Examining concepts of reflexivity and positionality in native and indigenous research methods

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Introduction

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The progression of anthropology as a discipline has long been recorded as having a mutually reinforcing relationship with colonial discourses of power (see particularly Lewis 1973, Pels 1997). This has created a multitude of power dynamics which infiltrate research methods on both micro and macro levels. Thus, reflexivity and positionality have emerged as two crucial elements of the ethnographic process in order to allow for a critical examination of these power dynamics. This essay will use Foucault's (1970) definition of these concepts, which states that we need to recognise that our knowledge is 'controlled by certain inherent rules that grants privileges and marginalises other knowledges' (Foucault in Bartilet 2014: 1). By utilising this we can begin to understand the problematization and complexity of conducting native anthropology or "anthropology at home" and how this transforms the concept of reflexivity (Jackson 1987:245). Inquiring into the formation and relevance of these concepts does, therefore, require us to fully examine their multifaceted and mutually constitutive nature. It could be argued that native anthropologies are always going to hold deeply entrenched biases which inevitably cloud the objectivity of the research. This would, however, ignore the nuances of native anthropology which can grant access to information which might otherwise be unavailable. A stronger argument, therefore, is that native and indigenous anthropologies must be conceptualised as broad – including anthropologists native to specific cultures rather than to a monolithic whole. Using this as a starting point allows for an examination of the ways in which both positionality and methodology impact on the conduct of fieldwork. This will be done by first examining the impact which personal conditions have on development and reflexivity before looking at both the micro and macro elements of the methodologies which emerge from this and finally its problematization.

Understanding the impact of personal experience on reflexivity in native anthropology

The problematization of native anthropology stems from the entrenched colonial binary of 'the observer' and 'the observed' which perpetuates the polarisation of 'native' and 'real' anthropologists (Ryang 2006). Tuhiwai Smith (1999) emphasises how growing up within an indigenous community,

there was no clear distinction between stories about research and stories about colonization, as the relationship between the two is historically mutually reinforcing. Moreover, she suggests that the detrimental power in research was not in the imposition of researchers within communities but was in the worthlessness of the research to 'the indigenous world' as it 'told [them] things already known… suggested things that would not work and made careers for people who already had jobs' (Tuhiwai Smith 1999: 3). These conditions are, therefore, perhaps where a reconsideration of native anthropology can bridge the gap and begin to repair both damage and forced relationships forged by colonial binaries.

This reconsideration of native anthropology requires us to view 'each anthropologist in terms of shifting identification amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations' (Narayan in Ryang 2006: 144). Moreover, it requires us to actively distance ourselves from colonial perceptions and appreciate the contributions which can be made through the shifting identities of semi-native or native anthropologists. Mahmood (2005) fits into the category of the former. Growing up in Pakistan in the midst of the Islamic revival movement, she made the conscious decision to conduct her fieldwork in Egypt as this would allow the intellectual and political 'dislocations' she deemed necessary in order to fully commit to understanding and representing communities through her ethnography (Mahmood 2005: 24). This placed her in a unique position as an ethnographer as she had a deep, personal understanding of the cultural complexities which underpin Islamic society without intimate knowledge of Egyptian society itself, thus, creating both the potential for a close relationship with her respondents whilst simultaneously leaving an open space for independent construction of their narratives. If we revisit Foucault's definition of reflexivity and positionality as being 'controlled by certain inherent rules that grants privileges and marginalises other knowledges' (Foucault in Bartilet 2014: 1) we can see that through utilising her status as a (semi)native anthropologist she is able to contort those privileges and knowledges to benefit both her ethnography and the portrayal of the women within her research.

Similarly, Abu-Lughod conducted her research on Bedu communities in Egypt, utilising her Palestinian-American background (2008). She asserts that being from the Middle East and Arabic-speaking allowed a relationship of trust to be forged, specifically with the women in these communities. Being able to maintain and perform both sides of her identity was 'both important in determining what [she] sought to do in [her] writing and crucial to them in their acceptance of [her]' (Abu-Lughod 2008: 39). However, she also notes that it is because they hold her to the standards of someone indigenous to Arab culture that she began to see a divergence on certain values (Ibid). This demonstrates that by engaging reflexively with her dual positionality she was better able to conduct research. Moreover, both of these ethnographies demonstrate the fluid and shifting nature of personal identities and their impact on the field.

Research Methods which emerged from (semi)native anthropology

The status of (semi)native anthropologists can be seen to open a new avenue of ethnographic investigation. Both of the ethnographies above demonstrate the ways in which having an understanding of the values of a society can help one to create trust within communities. When looking explicitly at the methods used by both Mahmood (2005) and Abu-Lughod (2008), it becomes evident that whilst Mahmood uses her indigenous knowledge to ground her interviews and understandings, they are also heavily supplemented by other information and theories which she had gathered. Abu-Lughod, on the other hand, places the focus specifically on the interviews allowing them their own space and to be free standing (2005, 2008).

> "With many a sense of the limitations of the standard anthropological monograph, however sophisticated, sensitive or well written, and wondered if there could be a style of ethnographic writing that would better capture the qualities of "life as lived" in this community"
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> (Abu-Lughod 2008: 2)

Abu-Lughod's positionality within these communities is key as it is within her role as a (semi)native ethnographer that she is able to see past the, predominantly western, cultural biases and binaries and move to create something which centres the respondents. The importance of using and appreciating knowledge, which can only be formed in the margins of society, cannot be understated as it is this which adds both dimension and depth to an otherwise singular discipline (Hooks 1984). Additionally, her fluency in Arabic allows her full control over both fluid conduction of interviews and translation which conveys exactly what was trying to be said. Her direct transposition of recorded stories and narratives in their entirety is a kind of solution to what Narayan (2003) refers to as 'hybridity'; as it enhances the experiences of respondents and places their narrative with equal importance to the analysis (Ibid). Abu-Lughod's presentation of research is, as she admits herself, 'unusual' (2008: 1). Upon her first stay in the Awlad 'Ali Bedouin community in the 1970s, she asserts that she did not feel comfortable recording and, therefore, wrote her first book from scribbled notes spanning a large number of notebooks (Ibid). Whilst these notes were satisfactory for the writing of a book focusing on social life and gender relations, Abu-Lughod draws a dichotomy between the academic and scholarly accomplishment of this book and her desire to properly convey the richness and complexities of the lived experiences of people within this community. Thus, she returned in consequent years and describes it as sharing:

She qualifies her defence of this type of ethnography with explanation that despite the narrative tone, it still involves both analysis and the need for an awareness that the stories told are still shaped by her questions and the point of view which was taken (Ibid). It is in this way that both her status as a (semi)native anthropologist and a woman come into play as we see self-contained narratives of Bedu

women being framed by the analysis and thought of another woman from a similar ethnic background. By using directly quoted interviews, one can attempt to avoid the ever-present pitfalls in feminist anthropology, the universalisation of the experiences of women accompanied by false essentialism and cultural blindness (Ibid). Moreover, this diversification of knowledge detracts completely from the idea of ethnographers belonging to a single monolithic entity. We can further see from this that there is a strong consideration of reflexivity within her work which pushes her to better consider and use her positionality.

As previously suggested, Mahmood's (2005) ethnography still seeks to utilise her position as a (semi)native anthropologist but in strikingly different ways than Abu-Lughod. In the case of Mahmood, it is far more nuanced and comes with the fluidity of her writing, which can be attributed to the lack of obvious bias or strained relationships due to her being an 'outsider'. Her use of 'person centred ethnography' coupled with her cultural knowledge creates a valuable example of representation of 'the complex interrelationships between individuals and their social material and symbolic contexts' (Levy & Hollan 2015: 297). This is exhibited through the ways in which she conducts her interviews, with the interviewee being treated as a respondent as opposed to an informant (Levy & Hollan 2015). Coupled with the space which she gives in her writing - as seen through paragraphs on uninterrupted interview transcription - this allows for a unique perspective. One particular example of this is in the chapter 'Topography of the Piety Movement' as a paragraph of transcription is followed by the phrase 'Noting the look of puzzlement on my face, Fatma asked, "Have you spent the month of Ramadan in Cairo?" I nodded yes. Fatma continued: "So you know what happens during Ramadan in Cairo..."' (Mahmood 2015: 49). This is demonstrative of the ways in which Mahmood uses nuanced body language and communication to not talk over and dominate the interview but to push forward and tease out more information. This subtlety also proves her present knowledge of her positionality and how to utilise, tailor and adapt it to conversations with different informants. The combination of her status as a (semi) native anthropologist and the interview techniques she chooses to employ therefore allows her a particular path into her ethnography which aims to grant agency to those she is interviewing.

Although I have laid out here the importance of the differences found between Mahmood (2015) and Abu-Lughod (2008) in order to emphasise the diverse and multifaceted nature of native anthropology, there is one overarching similarity: their advanced knowledge of the language of Arabic which allows them a further freedom of movement within their interviews. Mahmood (2015) dedicates a small section at the beginning of The Politics of Piety to the nature of her transcription and the ways in which she sought to stay as true to the original meaning as possible. In order to do this, she notes numerous systems which were used in translation. The most prominent example states that 'in order to make the transcription of Modern Standard Arabic

words and Egyptian Colloquial Arabic words as consistent as possible, while still conveying the flavor of Egyptian colloquial speech I have adapted the Badawi and Hinds system to that of IMJS' (Mahmood 2015: 39). Thus, we see that the fluidity which accompanies (semi)native anthropology does not stop after the research has been completed but continues through the entire process. This is not to say that the ability to speak an indigenous language is limited to (semi)native anthropologists by any means, however there is an advantage to being native to a language as this allows one to hear subtleties which may otherwise be missed.

Problematization of identity and bias in native anthropology

In order to fully understand the concepts of reflexivity and positionality we must also acknowledge the limitations which native anthropology faces. To do this, we will depart from the focus on the works of Mahmood (2005) and Abu-Lughod (2008) and use Kubic's (2016) native ethnography of Poland. Given the context in which this essay has been situated, it is paramount to acknowledge that the situation in Central and Eastern Europe, whilst unique, does not harbour the same colonial legacies (Kubic 2016). Thus, this aspect of this essay does not seek to transpose this theory onto the wider concepts of native anthropology but rather use this as a singular example and opportunity for analysis.

Kubic argues that there are two primary problems within native anthropology. Firstly, the problem of bias emerges as one has an innate drive to present their own community in a certain light, which can cloud the way in which research is carried out (Ibid). Interestingly, far from arguing against this bias, Kubic (2016) suggests that one should assume the role of defending their community against hegemonic misunderstandings and representations, however, this should not obstruct critical dialogues concerning their community. It could be argued that there are limitations to this, as the onus placed on the ethnographer cannot be monitored or checked, however it does allow for correction of historical injustices. Secondly, whilst there are many advantages to sharing cultural values with those involved in one's ethnography, there are also corresponding problems. Kubic recalls her interviewees assuming her knowledge on topics she was asking about, as she shared their language (2016). Here we see the potential for homogenisation of culture and knowledge by informants/respondents, perhaps leading to the omittance of key information. Moreover, this problem is furthered as native anthropologists are often held to higher standards than their peers. Kubic demonstrates this as she recalls a criticism of her book from a cultural activist who stated, 'I must admit that this book left me very disappointed. I believe that the formulation of Polishness in this work is extremely unfair' (2016: 91). Thus, this demonstrates the ways in which the sense of belonging and community one brings to their anthropology may similarly bring criticism and a sense of betrayal. When considering this in the context of research methods it may require more effort on the part of the ethnographer to

ensure their respondent is aware of the aim of the ethnography and the wider, non-native, audience it is intending to impact. There may be an ironic subversion here, in which native ethnography requires people to be addressed more as informants rather than respondents in order to mediate these issues.

Conclusion

The conceptualisation of native and indigenous anthropology must be broad, including anthropologists native to parts of a culture rather than a monolithic whole. This allows for further critical analysis with considering the multiple positionalities situated within the axis of identity being key to the reflective conducting of fieldwork. Being a (semi) native anthropologist allows one a unique perspective in which they can both resist colonial and racial bias and afford space to their respondents to speak for themselves. Kubic's (2016) ethnography further allows us to appreciate and contextualise this, whilst simultaneously analysing the duality of the benefits and fallacies of complete native anthropology. Thus, research methods are constantly changing and evolving much like conceptions of both anthropology and the anthropologist. In the context of this dynamism, finding the right research method therefore has never been more crucial.

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