Reflections on Fieldwork:

A Comparative Study of Positionality in Ethnographic Research across Asia

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This paper aims to reflect on positionality, in particular insider-outsider binary and gender, while conducting research across Asia in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam between 2008 and 2014. The paper addresses the following question: how does positionality under divergent conditions (in restrictive or in friendly research zones) facilitate or impede the qualitative research process? Ethnographic fieldwork was used to collect data. Two proxies of comparisons are used in examining the role of positionality, namely gender and insider-outsider in Central Asia (CA) and South East Asia (SEA). It is demonstrated that understanding one's position in the field is vital to be able to consciously reflect and negotiate space for fieldwork. Next, one's positionality is not an automatic result of one's native identity. Rather, choosing the stance to opt during the fieldwork can be a conscious decision for the researcher. This is decisive for the researcher's personal security and for the collection of the unique data. With regard to gender, despite being rather an unfriendly environment for conducting social science research, CA turned out to be a much easier space for a female researcher to manoeuver, than SEA.

Keywords: positionality, autobiography, gender, insider-outsider, ethnographic fieldwork, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia.

Introduction

This paper is a method paper, presenting autobiographical reflection by two female researchers conducting qualitative and ethnographic research in Central Asia (CA) and Southeast Asia (SEA). It aims to reflect on the issue of positionality; in particular insider-outsider binary and gender. Both authors will draw a comparative approach in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam between 2008 and 2014. By means of presenting fieldwork experiences from different countries, the paper argues that positionality is not as simple as constructing a feminist researcher's hyphenated identity, based on her native origin: the picture, as it will be sketched later on, is much more complicated and fluid. To this end, this typology of comparison presents an opportunity to look beyond conventional, territorially predefined regional divisions of the world, such as South-East Asian studies, or methods that are tied with nation-states, such as methodological nationalism. The main research question is: how does positionality under different circumstances (in hostile or in friendly research zones) facilitate or impede the qualitative research process?

The paper builds further from two tenets: an autobiographical account (Banks, 1998) and an account of the subjective experience of researchers (Schuetz and Luckmann, 1973). Critical social science research is not a cold and detached science. Thus, the authors' autobiographical account is a key feature of the paper.

The authors of the paper are two women: the first is Anastasiya Shtaltovna, Ukrainian by origin. Having grown up in the Soviet Union, she has a good understanding of the other post-Soviet republics (this concerns the countries where research was conducted) in terms of language, history, politics and culture. Shtaltovna has two international degrees. She was baptised at birth but is not a practicing Christian. Farah Purwaningrum, who is the second author, is an Indonesian by origin and nationality. She has a Javanese ethnic background yet speaks Indonesian and Malay languages fluently. She received training for social science research methods during her law studies. Purwaningrum is a practicing Sunni Muslim who tries to keep an open-mind on cultural differences. Before going to the field, both authors obtained similar social science backgrounds and were equipped with the same set of qualitative research methods from the Department of Political and Cultural Change, Centre for Development Research, University of Bonn. Later on, the paper will demonstrate how, having similar backgrounds and the same research toolkit at hand, the lived experiences of fieldwork have materialised differently in two contrasting parts of Asia.

The next feature of the paper is its comparative parts. Gender and insider-outsider are aspects of comparisons of positionality in the paper. For that, it specifically draws our insights from reflections of fieldwork. When it comes to a comparative inquiry of how positionality features in the category of insider-outsider and gender, it is argued that there are gender restrictions arising for female researchers in Central Asia (CA) and Southeast Asia (SEA) that may impede the research process.

The study illustrates that in CA one's position as a female can be a strength, whilst in SEA it can be a restriction. Recognising one's position as a female requires an awareness that there are gender-related obstacles in the field and a willingness to negotiate the research process in the face of such barriers. Whereas understanding one's position in terms of insider-outsider requires capturing identity as an ongoing, fluid and complicated process, it is not statically pre-defined and fieldwork experiences have transformative power.

The present study makes the following contributions in terms of ethnographic methods. First, for feminist studies, a study that takes insights from positionality in Asia should equip researchers with strategies to negotiate and to carry out fieldwork. To do this, female researchers should continuously and consciously reflect on their position during fieldwork. Next, there have been discussions to overcome methodological nationalism (see Wimmer and Schiller, 2002; Chernillo, 2011). Positionality calls for researchers to research into Asia, not by using nation-state as a fixed container but instead, using lived experiences of activating methods in fieldwork.

The paper is organised as follows. The following section discusses current themes of positionality, focusing on gender and insider-outsider binary. Section three and its subsections provide comparisons between the two regions of Southeast Asia and Central Asia; namely, themes of insider-outsider in fieldwork and being a female researcher in the field. The paper ends with a conclusion.

1) Positionality of the Researcher: Insider- Outsider and Gender

The two authors conducted an ethnographical type of research. Ethnographic research affords an intellectual space for a researcher to explore topics and issues in conversations that are mutually comfortable and flow naturally. They may not always be structured. Each week, an ethnographer revisits his/her field notes to keep track of progress and to understand what needs to be followed up. Yet entrance to the field requires a researcher to divulge his/her identity and to become immersed in everyday routines. Comparisons of ethnographic works enable the differences and similarities of particular issues to be highlighted (see Palmberger and Gingrich, 2014) and to understand how positions affect access to ethnographic data. This study does so from a positionality lens. Studies that discuss positionality and fieldwork are carried out predominantly in anthropology, sociology and geography. The issues that scholarly works have discussed in these disciplines, concerning positionality, will be presented in the ensuing paragraphs.

Anthropological studies are indeed characterised by long-term field work and immersion into a society, to enable a 'native's point of view' (Adams, 2012; Geertz, 1973; Davies, 1999). In geography, aspects of identity relating to positionality pertain to race, class, gender, case, sexuality and other attributes that signify relational positions in society, instead of intrinsic qualities (Chacko, 2004). Chacko further asserts that acknowledging positionality is critical in pre-and post-fieldwork to endow a researcher with a vigilance over power relations and the consequences they might have on exchange and production of knowledge. Thus, understanding one's positionality may involve identification of key political aspects of the self (Moser, 2008, as cited from Cloke et al., 2000). Castagno's (2012) study in Cuba exemplifies positionality: the researcher was aware of the fact that there are a number of privileges inherent in her prior study and during fieldwork. Privileges are moulded by socio-political conditions arising due to the US blockade against Cuba and the requisites of Cuban socialism (Castagno, 2012). Access to abundant food, transportation and material goods was made possible by the privilege enjoyed by the researcher. Her study highlights how geo-political conditions of the two countries had an impact in terms of fieldwork.

In this paper, positionality is taken as the researchers' identity. It is posited that identity in fieldwork includes autobiography and lived experiences, as stated earlier. Identity can be manifested on the basis of social categories: ethnicity, profession, age or discipline (Ergun and Erdemir, 2010; Razon and Ross, 2012). Entrance into a field and gaining acceptance is easier when one shares an identity with a majority of locals throughout the community wherein the researcher is working (see Naz, 2012; Kanuha, 2000). Yet, instead of having singularity, these identities crosscut and may be fluid. Identities may indeed be fluid due to the contingency and movement of how researchers' identities unfold and the degree to which they disclose information about themselves (Razon and Ross, 2012).

This makes it untenable to operate exclusively under the binary category of insider-versus- outsider. James Banks (1998) asserts that the biographical jour-

neys of researchers significantly influence their research inquiries, their values and the knowledge they produce. Banks (1998) has further analysed the insider-outsider inquiry in his work on African-American communities in the United States. He pointed out two dimensions, the first of which reflects the origins of the researcher in relation to the community studied (indigenous or external), and the second the perspective taken during the research itself (insider-outsider). Acker uses the two dimensions as a typology involving four categories: indigenous-insider; external-insider; indigenous-outsider; external-outsider (2000). Indeed, comprehending a researcher's positionalities is vital before, during and after fieldwork. It also requires a grasp of the notion of identity as earmarked by insider-outsider.

Our study draws on the insiderness of knowledge production in our fieldwork across Asia. The notion of native anthropologist or native sociologist is not new (see Ergun and Erdemir, 2010; Motzafi-Haller, 1997; Davies, 1999; Kanuha, 2000). These scholars are usually trained in developed countries and are typically members of professional associations, such as the American Anthropological Association or the International Sociological Association. Sociologists trained in Germany, for instance, are normally taught to be multilingual: he or she should speak a basic level of German, although writing in English. 'Nativeness' in this context denotes an insider; a category used in framing a researcher's identity. The extent of a scholar's insiderness, or the degree to which scholars are able to overcome their outsiderness, is believed to have an impact in terms of access to informants, reliability of data collected and the success of field research (Ergun and Erdemir, 2010; Narayan, 1993; Nagar, 2002). The fact that an insider speaks the language of locals and lives in the community where the fieldwork is conducted enables trust to be gained (Adams, 2012). This, combined with the experience of participant observation, makes production of knowledge through rich qualitative data possible and tenable. A subjective dimension of the insider's production of knowledge through his or her fieldwork is, consequently, inevitable.

From a feminist standpoint, positioning infers

responsibilities for enabling practices, presumably in carrying out research. Following this line, it calls for contestation and struggles over politics and ethics, and what counts as rational knowledge (Haraway, 1988, 587). A feminist standpoint thus points to situated knowledge, not isolated individuals (Haraway, 1988). Feminists also contribute in terms of works on this area of positionality (Kim, 1994; Haraway, 1988). In dealing with multiple positioning, feminist ethnographers developed several strategies: they include alluding to themselves as 'hyphenated' ethnographers (See Visweswaran, 1997). In this way, a description is enabled regarding how mixed parentage, ethnic heritage or racial positioning have moulded feminists' ethnographic identification (see Narayan, 1993 and Visweswaran, 1997). According to Visweswaran (1997) in standpoint theory, there are more radical foregrounds with regard to the meaning of multiracial identity, or biracial identity. Inherent in this development of 'gender standpoint' theory is the tenet that women share a point of view despite cultural class differences (Visweswaran, 1997).

The alterity of women has been discussed by feminists: Spivak (1988) and Patai (1983) are two feminist scholars who have explored this facet in depth. The former launched her critique of imperialism as an image known to be an establisher of a good society yet signified by the embracing of woman as an object of protection from her own kind.[1] Daphne Patai calls for one to transcend contradiction that exists at the core of contemporary feminism. She specifically recommends several strategies: first is to refuse the dominant paradigm and to highlight the importance of the work done by women by refusing to make a special point of their gender. Second is the reverse of the first strategy including, amongst others, that one should begin to treat the manifold areas of research that entail men and men's activities in terms of men's gender identity; i.e. male social roles and characters. To reverse this, a redefinition of accepting the male as the human norm is required (Patai, 1983, 183-184). Both authors are experts in comparative literature; their approaches are influenced by gender studies and literature. Judith Stacey, for instance, responds to alterity (or otherness) in a different tone. She asserts

that feminism's keen sensitivity to structural inequalities in research and to irreconcilability of otherness, is applicable mainly to its critique of research by men, particularly to research by men, but about women (Stacey, 1988, 25; see also Stacey, 1993). Lived experiences, which may be mixed with racial and social identities, are notably absent in their work.

Sociology focuses on lived experiences and the issue of identity. In light of this, there are five guiding principles of feminist methodology that can be identified. Fonow and Cook pinpoint them, as follows:

> First, the necessity of continuously and reflexively attending to the significance of gender and gender asymmetry as a basic feature of all social life, including the conduct of research; second, the centrality of consciousness-raising or debunking as a specific methodological tool and as a general orientation or way of seeing; third, challenging the norm of objectivity that assumes that the subject and object of research can be separated from each other and that personal and/or grounded experiences are unscientific; fourth, concern for the ethical implications of feminist research and recognition of the exploitation of women as objects of knowledge; and finally, emphasis on the empowerment of women and transformation of patriarchal social institutions through research and research results. (2005, 2213).

Bearing in mind restrictions and social expectations from different socio-cultural contexts, what are the restrictions, as well as advantages, that may face female researchers in their fieldwork and how best should they deal with them? The paper will deal with this issue in the ensuing section. Topics of positionality and gender in Asia, employing a comparative perspective, have yet to be conclusively discussed in literatures of ethnography and qualitative research methods. Moreover, to date there have not been studies that thoroughly engage in a comparison of method across two regions in Asia; i.e. Southeast Asia and Central Asia. The following paragraphs will elaborate on these topics based on the experience of working and conducting fieldwork in two regions: Southeast Asia and Central Asia.

2) Comparisons of Southeast Asia and Central Asia

a) Insider - Outsider at Play

The process of conducting fieldwork often evokes a sense of being caught between the worlds of insider and outsider (Narayan, 1993; Lal, 1996; Nagar, 2002; Chako, 2004). While reflecting on her positionality, Shtaltovna is neither an insider nor an outsider in Central Asia. She is not an insider because she does not originate from one of the researched countries. On the other hand, Shtaltovna is neither an outsider as she stems from Ukraine, which used to belong to the Soviet Union for some 70 years (a situation similar to CA republics). This implies that Ukraine and CA countries existed as one, some years ago. These countries share a common history and strongly intertwined relations: there are many Soviet legacies that only people from those countries can comprehend and recall.

Next, speaking local languages when conducting fieldwork is definitely an asset. In the Soviet Union, Russian was the national language. Even though every country has adopted its own national language (Uzbek, Kazakh and Tajik in the given cases) since the end of the Soviet Union, a vast majority of people can still speak Russian. Shtaltovna's ability to speak Russian was a great asset in conducting research in CA (see Shtaltvona 2013). Having also carried out research there, Veldwish, Wall and Oberkircher refer to Russian as a hegemonic language and opine that it is associated with elites and thus prevents close access to the informants and obtaining reliable data (Wall, 2006). Shtaltovna's experience proves the opposite. Speaking this language allowed her to work almost all the time without a translator.[2] She could have a conversation with anyone and could discuss any matter, given the informational vacuum in Uzbekistan and generally very positive attitude towards someone from another former Soviet republic, especially Ukraine. Nearly every second farmer was in a sanatorium or in military recruitment in Ukraine during the Soviet period. This fact has opened the doors of all people; i.e. farmers, service providers, state organisations and others from all CA. Interviewees were curious to know about how life has evolved in Ukraine, and agriculture in particular, since the end of the Soviet Union (SU). In this

way, it was not merely an interview but resembled a vibrant discussion with people talking not just about the questions listed in her notebook but also about their lives. So, in this way, in contrast to foreign researchers, Shtaltovna is more of an insider than an outsider. Thus, speaking Russian adds to the point that Shtaltovna was an 'in-betweener'; that is, neither a foreigner nor local. Such a position in the given cultural and political settings turned out to be very helpful. It played a crucial role in accessing unique ethnographic data in any country she visited for research in Central Asia (Shtaltovna, 2013).

Purwaningrum's nationality and her ethnicity allowed her a 'native' position with regard to her research in Indonesia (see Purwaningrum 2014). This 'native' standpoint enabled an emic perspective. While conducting her research in Indonesia, Purwaningrum was entering the field by introducing herself as an Indonesian national with a Javanese ethnic background. She speaks Indonesian fluently, as it is her mother tongue. Hence, interactions with respondents during her time in the field were mostly in the Indonesian language and with an inherent understanding developed through her introduction and social interactions. In addition to this, she obtained viewpoints as an insider, due to her internship in the three organisations.

Her training allowed her different reference points in addition to being 'native'. To begin with, she was equipped with an academic training as a sociologist, whereby she was taught to take some time to reflect on the field and findings, either ex ante or ex post facto. In a few instances, having been trained in Germany enabled her to converse with other alumni using her conversational level of German language. This assisted her in becoming familiar with the field of manufacturing engineering and dual production system. Her academic training enabled her to adopt the kind of detachment that is a prerequisite for reflexive thinking.[3] This detachment quintessentially means she engaged not only from an emic perspective and from her identity, as frames of reference, but she was open to social interactions to be framed analytically from critical social science theories. Externally, one of the strategies she employed for detachment was

by informing respondents that she was on leave from her previous post in the Indonesian Institute of Sciences and she also introduced herself as a PhD student. Thus, being able to speak Indonesian and German languages and being a part of an alumni network enabled familiarity with other Indonesians in the field, some of whom would turn out to be respondents and/or informants. Thus, she holds a middle ground position even though she was local.

Purwaningrum was often seen as a local, or a Malaysian, in Brunei Darussalam. She then introduced herself as a Javanese. The Javanese were often viewed as a part of the Kadayan ethnic group in Brunei Darussalam.[4] Hence, respondents were familiar with her ethnicity in Brunei. Spending time in the field also allowed her to gain a view of Malay culture: she not only learned the Brunei-Malay language. This proved to be of assistance in interpreting data and, later on, calibrating data where she had to individually cross check. In this regard, she did not rely on external translation assistance for her data analysis and calibration as she understood the Malay language (Fieldnotes, 02.08.2013, Brunei Darussalam). Her experience in Brunei Darussalam indicates how speaking a local language - i.e. the Malay language in Brunei - and comprehending gestures or non-verbal expression when speaking had significantly assisted her in data collection. Also, she grasped the Malay sense of hierarchy, which emphasises respect for seniority and the elderly.[5] Malay culture and being perceived as Malay afforded her a partial insider stance with respect to her fieldwork in Brunei. However, limitations prevailed which restricted Purwaningrum in the field. Her identity as a Sunni-Muslim,[6] for instance, has hindered some of the interactions with male respondents (this area will be expanded in the next section of the paper, dealing with the issues of gender[7]).

To sum up, both researchers held a middle-ground position, being neither an insider nor outsider, while conducting fieldwork in CA and SEA. The comparative study of one's positionality demonstrates that it is not an automatic outcome of one's native identity. Rather, it can be a conscious decision of the re-

searcher. In the case of Shtaltovna, her middle-ground standing was due mainly to her nationality (and the perception of it) in Central Asian states. Being Ukrainian takes her one step closer to her interviewees and the researched field than any western researcher: furthermore, because Ukraine - as well as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan - used to share Russian as a bridging language and many other attributes of the former Soviet empire, such as culture, literature, understanding of how the system functions, and many other aspects. Having a semi-insider/semi-outsider standing offered many advantages while Shtaltovna conducted her fieldwork in CA.

During her own fieldwork in Indonesia, Purwaningrum was perceived as a semi-insider despite being native there. First and foremost, her 'in-betweener' position is something she decided would help her during her research. For that, she has used her education abroad and detachment technique to position herself as such. As to Purwaningrum's research in Brunei, a mastery of local languages, along with understanding the local context and her academic training helped her navigate, negotiate and detach herself from her insiderness as a native Malay-Javanese. Furthermore, it helped her to grasp a first-hand account of data collection and interpretation in Indonesia and Brunei. This kind of standing is referred to, in the literature, as a 'hybrid form of those two' or 'a fluid identity'; an 'in-between' position (Razon and Ross, 2012; Narayan, 1993).

b) Entering the field as a female

Being female had an impact on Purwaningrum's fieldwork, especially on the shop floor. Two of the ethnographic organisational studies in the Jababeka Industrial Cluster, Indonesia, were masculine and male-dominated, due to their manufacturing orientations. The type of work that was carried out in these two organisations required stamina enough for 10 hours per day. Consequently, interactions were gendered and tended to be more male-based. When she was conducting fieldwork in ATMI Polytechnic,[8] as one of the organisations she entered, there were instances where meetings in the canteen would be

attended only by male engineers and instructors working at the polytechnic. If she came closer to these informal meetings during lunch-breaks, the employees would be quiet and respond minimally. In context, this was to let her know that she should distance herself from joining conversations. Gender also plays a role in exclusion, especially in Javanese society. Most employees of the polytechnic are of Javanese ethnicity. As a Javanese, Perwaningrum was cognisant of the fact that there was an imposition of patriarchy in the field. In this sense, referring to Fonow and Cook's remark (2015); it is imperative in understanding lived experiences to continuously be aware of gender asymmetry in the shape of patriarchy. Purwaningrum realised her gender, as a female, would preclude her from a few interactions in informal meetings during her internship in a Japanese supplier company and in a polytechnic in Cikarang, Indonesia. For instance, she was constantly being called '*Mbak*' (Miss) as opposed to '*Ibu*' (Ma'am).[9] She observed the interactions in the field by means of participating in what others did, when they were working. This lessened the predominantly male shop floor. Overall, her gender did limit her in terms of interactions in Indonesia.

In Brunei Darussalam, segregation based on gender is much more prevalent, particularly in formal meetings. Interactions with male Sunni counterparts were made with minimum eye contact. To deal with the situation, Purwaningrum was assisted by her research assistant in order to deal with the limitations whereby follow-up questions could be asked. During these interactions, for the purpose of research, there were instances where men met her with silence due to her gender as a female. Due to her identity, also, as a female Sunni Muslim, she was unable to engage in direct eye-to-eye contact or to ask what kind of knowledge was shared during or after Friday prayer. During her everyday work in Brunei, she was constantly reminded that intermixing between different genders is not allowed. She was conscious, as a Muslim and as a heterosexual, of the norm that intermixing is meant to protect a woman. Nonetheless, this was not helpful for her fieldwork as she had to contact males. Similarly, in Indonesia, she was conscious of

limitations. Positioning in terms of gender means that she is aware of the limits.

Debunking such structure is not tenable. Cook and Fonow (2005) suggest that there is a central role in feminist methodology to use consciousness-raising or debunking as a particular methodological tool. This would not be viable in Brunei and Purwaningrum would be alienated from the field. What was possible was to be conscious of her position as a female and to continuously negotiate for space whereby she could approach and interview her respondents. In Brunei Darussalam, this manifested through constant follow-up questions and having a research assistant who happened to be a female. Such strategy was tremendously helpful in altering the interview session from a female-to-male event to one comprising two females and a male.[10] This helped thaw possible tensions; thus, she was able to elicit answers, despite her limitations. She learned to grasp the Malay sense of hierarchy that, among others, reinforces segregation based on gender. To sum up, having a research assistant, particularly a female, was helpful on site as Purwaningrum had to face interviews with males in Brunei. Positioning in two fields requires consciousness of the limitations both societies pose to female scholars and at the same time continuously negotiate for space wherein critical social science methods can be used in social science research.

CA shares an Islamic religion with SEA; however, it is exercised to a different extent in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. At the same time, if one has to describe this part of the world in one sentence, it would be 'This is a man's world'. Local women very often cannot look directly at a man (who is already known) or greet him in the street, or approach a man and ask what time it is. For a man and a woman, who are not part of the same family, having lunch/dinner together is unacceptable. A woman can easily gain a bad reputation in such a society (Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, especially). Shtaltovna's research on agriculture very often brought her into contact with men: 90% of people with whom she worked were male. But here, her ethnicity and 'middle-ground position' had freed her from those rules, as they would apply solely

to local and native women. These customs stem from the times when many Slavic people – Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Moldovians (to some extent) – came to work in Central Asia in the Soviet period. Given the Christian background and traditions, particularly in terms of clothing and women's improved standing in society, a different attitude was afforded to her, in contrast to the local women. Thus, for Shtaltovna, as a female, it was acceptable to attend an interview with a man or a group of men. This is another advantage of holding a middle ground position while conducting research.

Having an assistant during some stages of the fieldwork in Uzbekistan had assisted Shtaltovna in accessing respondents and available data, just in Uzbek. As it turned out, the gender of the research assistant makes a difference. Shtaltovna experienced working with both male and female assistants. When she employed a male, the experience was similar to working with a male local expert. Very often, during interviews, the male interviewees would use her male companion to enquire about Shtaltovna, whether or not she was interested in a date, etc. Her male assistant, or local expert, would reply with an answer upon which they had earlier agreed: that she was an engaged woman and that they worked for UNESCO (in Uzbekistan, they were affiliated with UNESCO) and that they were constantly watched, thus it was better not to touch her. This was very helpful. Between the lines, it could have become clear that being a young female in Central Asia would open a lot of doors but it also brought a lot of annoyance from the men. Thus, the role of the assistant-translator was crucial as a safeguard and acting as Shtaltovna's ears in locations where she was either not present or could not understand, given that locals would speak in the local language amongst themselves. Thus, the translator-assistant played a much more important role than that of an interpreter, per se.

During her second field visit to Uzbekistan, Shtaltovna employed a female assistant. Regarding the security/annoyance issue, Shtaltovna had to take care of her female assistant, in contrast to the male assistant. That also worked out well but it was more stressful than employing a male assistant. There were also sev-

eral advantages in having a female aide: she was more trusted by the informants than a male. For some reason, when a male assistant accompanied Shtaltovna in Uzbekistan, people would often think that he was a spy and would not trust him. There were no such thoughts when Shtaltovna was accompanied by a female research assistant, even though she did act as a 'spy' for Shtaltovna. When Shtaltovna underwent an internship in the organisation, a female assistant would often go to chat or just sit in the office of some employees. In this manner, she could conduct observations and sometimes ask research-related questions in an informal way when Shtaltovna was working with other people. From Shtaltovna's experience and observations in three countries, people would feel less fear towards a female and would rarely imagine that a woman could cause harm.

Furthermore, the great local hospitality of Central Asian states played its significant role in the Shtaltovna's fieldwork. Some researchers who conducted studies in Uzbekistan regard it as disturbing (Veldwisch, 2008, 50; Oberkircher, 2011, 8). According to Shtaltovna's experience, it was helpful. She was seldom rejected in any of her requests for an interview. Moreover, she was always invited for a tea or for a meal. Over food, people open up about themselves, which is what the research requires. People are careful in the beginning but, during the course of a meal, they relax and divulge interesting information. Despite the fact that interviews usually took place during the day, alcohol was served during the meals. Interviewees, especially the men, encouraged Shtaltovna to drink. Depending on the situation, Shtaltovna would state either that she does not drink or would sip very small amounts to demonstrate respect. Drinking alcohol when the outside temperature is averagely +40 C can quickly lead to dizziness. The positive side of it is that people become more talkative; hence, they would provide more information about their business and very often details about the politics of agriculture when they would not engage so willingly, otherwise. However, there is a downside. Some people would change the topic of the conversation, or start making jokes, and some would fall asleep or try to become overly-familiar with the researcher. Recognising such

behaviour, Shtaltovna never went for an interview alone: she would either be accompanied by an assistant or a hired expert, or a driver, or by people with whom she had established trust over time. Thus, having decided to conduct research in such a location, one should automatically be prepared for anything that could happen; i.e. intimidation, arrest, or a range of other utterly foreseeable dangers (Kovat-Bernat, 2002; Naz, 2012, 97). Overall, Shtaltovna chose the right attitude of being open to accepting local culture.

To summarise this section, positioning in the field carried gender restrictions for both researchers. Each had to constantly negotiate and consciously stay aware of restrictions in CA and SEA. Indeed, both researchers felt that being a female had an impact on conducting fieldwork in both locations. In the case of Shtaltovna's research, her gender reaped many advantages in accessing accurate data during the fieldwork in Central Asian republics, but it was by no means ideal. Being a female brought regular annoyance in all three countries where Shtaltovna conducted her research. Shtaltovna had to improvise using different aspects of her positionality and the help of either her assistants or local experts to ensure her security and in fulfilling her tasks. To this end, CA, despite being a rather unfriendly environment for conducting social science research, turned out to be a much easier space for manoeuver for a female researcher.

In contrast, Purwaningrum's gender was limiting in terms of interactions in equally male environments in her native Indonesia. In Brunei, it was similar. In addition, religious difference added an extra layer of difficulty. She was unable to engage in direct eye-to-eye contact and there were instances where silencing occurred, due to her gender as a female and due to her identity as a female Sunni Muslim. She navigated through the field constantly with follow-up questions and having a female research assistant as one of the ways to overcome this obstacle: it was also very helpful conducting interview sessions as two females and one male, instead of a one-to-one female and male context.

3) Conclusion

The paper provides qualitative research insights in two Asian regions emerging from female researchers' autobiographical accounts and experiences during the past 8 years. In particular, the paper explored how having been trained in the same school and having employed almost the same study methods, the researchers went to the field and their research materialised in different forms. The paper asks the question: how does positionality under different circumstances facilitate or impede the qualitative research process? The paper discussed the following two tenets of positionality: insider-outsider and conducting fieldwork as a female.

Ergun and Erdemir pinpoint how 'static conceptualisation of insiderness and outsiderness does not fully explain the complexity and ambivalence of the researcher's transformative experiences in the field' (2010, 17). As discussed in the paper, both researchers took a middle ground position that worked very well, while conducting fieldwork in CA and SEA. While facing many different situations in the field, each researcher has always found a way to collect accurate data and to stay safe. To that end, they have employed all kinds of techniques; divulging their ethnicity, speaking different languages and employing female or/and male research assistants. Thus, depending on the situation, a researcher could consciously decide which stance to adopt – more of an insider-outsider or in-betweener in reflecting her fieldwork progression. There should be a consideration of why she is an outsider-insider or in-betweener. A careful reflection and choice in terms of positioning has translated into a collection of a unique ethnographic data. As the subjective dimension of insider or outsider has an implication in terms of how knowledge is being produced, the closer it is to an insider's perspective the closer it is to a reality. Thus, positionality is something a female researcher can utilise for the sake of the research outcome and for personal safety.

However, the situation becomes less flexible (in terms of positionality) for the female researcher when it comes to the question of the religion of the country where research is taking place, and the researcher's

religion. In Shtaltovna's case, being a non-practicing Orthodox Christian did not provide any obstacles for her research. Her gender won many advantages in accessing accurate data during fieldwork in Central Asian republics, but the situation was not always perfect. Being a female brought regular annoyance in all three countries where Shtaltovna conducted her research. In these countries, Shtaltovna had to improvise using her positionality and the help of her assistants, or local experts, to ensure her security and fulfilling of her tasks. Purwaningrum employed a similar technique to face this issue. Employing a female research assistant helped her in changing the interview session to two females and one male. In contrast to Shtaltovna's experience in CA, Purwaningrum's gender as a female and her identity as a female Sunni Muslim limited her in terms of interactions in a similarly male environment. She was unable to engage in direct eye-to-eye contact and there were instances where silencing occurred. Thus, a combination of the researcher's and the research country's religion is a restraining factor as part of one's positionality.

The questions to be further discussed are: how can a researcher decide which stance to take? Does the female researcher have less or more room for manoeuver than a male counterpart?

Notes

[1] Spivak asked, further: 'How should one examine the dissimulation of patriarchal strategy, which apparently grants women free choice as subject? In other words, how does one make the move from "Britain" and "Hinduism"?' (1988: p94-95).

[2] During the interviews, Russian language was always used but while conducting participant observations during the internships in organisations, people talked to each other in Uzbek or Kazakh: in those cases, translator assistance was used.

[3] Detachment is defined as exploring possibilities offered by theories or experiences drawn from other fields outside of one's own. Reflection from the field, categories and concepts used are enabled through one's training (See Bourdieu, Pierre and Wacquant; Loic, J.D., 1992).

[4] Historically, the Javanese were brought to Brunei Darussalam by colonial power, as slaves.

[5] This is similar to the idea of power in Javanese culture (see: Anderson, 1972).

[6] Purwaningrum singled out religious identity, as literatures that discuss becoming Malay identify the process as involving Malay ethnicity and embracing Islam as a religion (see King, 1993, 2008). This is particularly evident in Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam and, to some extent, the Malay part of Indonesia; i.e. Sumatera (Sumatra).

[7] In the Sunni-Muslim community, there is strong segregation between males and females: akin to the division in the Mosque, for prayer, the same logic is applied for different functions in Brunei Darussalam; i.e. for wedding events and, in some cases, for dinner and lunch events.

[8] ATMI Polytechnic was one of the organisations where she interned. It is located in Jababeka Industrial Cluster, Indonesia.

[9] '*Mbak*' means Miss. It is informal and is conventionally used to refer to younger females, whilst '*Ibu*' means Ma'am, which is more formal and is used to refer to adult, more elderly females.

[10] Purwaningrum had thought about hiring a male research assistant, but after careful consideration (as she is a Sunni), she acknowledged that it is not customary to work in research projects with a male counterpart. Thus, she preferred to work with a female researcher who was keen to learn and deemed more appropriate. She did most of the interviews herself: her research assistant was helpful in explaining context and transcribing interview transcripts.

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