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Dialogue, Debate, and Discussion

Inside-Out Interviews: Cross-Cultural Research in China

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ABSTRACT There is a paucity of research exploring the use of local facilitators in cross-cultural research in Chinese cultural contexts and the impact this may have on data generation and knowledge creation. Addressing this gap, this paper critically reflects on cross-cultural interviews in Hong Kong. The reflection is centred on the experience of interviewing as an outsider to the culture of the participants and later working alongside an insider. While insider and outsider positionalities are formed from a multitude of intersectional characteristics, both gender and nationality emerged as primary influencers in this context. This paper contributes to the methodologically oriented literature by making salient the complexities of deciphering the multitude of influences originating from the researcher's positionality in relation to research others. Specifically, this paper highlights how both insider and outsider positionalities generate different, but complementary data through the exploration of participant's responses. 'It's a Chinese thing' or comments equating to it's a woman's thing were used by participants to either limit responses or expand and offer additional information, and the juxtaposition of these responses with those given to an insider help to highlight what this might mean for knowledge creation.

KEYWORDS cross-cultural interviews, insider-outsider, reflexivity

INSIDE-OUT INTERVIEWS: CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH IN CHINA

Collaboration between local facilitators and outsiders when conducting research in a Chinese cultural context has been advocated by many (see for example Eckhardt, 2004; Stening & Zhang, 2007; Tsui, 2004; among others), in part due to the discourse that insider researchers are better positioned than outsiders (Crang, 2003; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Merriam et al., 2001; Thomas, Tienari, Davies, & Meriläinen, 2009). Little research has explored how intermediaries influence data collection within the context of research on/in China or elsewhere (Krzywoszynska, 2015). There have been notable calls for further qualitative

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exploratory research in Chinese cultural contexts (Barney & Zhang, 2009; Li, Tan, Cai, Zhu, & Wang, 2012; Tsui, 2009; Wang, 2012), and as such it is important that the academy critically reflects on the process of carrying out this type of research.

This paper contributes to the literature by offering an empirical investigation of the working with insider facilitators, and in doing so we challenge the discourse that insider researchers can generate better knowledge than outsider researchers. However, our findings also problematize the understanding of positionalities as fluid (Adu-Ampong & Adams, 2019; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Merriam et al., 2001) through an examination of persistent positioning of the outsider as socially incompetent. This is clear from the exploration of participant's responses 'It's a Chinese thing' or comments equating to it's a woman's thing used to either limit responses or expand and offer additional information.

This paper first discusses the concept of positionality and its application in Chinese cultural contexts, which provides the foundation for the analysis of reflections on data collected by an 'outsider' man and an 'insider' woman. Focusing on gender and nationality, this paper highlights how both insider and outsider positionalities generate different, but complementary data. Interestingly, while social class was not the focus of this paper, it emerges as an important intersection with gender and the insider researcher. Class does not appear to affect the positioning of the outsider, whose primary positioning remains socially incompetent.

POSITIONALITY

Positionality is a concept used to examine and understand a variety of social categories, such as gender, ethnicity, nationality, and class (Anthias, 2008). Positionality is an important, but under-analyzed concept in cross-cultural research, as it can shape the creation of knowledge by affording specific insights and understandings, but also by mediating the participants (England, 1994). Such an understanding has been foundational in arguments concerning the ability of researchers to analyze people different from themselves (Anthias, 2008; Berger & Luckman, 1989 [1966]), who may be 'constructing a reality with one eye shut' (Thomas et al., 2009: 319). Following this criticism, terms for describing positionality have traditionally been *etic/emic*, or *insider/outsider*.

Positionality extends wider than the researcher's understanding of self-identity, to include how they are positioned by others (Chereni, 2014). To some extent, all participants differ to the researcher and are therefore *Other*, as we are *Other* to them (Fawcett & Hearn, 2004). The lines between insiders and outsiders are not fixed but fluid, which demands that we rethink how beneficial insider positions are in contrast to outsiders (Adu-Ampong & Adams, 2019; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Merriam et al., 2001). Insider researchers may be able to create better rapport and trust, which might lead to more in-depth data; for instance, a woman might feel more comfortable talking about the challenges of being a mother to another mother. Shared positionalities between researcher and

participants can be an advantage, but difference may also create a lens which sees past that which is normalized (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009).

Conversely, Whitehead (2002) argues that many men are gender-blind, as men may see themselves as the norm, which limits their ability to understand, observe or be aware of issues not directly relevant to them. This blindness may not occur consciously, but rather subconsciously linked to the man's positionality. The worldview shaped by researcher and participant positionalities may also influence how the data is generated and analyzed (Berger, 2015). For example, the meaning of trust or justice varies dramatically from Chinese to Western cultural contexts (Stening & Zhang, 2007). If the researcher is not aware of these nuances, the participants and researcher could be speaking two different languages.

Positioning, Nationality, and Cross-Cultural Research in China

Several authors have noted the difficulties that non-Chinese researchers face when researching in Chinese cultural contexts (Roy, Walters, & Luk, 2001; Zhou & Nunes, 2013). Stening and Zhang (2007) highlight the importance of certain aspects of the researcher's positionality, suggesting this may affect the attitudes and answers of the participants. Participants may be more or less willing to open up and share their views depending on the specific context of the interview, the person who is conducting the interview and topics discussed. Furthermore, depending on the positionality of the researcher, participants might be reluctant to openly express negative opinions (Sanchez-Burks et al., 2003).

Roy et al. (2001) have addressed some of the challenges that non-local researchers might face and suggest that the use of a Chinese interviewer/ facilitator could help to overcome these. Working alongside local facilitators to conduct interviews may improve the trustworthiness of the collected data (Eckhardt, 2004), and add perspective, which can help triangulation at the time of conceptualizing the data (Watkins-Mathys, 2006). Tsui (2009) has argued that the collaboration between insider and outsider researchers leads to 'in-outsiders' cooperation, which might provide diverse research perspectives. Finally, the facilitator also reduces the likelihood of errors due to cultural misunderstandings (Stening & Zhang, 2007).

Inside-Out Interviews

The importance of a reflexive approach to research in Chinese cultural contexts should not be underestimated (Wang, 2012). As reflexivity is primarily based on questioning the relationships between ourselves and the research participants (Haynes, 2012), I reflect on the collected data. Reflection helps to illustrate how researchers affect the data collection process, and how different positionalities (insider and outsider) can help to enrich the data and create knowledge. In this

specific case, the reflections are based on the 15 semi-structured interviews with Chinese women middle managers conducted as part of the first author's doctoral studies.

During the process of conducting these interviews, I faced what Cassell and Symon (2004) have catalogued as 'difficult interviews', and as such enlisted a local facilitator (Roy et al., 2001). The decision to work with a local facilitator was based on previous studies, which have concluded that a diverse research team has the potential to produce better outcomes (Jonsen et al., 2013). The interviews were therefore repeated on two separate occasions, originally with myself, a Caucasian but not white man, (then) London based, Western educated, Argentinian researcher of Italian heritage. Then later with a Hong Kong ethnically Chinese, university educated woman research assistant.

REFLECTIONS OF AN OUTSIDER

When reflecting on the data collected, both nationality and the gender of the researchers appear to have elicited very different responses from the participants. The Outsider was positioned by the participants as such, and the expression 'it's a Chinese thing' was repeated time and again to highlight this. Gender also shaped the participants' responses, especially when discussing more intimate issues. The section entitled it's a woman's thing explores this alongside the potential gender blindness of the author.

It's a Chinese Thing

The outsider researcher questions were often answered with the phrase, 'It is a Chinese thing' as a way to state; 'You are an outsider, you cannot possibly really understand this issue, and I do not know how or I do not want to explain it to you'. I think this both highlights how the participant positioned me as Other (Anthias, 2008; Merriam et al., 2001) and how this process of Othering ultimately limited the response. A further instance of the limiting effect of Othering is evidenced when one manager was asked by the outsider researcher: 'Do you involve yourself in your subordinates' personal lives?' To which she replied: 'Yes, me and all the managers get involved in the private life of the subordinates, but you know, it is normal; it is a Chinese thing'. But when further asked, why? The answer was repeated, 'It's a Chinese thing'. This expression both summarises and essentializes Chinese society, limiting the discussion of alternatives and singularities.

Throughout the interviews, it is not clear why participants chose to contextualize and explain some of their answers in more depth and limit their answers in other instances. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the facilitator, never received the response 'It's a Chinese thing', or similar comments. For example, the same participant offered the following response to the same question when asked by the facilitator:

‘yes, we all get involved in the personal lives of our subordinates, but you know how it is some people just pay lip service to the personal lives of their subordinates, but some others develop very close links, like (name and name) who treats her assistance as a young sister’.

However, there were cases where the outsider’s positionality may have positively influenced the data collection, facilitating more detailed explanations. This occurred when participants presumed that the outsider knew nothing about their culture. This assumption is evidenced by phrases such as ‘Let me explain to you because you are not Chinese’, or ‘any Chinese person would know that, but I will explain’, and consequently, a more contextualized explanation that enriched the research process emerged. Here rather than difference creating a lens to see past that which is normalized in Chinese culture (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009), being positioned as Other enabled or encouraged participants to fully explain the things that they believed the researcher did not know. This supports other findings, where arguably insiders Adu-Ampong and Adams (2019) highlighted that being positioned as socially incompetent, facilitated deeper explanations. Outsiders can perform the role of socially incompetent with obvious ease.

One manager was asked: ‘why are there so many relatives of the owner of the company working in the organization?’ She answered:

‘any Chinese person would know that, but I will explain to you, Chinese people care for their (extended) family, and a way to do this is by giving them with jobs, it doesn’t matter that they might not be the best at what they do, but as part of the extended family (of the owner) he provides them with jobs when possible, secures their loyalty of the people working here, this is more important than how well they do their job’.

When the same manager was asked the same question a year later by the local facilitator, the participant commented: ‘you know how this is, we all have to care for each other’. A clear example of how participants adapt their answers based on perceived positionalities. As the long explanation shows, participants seemed unaware of the possibility that the foreign researcher may have studied the characteristics of the Chinese culture and underestimated my knowledge. The extended answer exhibits the need of the manager to explain the concept of loyalty, loyalty being central to organizations in Chinese contexts (Farh & Cheng, 2000).

A long, contextualized answer, given to an outsider opens the door to follow-up questions, whereas the second answer omits loyalty, assuming that the insider already knows how important it is to have relatives working in the organization. Interestingly, even though insider knowledge is taken for granted in the second response, follow-up questions helped to understand how sometimes line managers are bypassed as some subordinates have a ‘direct line’ to the owner of the organization. This more detailed explanation of work politics given to the insider

researcher could be the consequence of better rapport created by two people with a similar culture. It could also be that as the base of knowledge was presumed to be similar, participants felt they had more time to explain something slightly more complicated, such as office politics.

Other differences between the answers given to the insider and the outsider can be identified based on the use of language. Even though all participants were fluent in English, the inclusion of Cantonese words was far more prominent in the interviews that took place with the local insider. Participants rarely used words in Cantonese when interviewed by the outsider researcher, and when they did, they always apologized for it. Whereas when the insider conducted her interviews, words in Cantonese were more prominent and unapologetically used. The addition of a few words in Cantonese did not affect the actual outcomes of the interviews. However, it does highlight how an insider researcher who speaks the same language might create an open environment (Stening & Zhang, 2007), allowing participants to fall back on their local language when needed, without the need to apologize.

It's a Woman's Thing

Questions that focussed on women's experiences of leadership were answered in more detail when asked by the local woman facilitator, which supports the gender studies literature that women might be better than men at creating rapport with women (Oakley, 1981). When asked by the female facilitator 'How much support do you have from your husband in your professional role'? A manager commented: '[I feel] a lack of support from my husband for the upbringing our children and domestic chores in general'. She described her husband as:

'Extremely focused on his career [...] but I also think that is an excuse, with little time and unwillingness to help with the domestic chores, my son or old relatives; this is my job, not his'.

This notion was echoed by several of the other participants. In contrast, when asked by the male researcher, the same manager replied, 'Not much'. These answers evidence a clear distinction in the amount of information concerning their relationships; participants were willing to disclose. In addition to this, I did not ask follow up questions to this response, which could be the consequence of 'gender blindness' (Whitehead, 2002), where perhaps the importance of the question and the answer was not fully understood. On the other hand, the participants may have also Othered me (Chereni, 2014; Merriam et al., 2001) as just another man, who is either not interested or would not understand.

While 'gender blindness', and my gendered positionality may have led to 'difficult interviews' (Cassell & Symon, 2004), the insider's positionality was far from unproblematic. The insider was from the upper class, evident from her dispositions resulting from her economic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu, 1990). Class

intersecting with gender (Anthias, 2008), colored the interviews with many of the participants coming from working-class aspirational backgrounds. An example of this intersection occurred when the local facilitator asked a manager why she did not have a foreign domestic helper (a common practice in Hong Kong). The local manager answered quite curtly: ‘not everyone has a big home to host a maid, some people live in very small homes’, making an implicit reference to the difference in the sizes of their homes. This is a clear symbol of status in Hong Kong, a city where affordable housing is a serious problem. When the outsider asked a similar question, that ‘the problem is not to pay for their [domestic workers] salary, the problem is where to put them’ (as foreign domestic workers are required by law to live in the home where they work). The answer to the questions is quite similar – the problems of housing a foreign maid – yet the interaction, and tone of the answers are different.

I could also be considered from a middle class, but perhaps my ambiguous identity (from the participants’ perspective) – Western-educated, Caucasian but not white, led to my being understood as simply a socially incompetent outsider. We would argue that in this instance social class does not travel across culture, for example the marker for social class here – domestic help, would not be a marker for social class in other contexts. Overall, both the insider and outsider positionalities helped to enrich the data by bridging limitations that might be assigned to either positionality, such as gender-blindness, or an inability to see past what is normalised in Chinese culture and in gender.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this paper contributes to the literature by offering an empirical investigation of working with local facilitators in research in Chinese cultural contexts (Eckhardt, 2004; Stening & Zhang, 2007; Tsui, 2004). We challenge the discourse that situates local and foreign researchers as insider/outsider with the former being more desirable for data generation (Crang, 2003; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Merriam et al., 2001; Thomas et al., 2009). The assumption that the outsider researcher knew nothing about their culture and way of life, often leading to phrases such as ‘Let me explain to you because you are not Chinese’, or ‘any Chinese person would know that, but I will explain’, is starkly juxtaposed with ‘It’s a Chinese thing’. Here the outsider positionality can be said to both limit and enrich the data. While, positionality has been described as fluid (Merriam et al., 2001), in this particular case, the social positioning of the outsider was quite static.

The outsider was positioned as socially incompetent when discussing issues related to culture or issues related to gender. As previously noted, being positioned as socially incompetent appeared to both enrich and limit data. The insider researcher certainly yielded complimentary data, obtaining more detail when I had struggled. This could be due to her ability to build better rapport, but also due to shared basic understandings, which led the participants to think that they

could focus on more complex issues such as office politics. The closer shorter distance between the insider and the participants led to certain class politics, as her class could be perceived and understood. However, we note that the outsider remained outside Hong Kong class structures, and as such argue that class perhaps does not travel across cultures in this instance. This is perhaps partly because the researcher is not white, and as such, is not understood to have white privilege.

The reflections presented in the paper support the arguments for working with local facilitators when carrying out cross-cultural research in Chinese cultural contexts (Eckhardt, 2004; Stening & Zhang, 2007; Tsui, 2004). Finally, even though nationality and gender were two of the most salient factors that affected the data collection, they are only part of the positionality of each of the researchers. As the reflection on class exemplifies, positionality is intersectional (Anthias, 2008) and further research should account for this depending on the research context. We have briefly highlighted that class is linked to race, but also how class may not travel across cultures, which we feel should be explored further.

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