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Researcher or Teacher?
Reflections on Negotiated Roles in the Field

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Abstract

This paper discusses the ethical and methodological issues related to taking on the role of teacher to one's informants. Drawing on the author's fieldwork in Shanghai, it argues that as long as researchers are mindful of the problems created by such dual roles, teaching in the field may provide valuable insights that would otherwise not be available.

Introduction: Can Researchers also Be Their Informants' Teachers?

Participant observation is about learning through practice. For anthropologists, this usually entails immersing oneself into the lives of ones informants over a longer period of time. However, exactly how one does so varies. Whether one actively partakes in the daily activities of informants or just "hangs out" with them, the goal is to get access to deep qualitative data about their lives. However, as Elin Sæther (2006) have recognized, finding one's own place in the field and gaining access is rarely a straightforward process, depending not least on *how* and in *what contexts* the informants come to know the researcher. When the researcher is also their teacher, as in my case, it is important to reflect on the benefits and downsides of negotiating these two roles.
I did fieldwork in Shanghai for 13 months between 2010-2011, studying the education of internal migrant youths. Since the economic reforms started in the late 1970's, China has undergone immense socioeconomic changes, with millions of people being lifted out of poverty. At the same time, the rural-urban divide has increased, leading to an unprecedented level of internal migration to cities and provinces like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong, where workers are needed in industries. Although they have significantly contributed to the economic boom of the country, the continued governmental maintenance of the household registration system (*Hukou*) limits rural migrants and their children's entitlement to local public welfare, including education. My research is about how migrant youths reconcile their aspirations with their limited opportunities, and how they negotiate and attempt to circumvent the system.

Upon arriving in Shanghai, my first challenge was deciding where to do fieldwork. Most migrant communities lie in the vast city's suburbs, where few foreigners tend to venture. My appearance clearly delineated me as an outsider in these areas. I could not just show up somewhere and start asking questions, so I decided to ask my local Chinese contacts for help. One was connected to a NGO catering to migrant children by providing extracurricular opportunities they otherwise would not have. About 150 children between the ages of 5-20 attend their two centres in the north and south of the city. The director explained that the aim of the NGO is to empower the children by increasing their social awareness, not least regarding their educational and vocational choices. They thus attempt to change the pattern of social class reproduction of children who would otherwise have few options apart from manual labour. I was granted permission to do my research there, but on the condition that I would take on the job as a voluntary teacher of spoken English.

Samantha Punch (2002), Nigel Thomas and Claire O´Kane (1998) have noted how researchers doing child-oriented research need to be particularly mindful of power relations, especially in interviews. In addition, questions around informed consent are important, as children might not understand the ramifications of participation. For both of these reasons, it is argued that a guardian should be present in interviews, but also that

the researcher needs to attend to the subject position of this guardian. Doing interviews in front of teachers is specifically mentioned as an ethical and methodological grey area, as young informants might feel coerced to answer questions or believe there are right or wrong answers.

Would it then constitute a role conflict if the researcher was also the teacher? Faced with the decision between getting formal access through becoming a teacher, or not having access at all, I decided to be pragmatic and took on both roles. My teaching consisted of three weekly lessons where I taught 15 youths ranging in age from 14-19 in a small room at the NGO, in addition to shorter one-on-one tutorials. Throughout my fieldwork, this role provided many challenges as well as opportunities that I continuously needed to negotiate. I tried consulting with literature but found little guidance on this particular issue. Hence, in this commentary, I would like to share some of the reflections I have made.

Teaching as an Incorporating Role

Researchers studying controversial issues in China may face restrictions from local authorities, potentially also causing problems for informants. In my case, they were a doubly vulnerable group as they were both children and migrants, but my interactions with them were legitimated through my role as a teacher at the NGO. While gaining access to public schools would usually be difficult due to my subject position as a foreign researcher, when my informants presented me as their teacher I was allowed entry and could talk with their teachers and classmates. This is not to say that I was not open about my research. I did my best to remain transparent about my role as a researcher and my research objectives throughout the fieldwork, as long as it did not compromise the wellbeing of my informants.

Although my role as a teacher provided me with formal access to different educational institutions, during the first four months of the fieldwork I was frustrated with how little I had seen and knew of my informants' lives outside of the NGO. I wondered whether their awareness of my dual role as a teacher and researcher impeded my ability to develop friendships with them. This notion was reinforced by how my informants usually introduced me to their parents, teachers and friends as their English teacher. Obviously I was, but it was striking to me that this endured throughout my fieldwork, even after we knew each other quite well. In retrospect however, I believe this was rather due to a combination of other factors. Importantly, my informants spent most of their time either at school or the NGO, and often only went home to eat and sleep as their parents worked long days. When I was introduced as their teacher to people external to the NGO, I believe this served as a simple explanation as to why they were hanging out with a foreigner nearly twice their age. Additionally, as having a foreign English tutor connotes a certain degree of status in China, it made me less threatening to my informants' acquaintances, and in formal settings partly because they knew this was how I would get access in a safe way. What remains clear to me is that my informants did not only reflect on my identity, but also positioned me differently in different contexts.

Power Relations and Access

What defines the power relations between teachers and students? In a formal school setting, it is arguably the advanced knowledge of the teacher in addition to his or her ability to mark and sanction students (Colnerud 2006: 367). Since I was a voluntary teacher in an informal educational setting, this was *not* the case for me. As they participated freely, my informants did not need to fear the wrath of their teacher if they didn't show up or behave in class. On the contrary, I felt I needed to watch my own behaviour as my students, being also my informants, had knowledge and experiences that I was seeking to understand. Since my research focused on the experiences, reflections and ways in which my informants' aspirations were influenced by government educational policies, my project depended on maintaining good rapport with them so they would share these personal aspects of their lives with me. I did not want my role as a teacher to negatively affect my research as they had the power to shut me out, so I decided I would do my best to defuse as much as possible the power relations through my teaching. I did as best I could by emphasising praise rather than criticism, and through joking and acting in the classes to maintain the rapport with my informants. My students gave me positive feedback on my teaching methods, which was further reflected in our rapport outside the classroom. In addition to gaining first-hand impressions of my informants' approaches to learning, they also told me how I differed from their regular teachers in terms of pedagogy. With regards to their educational choices for instance, I learned how in addition to structural limitations the massive amount of schoolwork and rote learning also informed

decisions to rather follow vocational than higher education. Thus, by acting as a teacher, a position my informants already had established local preconceptions about, and then not teaching in a way that they might expect, I gained interesting insights from their reflections and comparisons. Despite risks to the informant-researcher relationship, I argue that we can learn a lot from the ways in which informants reflect on our ways of teaching and what we teach.

Some Ethical Issues in Mixing the Roles of Teacher and Researcher

Researchers enter the field with sociocultural baggage and biases, including norms, morals and values that affect how we see our informants and the field in general. As such, researchers need to be wary of the standpoint from which they are studying children, by respecting and adapting to their competencies (Morrow and Richards 1996: 100-101). As with all ethnographic research, one's presence affects the field. But when one enters a classroom to take on the role as a teacher, a space and subject position that is imbued with normative power, I would argue that this effect is amplified. As such, there are specific ethical aspects to consider. First, because what a teacher says is often perceived as explicitly normative, the researcher runs the risk of shaping the opinions of his or her informants, and, thus, the research findings. Second, as Morrow and Richards have pointed out (ibid.), most school tasks and activities are compulsory, so children may feel obliged to participate and not have the opportunity to dissent. Third, simultaneously doing research and teaching may come at the expense of informants' studies. As mentioned, my informants learned about different social issues at the NGO, and, like me, they were indeed interested in discussing them. I was teaching spoken English and I found informal discussions a more relevant learning experience than the standard textbooks offered. While we talked about a range of different subjects, sometimes my interlocutors would relate discussions on poverty, education and travel to their own lives. This provided me with valuable data and one could argue that at such times the classes also constituted focus groups. Was this a form of covert research then? Since I told them how this related to my research, I could argue that it was not. I explained my project to them many times, and they had repeatedly given their consent to be a part of it, and even supported it. Overall I experienced them as more than capable to argue against each other and me, and to correct any wrongful assumptions I made. Nonetheless, given the likelihood that I still affected my informants' behaviour and opinions, I continue to reflect on this dual role throughout writing my ethnography.

Concluding Remarks

Anthropologists need to continuously reflect on how the roles they take on in the field affects their informant relationships. For me, becoming a teacher was not planned, but I would argue it opened up many doors that would otherwise have been closed. By becoming a teacher, I took on an already established role and since I was studying migrant youths' education, I became part of the educational experience of my informants. In that sense, I became part of the issue I was studying. This profoundly changed the ways in which I understood my informants and migrant education in Shanghai. It also shaped how my informants related to me. Sensitivity to these reactions enabled me to gain insights into the local cultural premises of education. I would argue that this could extend to a multitude of other issues of anthropological interest. I sometimes wonder whether this role created a distance between my informants and myself, but in general terms I found them to be acutely aware of our subject positions, them - as informant-students and me - as a foreign teacher-researcher. Through realizing that I was part of a continuous course of interactions it seemed clear to me that they negotiated their roles as informants, students and friends, as I did with my own multiple roles. During the fieldwork, I found it helped discussing this with my informants and not pretend that it was not an issue. On this concluding note, I would also argue that teaching can be a great way to give something back to the community one studies.

References

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