

## ETHNOGRAPHER'S BIAS: CULTIVATING REFLEXIVITY

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*It is easy to talk about reflexivity, perhaps more difficult to incorporate it into ongoing research practice.<sup>1</sup>*

### Abstract

Ethnographic researchers enter their field with already existing preconceptions which inevitably arise from their own personal and professional histories and training. This article focuses on the researcher's subjectivity, reflexivity, and possible sources of bias. After sharing her own experience with bias during field-research, the author invites the reader to think critically over their own research designs. This paper introduces three practical approaches towards reflexivity in social science: searching for the potential sources of our bias; questioning ourselves throughout the research process; and a collective approach.

**Keywords:** ethnography; research; bias; subjectivity; preconceptions; reflexivity.

### Introduction

In this article I would like to discuss the researcher's subjectivity which inevitably arises from his/her own personal biography, and which influences the way he/she designs and analyses his/her research.

We can hardly question the fact that the ethnographic researcher enters the field pre-concerned, with certain values, judgements, and assumptions. These tendencies, often unconscious, are rooted in their personal histories and professional training, and may shape their research process and its outcome.

There is a vast literature on the importance of reflexivity and positionality in social research; however, I was surprised to learn that there are very limited resources offering actual practical activities which may help researchers (and their students) to develop critical reflective thinking.

Therefore, the main aim of this article is to offer the reader practical techniques of reflective thinking. For this reason, I underwent a literature search in various fields of social science, searching for specific reflective practices which may be useful in researcher introspection, and in uncovering the sources of our bias.

In order to demonstrate how preconceptions can influence our research I am also briefly going to share my own experience with overcoming bias in my ethnographic

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<sup>1</sup> Jan FOOK, "Reflexivity as Method", *Annual Review of Health Social Science* 9/1, 1999, p. 11.

field-research in Northeast India. The realisation that I had been biased helped me to change my approach and recognise important findings which I could have easily missed if I had not changed my way of thinking.

However, even though I do mention my experience with bias, my aim is not to analyse my research in this paper. My own experience serves here merely as an example of my first personal confrontation with bias, which ignited my interest in reflective practice in social science.

I am aware that my own research is not located in Ibero-America; however the nucleus of this article is reflexivity in ethnographic research, which I believe is relevant in any geopolitical region and to the overall theme of this issue. As Kusek and Smiley point out: “the issues confronting researchers are universal regardless of field site or national, personal, or professional position.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Note on reflexivity and reflectivity**

The terms reflexivity and reflectivity are often used as synonyms, or as terms with blurred boundaries;<sup>3</sup> yet some authors distinguish between them. For example, D’Cruz, Gillingham and Melendez suggest that while reflexivity is looking in the past (“reflection-on-action”), reflectivity, or critical reflection, is happening in the moment (“reflection-in-action”).<sup>4</sup> J. Fook on the other hand explains that *reflectivity* can be seen as a *process* of critically researching our own (or someone else’s) practice, while *reflexivity* can be understood as a *position*, or the ability to “locate ourselves in the picture”<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, to reach reflexivity, we need to practice critical reflection. I am referring to those terms in Fook’s sense.

### **Subjectivity in research design**

Subjectivity and the role of the researcher is an important topic in all the sciences. This is especially so in the social sciences, and particularly in ethnography, where the researcher is usually not shielded by instruments or machines (in contrast to laboratory research) and represents and offers a direct interaction and interpretation of the phenomenon studied.

From the early 1970s, anthropology as a science has developed an interest in the critical examination of the researcher’s role and in the influence of subjectivity, following the 1960s critique of anthropologists’ ignorance of contemporary reality and the colonial exploitation of the cultures studied.<sup>6</sup>

It became evident that the researcher cannot remain truly “invisible” in a research setting, as was previously thought desirable, and that their point of view

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<sup>2</sup> Weronika KUSEK – Sarah SMILEY, “Navigating the city: gender and positionality in cultural geography research”, *Journal of Cultural Geography* 31/2, 2014, p. 152.

<sup>3</sup> Heather D’CRUZ – Philip GILLINGHAM – Sebastian MELENDEZ, “Reflexivity, its Meanings and Relevance for Social Work: A Critical Review of the Literature”, *The British Journal of Social Work* 37/1, January 2007, p. 74.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 83.

<sup>5</sup> FOOK 1999, “Reflexivity as Method”, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Charlotte Aull DAVIES, *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others*, Routledge 2008, p. 11.

inevitably infiltrates the findings. Eurocentrism and the colonial gaze were harshly criticised, and it became clear that to understand the effect of colonisation, we need to study the colonisers as well.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, to understand anthropological statements about culture(s), we need to acknowledge that those statements are also statements about anthropology itself.<sup>8</sup>

Stories of “arrival” became a part of ethnographies in order to acknowledge the presence of the researcher – even though the arrival and the initial contact with the group researched may be the most artificial period, or even prone to misinterpretation.<sup>9</sup>

The need for further reflexivity in ethnography has continued to rise, together with a debate on how much reflexivity is enough to remain informative and to avoid only and completely spiralling inwards the researcher’s biography.<sup>10</sup>

It is not merely a question of being an insider or outsider vis-à-vis a particular culture – those categories have become inevitably interwoven in the post-modern era. It is evident that it is not only ethnical identity that separates researchers from the researched, but often also different intellectual preoccupations and overall personal histories. Therefore, a native researcher to a researched group also needs to invite reflexivity in order to understand her/his own biases.<sup>11</sup>

Bias may influence every stage of our research. Therefore, it is important to engage in critical thinking towards our own concepts, from the planning of our research until publication itself.<sup>12</sup>

It is also important to mention that subjectivity is not always a bad thing. While bias may prevent us from seeing certain important patterns of the phenomenon studied, subjectivity is simply inevitable, generating space for variability and allowing voices to be heard.<sup>13</sup>

### **My experience with bias: encountering matrilineality**

There was a particular moment during the ethnographic field research for my dissertation on childbearing practices in Northeast India when I realised that I was trying to adjust my interview setting in order to accommodate my preconceptions. Unknowingly, I kept blocking myself from understanding a broader spectrum of a phenomenon on which I wanted to focus.

The fieldwork took place in the state of Meghalaya, Northeast India, among the matrilineal society of the Khasis. The Khasis, numbering approx. 1,5 million

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<sup>7</sup> DAVIES, *Reflexive ethnography*, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Malcolm R. CRICK, “Anthropology of knowledge”, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 11/1, 1982, p. 307.

<sup>9</sup> DAVIES, *Reflexive Ethnography*, p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Donna Jean YOUNG – Anne MENELEY, *Auto-Ethnographies: The Anthropology of Academic Practices*, Peterborough 2005, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> DAVIES, *Reflexive Ethnography*, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> FOOK 1999, “Reflexivity as Method”, p. 15.

according to the latest Census,<sup>14</sup> are one of the few societies in the world who up to this day practice matrilineality and matrilocality.<sup>15</sup> For reference, in Ibero-America, matrilineality or matrilocality is represented e.g. by the Guna people (Kuna, Tule, Dule) of Panama and Colombia,<sup>16</sup> and by the Wayúu people (Guajiro, Wahiro) of Colombia and Venezuela.<sup>17</sup>

My bias stemmed out of the encounter with matrilineality, and with the overall gender dynamics of the Khasi society. Since I wanted to study practices related to childbirth, I wanted to focus on women. According to the literature on traditions related to childbirth across the globe, birth is usually a strictly women-only event. Men are very often completely excluded or even banned from witnessing the birth.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, when I wanted to interview people to find out more about local birthing practices, I immediately thought of interviewing only women, and tried to create a safe environment secluded from men. I was worried women may feel shy to discuss their intimate experiences not only in front of me, but also in front of others, especially men.

However, during the research I began to observe that not only were women not shy talking about childbirth in front of men, but even the men themselves started to share stories of births they witnessed or where they even helped. I learned that in the Khasi traditional culture of childbirth, men are an integral part of the experience. Among the Khasis, there is even a tradition of male-midwives. In case of home-birth, men often play an active role during childbirth, if they are chosen to attend by the birthing woman herself, and in some regions, there are even indications of *couvade*.<sup>19</sup>

That was a crucial finding of my research, and I almost remained blind to it due to my initial preconception and my unconscious attempt to influence my research setting and to exclude men from the interviews. That was the point when I became interested in practical reflective activities, which could help us realise how our own background influences our research.

### **Reflecting gender, rethinking matrilineality**

I became especially interested in reflecting on gender and encountering matrilineal societies. However, in my search of the literature, most texts related to reflexivity

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<sup>14</sup> CENSUS 2011, Meghalaya Population Census data 2011, [downloaded on 11 November 2020], accessible from: <http://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/meghalaya.html>.

<sup>15</sup> I describe the character of the Khasi matrilineality in detail in the following article: Lenka ZHRÁDKOVÁ, “Porozumění matrilinearitě u kmene Khásí v severovýchodní Indii”, *Nový Orient* 73, Praha 2018, pp. 2–10.

<sup>16</sup> James HOWE, *Chiefs, Scribes, and Ethnographers: Kuna Culture from Inside and Out*, Austin 2010; Karin E. TICE, *Kuna Crafts, Gender, and the Global Economy*, Austin 1995.

<sup>17</sup> Lawrence Craig WATSON, “Guajiro social structure: a reexamination”, *Antropológica/Sociedad de Ciencias Naturales La Salle* 20, 1967, pp. 3–36.

<sup>18</sup> Brigitte JORDAN, *Birth in Four Cultures: A Crosscultural Investigation of Childbirth in Yucatan, Holland, Sweden, and the United States*, Long Grove 1992, p. 33.

<sup>19</sup> Information from my research, Meghalaya (India) 2016, unpublished.

and gender focused mainly on dealing with the patriarchal setting, and especially on the challenges of being a female researcher in the patriarchal field.<sup>20</sup>

As Guédon points out, even though the social sciences went through massive perspective development under the influence of postmodern, postcolonial, and feminist approaches, and despite the fact that kinship studies changed with the evolution of much more critical and reflective studies of gender, matrilineal cultures are still being described by terminologies and concepts from the mid-nineteen century.<sup>21</sup>

The trend is slowly changing, but studies of matrilineal societies have yet to be transferred to the up-to-date field. In 2020, Guédon herself established a platform for studies of matrilineal cultures, or as Guédon suggests – “matricultures”, and is determined to engage in deep deconstruction and critique of terms and concepts used regarding societies that exist as an alternative to the patrilineal and patriarchal setting, and to be part of the change of perspective in the future.<sup>22</sup>

### **Practicing critical reflection**

Even though I could not find any practical reflective activities directly related to rethinking matrilineality, I have gathered several potentially useful techniques for engaging in critical reflection in research in social sciences in general, and I hope we can utilise them either in our own research or within our teaching practice as a tool to develop our capacity for reflexivity.

Therefore, I am going to introduce three practical reflective activities: (1) looking into the potential sources of our bias; (2) questioning ourselves at every stage of the research; and (3) a collective approach. Before we proceed with the techniques, I would like to challenge you, the reader, to engage in them actively. Feel free to use a pen and paper, and use the following exercises to practice your own reflective thinking; and to revisit your answers some time later to see if some of your perceptions have changed.

### **Ethnography of the mind: Searching for the sources of bias**

To realise and to acknowledge our bias, Margaret D. LeCompte<sup>23</sup> suggests that researchers should engage in active reflection, and to practice *disciplined subjectivity* – in other words, to practice, as she calls it, an *intellectual psychoanalysis* or *ethnography of the mind*.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Sandra ACKER, “In/out/side: Positioning the researcher in feminist qualitative research”, *Resources for feminist research* 28/1–2, 2000, pp. 189–210; Farah PURWANINGRUM – Anastasiya SHTALTOVNA, “Reflections on fieldwork: A comparative study of positionality in ethnographic research across Asia”, *eSymposium for Sociology*, [downloaded on 31 January 2023], accessible from: file:///C:/Users/Lenka/Downloads/EBul-PurwaningrumShtalt-Jul2017.pdf, 2017; Farhana SULTANA, “Reflexivity, positionality and participatory ethics: Negotiating fieldwork dilemmas in international research”, *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 6/3, 2007, pp. 374–385.

<sup>21</sup> Marie-Francoise GUÉDON, “Introduction”, *Matrix: a Journal for Matricultural Studies* 01/1, 2020, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> LECOMPTE, “Bias”, pp. 43–52.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 44.

Ethnography of the mind helps us uncover potential sources of our bias, so we can get to the roots of our own intellectual framework. LeCompte argues that there are two main sources, which can be further divided into subcategories.<sup>25</sup> Feel free to pause and brainstorm. What do you consider your own sources of bias? Try to compare it with the categories of LeCompte below.

LeCompte selects two main sources – professional training and personal experience; and she divides them further into following categories:<sup>26</sup>

***Sources of bias rooted in our professional training:***

- The History of the Discipline: The focus and common interest shift at different eras or stages of the discipline
- The Literary Tradition: Our writing style influences our ethnography; e.g. the tense we choose may give a certain impression, such as simple present tense may depict a freeze-frame effect and lead to false generalisation
- Technology and Intellectual Paradigms: Selection or avoidance of a certain technology may influence how we approach our research; our relationship to technology is also a product of our biography
- Mentors: Certain “schools” of particular mentors in anthropology/ethnology can be distinguished according to similar patterns
- Friends, Associates, and Colleagues: Influence of research centres, teams, cross-referencing those we are familiar with)
- Environments: Similarly, as “friends”, professional environments and their systems may encourage certain ways of thinking
- Paths of Opportunity: Our opportunities and our decisions on whether to follow them may point us in a certain direction

***Sources of bias rooted in our personal biographies:***

- History: The historical era we grew up and live in and its specific topics
- Geography and Demography: Such as social background, upbringing in certain values, religious training, family background, cosmopolitan experience, birth order, geographical region etc.)

We can now compare our own notes with the categories suggested by LeCompte – Have you possibly realised that you omitted some sources partly or completely? Or have you written down an area that should be added into the list? If you missed some categories, try to question yourself – why? Could those omitted categories somehow influence your thinking process and your research? Take some time for self-inquiry and see if the categories suggested by LeCompte could open your eyes to new realisations about your own possible sources of bias.

LeCompte invites us, researchers in social sciences, to actively engage in reflection and examination of biases in our own biographies, professional and personal,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, p. 44.

<sup>26</sup> Author’s summary of sources of bias according to: LECOMPTE, “Bias”, p. 44.

to be able to consciously decide what mental patterns we need to re-consider, and to distinguish a clearer way forward in our research.

### **Thinking, doing, evaluating: Questioning ourselves**

Another practical approach to help us with our retrospection is to ask ourselves meaningful questions at every stage of research. Building on Cunliffe<sup>27</sup> and Day<sup>28</sup> among others<sup>29</sup>, Corlett and Mavin collect and suggest sets of questions for different stages of research,<sup>30</sup> using three (interconnected) categories: “thinking”, “doing” and “evaluating” research.<sup>31</sup>

The *thinking* category relates to our epistemology, our understanding of reality, the nature of knowledge and our paradigms.<sup>32</sup> Among suggested questions to engage in reflection on this theme are: “What are my assumptions about the nature of reality? What do I see as the nature of knowledge? What are the different ways in which a phenomenon can be understood? How could the research question be investigated differently? What different insights may be made by taking a different epistemological perspective?”<sup>33</sup>

The *doing* category questions our methodology, the role of the researcher, the researcher’s motivation, identity, power, and voice. Some suggested questions are: “What is the impact of the research method(s) on research? What data have I chosen to include and leave out in my presentation of findings/interpretations? What are my personal and political reasons to undertake this research? How am I connected to the research, theoretically, experientially, emotionally? And what effect will this have on my approach? What is my (expected) role as a researcher? What effects does my role have on how the research is conducted? What is my power relationship with the people I am researching? What impact did the researcher’s race/gender/class have on the research relationship? How do I make sense of the lived experience of others? Whose voices does this sense making exclude?”<sup>34</sup>

The evaluating category addresses questions of validity and quality, such as: “How can I engage in reflexive ‘theorizing’ and ‘explanation’? What is useful knowledge and how can I produce it within a reflexive frame?”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ann L. CUNLIFFE, “Why complicate a done deal? Bringing reflexivity into management research”, in: Cassell, Catherine – Lee, Bill (eds.), *Challenges and Controversies in Management Research*, London 2011, pp. 404–418.

<sup>28</sup> Suzanne DAY, “A reflexive lens: Exploring dilemmas of qualitative methodology through the concept of reflexivity”, *Qualitative Sociology Review* 8/1, 2012, pp. 60–85.

<sup>29</sup> Mostly in the field of management research, however, applicable in any other field of social science.

<sup>30</sup> Sandra CORLETT – Sharon MAVIN, “Reflexivity and researcher positionality,” in: Catherine Cassell – Ann L. Cunliffe – Gina Grandy (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Business and Management Research Methods*, London 2018, pp. 377–399.

<sup>31</sup> CORLETT – MAVIN, “Reflexivity”, pp. 379–380.; and DAY, “A reflexive lens”, pp. 61–62.

<sup>32</sup> CORLETT – MAVIN 2018, “Reflexivity”, p. 378.

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem, pp. 379–382 (shortened).

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem, pp. 383–390 (shortened).

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem, p. 391 (shortened).

Feel free to take your time to engage with the suggested questions. The exercise of answering the questions above can be used to enhance our critical reflective practice, especially if used continuously in every stage of our research projects.

### **Exposing ourselves, hearing others: Collective approach to reflexivity**

Corlett and Mavin also call for innovative reflexive techniques in the future, especially for a stronger focus on reflexivity as a collective practice.<sup>36</sup> As Dean et al. notice,<sup>37</sup> even though authors in the social sciences are aware that different researchers may interpret the same data differently, and despite the stress on reflexivity and positionality to address subjectivity in social research, the collective approach remains underexplored and overlooked.<sup>38</sup>

By the collective approach Dean et al. do not mean merely “team research”, but a sharing and understanding of knowledge, discussing methodological approaches and world-views.<sup>39</sup>

In his experiment, Dean et al. employ six researchers from various fields of social science and offers them the same data set (interview transcripts) with a sole instruction to “analyse this data”.<sup>40</sup> The analysis is followed up by a collective reflection, which yields eye-opening results.

Dean et al. point out that the collective approach helps us understand how we are shaped by our backgrounds, but also that there is a certain “mundaneness” to research (mundane elements like mood, the practicalities of everyday life, the resources available, wine, friends...) that does influence our research, but is usually ignored or omitted.<sup>41</sup>

Dean et al. conclude that exposing our ideas to others and openly hearing their insights is an important way of developing our own practice, and a tool to prevent our own repetitiveness.<sup>42</sup> Dean et al. believe that the collective approach (between academic professionals, but possibly also open to all spheres) can and should be used as a training exercise in teaching qualitative research methods.<sup>43</sup>

### **Conclusion**

It is inevitable that we, ethnographic researchers, enter our field with our own pre-occupations. Our personal and professional biographies shape the way we organise and arrange our research activities in the field at every stage of the research process.

Therefore, it is necessary to reflect critically on our own biographies and possible sources of bias. This does not mean to the extent of being completely submerged in introspection without the ability to experience or to learn about the world outside

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<sup>36</sup> Ibidem, p. 392.

<sup>37</sup> Jon DEAN – Penny FURNESS – Diarmuid VERRIER et al., “Desert island data: an investigation into researcher positionality”, *Qualitative Research* 18/3, 2018, pp. 273–289.

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem, p. 274.

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, p. 275.

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, p. 380.

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, p. 285.

<sup>42</sup> Ibidem, p. 286.

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem, p. 274.



ourselves, but to acknowledge our preconceptions in order to become less ignorant of the impact of our personal experiences and intellectual development on our research processes and outcomes.

By sharing my own personal experience with bias while encountering a matrilineal society, I would like to stress the importance of reflexivity in enabling us to think critically about our own research.

I have conducted a literature search to look for practical ways whereby we as researchers and teachers can engage in active reflective thinking to develop our practice. Even though I could not find any practical activities focused directly on studying matrilineal cultures, I have identified three practical approaches useful in the broad spectrum of ethnography, and social science research in general; namely: (1) searching for the potential sources of our bias; (2) questioning ourselves throughout the research process; and (3) a collective approach to reflexivity.

*(Written in English by the author)*

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