the very reason that many had decided to travel to the

Netherlands to seek asylum. The author was appreciative of this remarkably positive relationship and Chris' assistance to facilitate and, in some cases, translate during an interview. Unlike Melcher and Marin (2013)'s fieldwork with migrants that began with research subjects who entered with fear or suspicion, the pre-established trust between the author's local contacts, such as Chris or the migrant ambassadors in the camps, who had attested to the validity and ethical intentions of this research project established an important foundation of trust on which the author worked respectfully to conduct this project.

The second reason several of the migrants were interested in participating was due to the fact that the author had proposed to let them interview her as well. Not only did some state that they found this opportunity "very funny" (for example, personal interview #10; #16; #23; #38, 2016), but many were genuinely curious about perceptions and narratives about this "crisis" in the United States. They wanted to ask about life in the United States and if stories they had heard about American laws or cultural expectations were indeed true. Others wanted to meet someone from the United State to see if the author looked like the people they had seen on reality television. For example, many openly expressed their surprise that the author was not rotund because that body shape was common in the in reality television shows they had seen that were filmed in the United States.

However, all indicated during fieldwork that their principal motivation for participating was the third reason – wanting their individual story and opinion to be heard. Indeed, all participants stated they contributed to the project in order to have their voice included in the stories and testimonies from this migration. This was particularly true for those who were waiting for the Dutch government's decision on their asylum request. The individuals in this precarious legal situation of "legal limbo" explained that if they are to eventually be rejected for asylum in the Netherlands¹², they wanted to ensure that their personal experience and stories would not be forgotten or silenced as marginalized individuals who were forced out of Europe (personal interview #28, 2016). Some of the female participants and unaccompanied minors asserted that they wanted to contribute because the majority of interviews about their migration were conducted with adult men. Respectively, many perceived an endemic gender and age bias in the coverage of the migration "crisis" in Europe, which favored the experience of men over the systemically marginalized "others" – women and children (for a discussion on the appropriation of refugee voices see Malkki, 1996). Indeed, the European media commonly objectified women and children as victims of violence or reported the incident of their death, such as the tragedy of Alan Kurdi, his mother and brother, but often did

¹² The fear of a rejected asylum application was heightened by the fact that individuals witnessed other asylum seekers from their same home state that had been rejected and returned, the official term for forced removal from Europe (European Commission, 2015), prior to the author's arrival. Consequently, the violence of waiting for the Dutch government's decision was identified as the most exasperating element of life in the asylum camps for these individuals.

not include interviews with women or children in their reports (Dempsey, 2016b). While there are certain cultural, religious, numeric and security reasons for the proclivity for interviewing adult migrant males, the consequence is a systemic suppressing of female and young individual's voices and experiences. In contrast, the author was committed to responsibly providing migrants, especially the aforementioned marginalized individuals, with the opportunity to participate in fieldwork and contribute their stories. This quickly led to a growing list of participants as some migrants who learned about the project from earlier interviewees became interested in participating as well. In addition, after a few weeks some migrants inquired about the author's presence and interest in the camps. If they learned about the details and methods of this research project, all but one individual who had talked with the author about the project then inquired if they could participate as well.

Interviews with participants occurred either in a private room inside of 15 asylum camps throughout the Netherlands or in a private room outside of the camp (often in a local Red Cross facility). Two of the 39 interviews were conducted in a migrant's private living accommodations because the individual had recently been assigned housing outside of the camp. The interviews ranged from 1-3 hours and were conducted in the migrant's language of choice. Seven of the 39 participants were proficient or fluent in English and voluntarily elected to use English for the whole interview, 6 individuals were proficient in English but preferred to speak in their native language, and the remaining participants knew little or no English. At the beginning of each interview, all participants were reminded that they were not obligated to participate or answer any questions at any time during the interview. The author detailed how the interviews would be documented and how research data from the interviews may be incorporated in publications and reports. For all interviews, participants granted permission for the author to record their age, gender¹³, and country of origin. All testimonies from migrants who participated in this research were also catalogued anonymously with all identifying information removed, including information about age, gender or particulars about camp location, because their testimonies were then shared with the Dutch Red Cross and the Ministry of Migration in the Dutch Cabinet in an effort for continued advocacy on behalf of asylum seekers in the Netherlands.

As previously discussed in this article, the author was mindful of her commitment to disrupt the hierarchies of power and positionality in this interview process. For example, if a migrant greeted her as "professor" or "researcher," the author asked them if they would be comfortable addressing her by her first name to remove some of the power associated with the title and reminded them that both

¹³ In order to avoid limiting gender responses to that of a categorical binary or to "speak on behalf" of the migrant based on perceptions of appearance or clothing, all participants were asked to identify their gender without providing categories relating to a male-female binary as the assumed options.

the author and this participant would be researchers asking questions throughout the interview. Moreover, the author did not assume any perceived commonalities in the presence of clearly power-laden differences such as legal status, race, class, or dis/ablement (Gilbert, 1994; Kobayashi, 1994) in order to not “reproduce structures of oppression and exploit research respondents” (Bondi, 2005, 66). After introductions, the author reminded the migrant that they were welcome at any time to ask the author any questions about her research, home country, or her as an individual. If they did not have any questions at the beginning of the interview, the author began by inquiring about their motivations for migrating to Europe, if the Netherlands had been their intended destination and why, testimonies from the journey, as well as their experiences in the camps since arriving. Some migrants were prepared with inquiries thus their questions initiated the interview in order to encourage a renegotiation of the frameworks of power in fieldwork. As McKay (2002) contends after conducting fieldwork with overseas contract workers, a highly controlled and structured research agenda would be disadvantageous if the research goal is to acquire personal narratives and experiences.

For example, a 23-year-old Syrian woman shared that she was happy that the author was in the camps inquiring about her journey from Syria and life in asylum camps, because she wanted people to hear what she had experienced during her journey and in the Dutch asylum camps. She expressly asked the author to include her story in one of her academic publications:

I will tell you my story, because you are sharing your stories with me. My mom asked me to leave Syria and go to Europe because the government had taken my friend to jail. Some of my friends came too and we paid a smuggler a group rate to go from Syria to Turkey. At the coast, we got in a rubber boat, 50 people on the boat because the smuggler used a gun to force us in. I had an iPhone for maps before I left and other people on the boat had boat experience, so they helped us cross the Mediterranean. There was a baby on the boat. We all sang on the boat in Arabic to help the scared baby. I don't know if the baby knew Arabic, but we sang anyway. When we arrived in Greece, there were camps for Syrians and non-Syrians. The Red Cross gave us food and clothes, but I had heard from friends not to give my fingerprints in Greece, so we hid and looked for the train station. We went through many countries like Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, and Austria. Serbia was very cold. I gave my gray blanket to someone who was colder than me. In Austria, the police came on the train to check passports. I had heard stories of police attacking women, so I found a policewoman. I hid my Syrian passport and told her a line from a movie in English I had seen. I said: “I am on a Eurotrip! Spring Break Baby!” The policewoman asked me for my papers and I said I lost my papers at a bar in Vienna. I smiled and repeated ‘Spring Break Baby!’ and she

finally let me back on the train. When I got to Germany, I stayed on the train because I knew about the Nazis in the war from school. I heard in Holland people are friendlier, but when I got to Holland the first camp was very bad. A boy committed suicide there before I arrived. Later, someone in the camp told an untrue story about me to COA and COA made me leave for 7 days without money for food. But they moved me to this camp 4 months ago. This new camp is better and the COA guards here are nice...I hope you share my story. I want people to hear about my trip from Syria. (Pause). There are so many men in the camps here. I want them to hear the stories of women too; there are not many women in the camps (personal interview #9, 2016).

As her narrative reveals, migrants experience numerous forms of institutionalized, embodied, and mental violence throughout their journey into Europe as well as in some of the asylum camps. In addition to the violence and trauma, this testimony also reveals migrants' (such as this young woman's) ingenuity, intelligence, bravery as well as sense of kindness and compassion. This also exposes the dualistic challenge that haunts researchers that work with migrants; she is both an individual in need of assistance and refuge, while at the same time she is an intelligent, resourceful, capable person who demonstrated great determination and agency in order to arrive at her preferred country of asylum in Europe. Ticktin (2011) has written in length about similar experiences and some of the unintentional consequences of working within immigration politics. With this in mind and remaining loyal to the core motivation of an ethical commitment in fieldwork with migrants, this article provides this participant a platform on which her experience can be shared, her voice empowered, and the hierarchy of research positionality of researchers working with international migrants renegotiated. In fact, in many interviews migrants specifically commented on how "powerful" they felt while asking an American questions they had about the author's personal life and country since they had previously perceived Americans as unapproachable, powerful beings (for example, personal interview #2; #6; #13; #16; #36, 2016).

This repositioning of the power imbalance in fieldwork was also evident when the author responded to migrants' interview questions. For example, all of the questions that the 23-year-old Syrian woman (personal interview #9, 2016) asked the author during this interview focused primarily on life in the United States and/or the author's personal life. For example, she asked the author: "What is life like for women living in America? Do you have any children? Are you married? What is school like in America? What do you learn about Syria in schools in America?" (ibid.) As a private individual, the author found responding to the migrant's interview questions rather uncomfortable, especially when she asked the author to explain or provide a justification regarding certain elements of her personal life. This challenging experience helped the author to remain acutely empathetic throughout the research process, especially due to the fact that a few of

the migrants' questions required the author to discuss some distressing personal experiences in the author's own personal life.

A related example involves an unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan. Due to the particularly sensitive nature of interviewing minors, the author strictly followed all protocol set by the approved Institutional Review Board for Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) for this research project. The IRB was designed for working with migrants of all ages and genders, but included special training and attention for interviews with unaccompanied minors in asylum camps. Prior to this project, the author had 1.5 years of ethnographic field experience working in Galicia, a historic nationality in Spain, and consecutive projects in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, and in sectarian neighborhoods in Belfast, Northern Ireland. The social worker that accompanied the author had worked with this unaccompanied minor for two years and has extensive training working with at-risk migrants. The social worker contacted the unaccompanied minor's mother in Afghanistan and after learning about the research project, the mother and the interviewee both granted permission for the interview. When asked about his journey to the Netherlands, he described his treacherous trip:

It was terrible, but my story is no different than the other boys in this hallway. All the boys came here with smugglers. My smuggler told me when we were walking that if I could not keep up with him, he would leave me alone to die in the mountains. I tried very hard to not fall behind. When we arrived at a border at night, the guards shot at us. I was very scared. I thought I would die, because the smuggler told me I would probably be killed by their guns. He said the last person he took here was killed...When I finally made it to Europe and arrived in Holland, I have food, clothes and some friends in the asylum camp. But the worst part is that I miss my mom, especially at night (personal interview #20, 2016).

After recounting his journey from Afghanistan to the Netherlands, he inquired about life in the United States and the author's personal life. He wanted to know if the author was a mother. He also asked about life for asylum seekers, especially Afghan asylum seekers, living in the United States and how they were treated. Despite the author's experience teaching university courses that discuss the asylum process in the United States and the socio-political implications of discriminatory immigration policies, the author found it emotionally challenging to answer this young boy's questions, particularly questions that pertained to her personal life as well as the geopolitical relationship between the United States and Afghanistan.

After hearing numerous accounts and experiences of trauma such as that of the aforementioned Syrian woman and the unaccompanied Afghan boy, among many others, the research triggered various distressing emotional responses for the author as well. As Coles, et al. (2014) contend, qualitative fieldwork on individuals

who have suffered a malicious trauma can result in a researcher becoming what Maillot et al. (2016) described as becoming “vicariously traumatized after having had extended contact with trauma victims” (16). Just as these researchers had “mirror physical manifestations” (ibid.) from working with migrants who had experienced trauma, the author also experienced a sense of depression and isolation after conducting fieldwork in asylum camps in the Netherlands for several months. As Hyndman (2001) posits, it is ethically inconceivable to forget what one hears or witnesses while conducting fieldwork, particularly with vulnerable individuals. However, this method of reciprocal sharing also produced a more emotional connection for the author with each of the participants during the interview as well as after the fieldwork was completed. The stories, hopes and fears that were shared during the interviews wield greater power in memory and practice for the author as well. As a result, it is important to acknowledge that researchers are in a unique and complex position of power, responsibility and vulnerability.

Conclusion

The article explored the ethical challenges and considerations of fieldwork with international migrants. While many geographers have argued for the importance of considering the complexities of the reiterative power relations that exist in field research between researcher and participant, this is particularly critical when working with individuals at risk such as migrants in asylum camps. Examination of research methodologies as well as a researcher’s self-reflection of positionality can help elucidate how power is constituted in the research process. Issues of representation and voice were also central in preparatory considerations. Consequentially, the methodology that was employed for this fieldwork was designed to disrupt these salient power structures and prevent exploitative research by empowering the participant to generate their own inquiries for/about the researcher and shift some of the scrutiny onto the researcher.

By sharing the narratives and experiences of migrants, this paper also sought to empower the voice of the migrant, particularly those who have been silenced or relegated to marginalized spaces such as asylum camps that are located outside of many Europeans’ regular routines. If migrant voices are disregarded, if the perception of these individuals becomes that of foreign bodies temporarily traveling through space, or if descriptions of their presence in Europe is analogous to climatic natural disasters such as the media using terms such as a “flood” or “tidal wave” (Dempsey, 2016b), they will continue to be victimized and systemically marginalized in Europe. For example, in Malmo, Sweden, university volunteer advocacy groups were required to stop assisting unaccompanied migrant minors due to an alarming rise of verbal attacks and xenophobic graffiti on the minors’ living accommodations after people began following volunteers to asylum seekers’ residences (personal interview #41, Malmo, Sweden 2016). Relocating these minors to an unknown location was of utmost importance, but severing ties and positive interactions between local advocates and migrants only further

exacerbates their sense of isolation and marginalization in Europe. It is critical in this period of increasingly volatile geopolitical relations that the migrant voices are heard.

Additionally, by allowing migrants to participate in the interview process by interviewing the interviewer, the hierarchies of power relations and the constitutive violence of interviewing is diminished. The “us” – “them” dichotomy in relation to insider/outsider is also challenged through this approach. Returning to Maillet et al. (2016) assertion, if research “is to be a form of resistance”, then it must “challenge dominant narratives around ‘vulnerable’ populations” (18). Opening oneself up to questioning is not an easy or comfortable experience, but it can remind the researcher of some of the power imbalances (albeit in a reduced form) and intersubjectivities that exist in fieldwork. When one endeavors to negotiate power and the performative agency of the interview process, it can simultaneously enrich the research data that is produced and render both participants vulnerable in the process.

It is imperative that ethical concerns permeate the entire research process. This begins during the conceptualization of the project and must continue through data dissemination. It is also critical for researchers to remain mindful of constitutions of power, representation and self-representation throughout the process as well. Cognizant of these indispensable and productive negotiations, work with marginalized or vulnerable individuals should continue to be a central part of any research agenda and especially within feminist scholarship. As this investigation demonstrates, such work can generate increased number of interview participants, enthusiastic participation and enriched conversations. Thus, while challenging, being reciprocally vulnerable can produce an emotional space through which some of the roles, distinctions and the power structures that exist in traditional interviews are altered, thereby allowing each participant an opportunity to form a stronger emotional connection with the fellow interviewee.

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