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Meeting the San youth – Ethical issues and the position of the researchers

Introduction

This paper focuses on the Participatory Development with the Youth Project, which is both an international and an inter-sectoral research study focusing on the San young people living in indigenous communities in South Africa and Namibia. Professor Satu Miettinen, from the University of Lapland, is coordinating the project, which is funded by Horizon 2020. The project aims to use participatory and explorative service design tools to endorse human development and assist in reducing youth unemployment by increasing the involvement and inclusion of young people in service development in South Africa and Namibia. The project focuses on San youth and young adults (13–24 years of age), especially those living in poor or otherwise marginal conditions and who are either marginalised or face the risk of becoming marginalised.

Our efforts are directed towards considering both the ethical questions and the positions of the researchers when studying the youth in the cultural context of the San people. In the paper, we explore what types of ethical questions we should ask when researching ‘otherness’ and indigenous cultures. What kind of challenges arise when the researchers tried to hear the voices of the San youth? These discussions were laden with the complex dynamics of power and ethics and they additionally raised the question of voice.

The paper is based on a one-month study period in Cape Town and Khwattu, the cultural centre for the San people in South Africa. The study period, which is part of a four-year research project, led us to consider the ethical questions when meeting people with different cultures and backgrounds.

Ethical principles in the work of the researchers

We met the San people in November 2016 in Khwattu, at the Cultural Centre for San people, which organises training and education for the San youth. We held a workshop, in Khwattu, related to curriculum planning and mapping out the learning outcomes of Khwattu's courses and pedagogy. It was a three-day workshop and we researchers took up part of two days. Other researchers and teachers did interviews and participated in the workshop and four San people attended as well. The leader of Khwattu also took part in the workshop. Our tasks were to photograph, video record and observe the workshop. To that end, we photographed, video recorded and observed the informants (San people), facilitators, communication situations, spaces and contents produced during the workshop. The position of the observers provided us the opportunity to witness the interactions between the people, the performances, the social space of the workshop and the participants' voices.

The general principles and ethics within a study process include scientific integrity, carefulness and a quality of study processes, academic freedom, democratic values and public accountability (Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Clarkeburn & Mustajoki, 2007). Researchers should consider threats and respect human dignity, privacy and autonomy throughout the study process and beyond. This consideration requires both proscriptions and prescriptions that are shared by the researchers as well as the participants (Preissle & Han, 2012).

When designing a study, the ethical perspectives should take what is being done in the research into consideration. Ethical questions are not merely recognition of the necessity for anonymity or permission; they should be responsible for the entire study process. During a study process, the researcher should ask her/himself: Is this act ethical, moral and respectful for the participants? (Atkins & Wallace, 2012) In addition, the researcher should be honest and careful, which means a deep and thoughtful investigation of the subject and the concepts of the study. She/he has to both produce reliable information and to have respect for human dignity (Pietarinen, 1999). Feminist researchers indubitably know that the study itself is value loaded (Preissle & Han, 2012).

Since we were not familiar with the Sun culture before we took part in this project, we orientated ourselves to it by reading information from the internet and books. The leader of Khwattu (RII) and other employees of Khwattu spoke with us and provided additional information about the Sun culture. Even though we had information and attempted to gain an understanding of the culture, as researchers, we were still in a strange land when we met the Sun people. In multicultural societies, the variations in the values are complicated and need to

be dissected and discussed during a research project (Preissle & Han, 2012). We need to understand that different human groups can have dissimilar value standards in comparison to our own. This raises the question of power: who can express his/her own values, whose voice is heard and how does power emerge in the study processes?

Hierarchies and power relationships are always present when a researcher and participants are meeting each other. Even though an encounter may be intimate, the researcher still has a professional role that can be formal and distinct. Nonetheless, roles such as those of researchers and participants can be shifted during meetings. Therefore, the most important thing for a researcher to understand is the nature of power, which is never stable in a relationship.

Since cultural expectations direct the roles of the study processes (Mäkiranta & Ylitapio-Mäntylä, 2011), a reflective touch is needed, especially when studying people from a different culture. This is because all societies have a number of different practices and no single study, story or image can depict reality as it is. In our workshop, we also noticed that with the different cultural and academic backgrounds, the general principles involved in the study process needed to be clarified to all of the participants. We, for instance, needed to carefully discuss the privacy and data protection with the informants before the data collection and workshops were held.

In producing research knowledge, there are always questions regarding how the data is gathered and what kind of position the researcher is taking (Hurtig, 2013). Thus, the knowledge is combined with time, place and certain methodologies.

For us, a reflective touch can be identified from feminist methodologies that avoid exploiting or harming human subjects and understand a power differential between the researchers and the participants. The strategy of feminist methodologies is to protect the participants and try to create a safe space both to participate and to generate opportunities for empowerment (Burgess-Proctor, 2015). Although the main idea in feminist study is to see the participants as subjects, a subject is always relative to the other and social reality is polar and conflicting. When considering power, the question is how the researcher defines knowledge. Feminist researchers suggest alternative ways to produce and assess knowledge that is connected with who has power to use one's voice (Preissle & Han, 2012).

Reflexivity is a self-critical tool that helps researchers to explore how the shape of a theoretical and biographical background can be studied. As a communal process, it needs to consider the structural, political and cultural backgrounds of both the researchers and the participants. Reflexivity increases engagement and participation in the study process and fosters both a less hierarchical and a more ethical study (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012).

When studying otherness and young people's voices, researchers should use specific methodological tools, for example, the scientific gaze back on the researcher's action (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012) provides space to listen and see things through others. Feminist methodologies are particularly interested in revealing hidden experiences and hearing the voices of the marginalised. Voices are expressions of identities and are used in both a political sense and in reflecting power. Since they affect the lives of the participants and their concepts of themselves, all of the voices and actions in research situations are political. Indeed, when participants have space to share their stories, those stories might help other people in similar situations (Burgess-Proctor, 2015).

Feminist ethics emphasises the values of caring relationships and being cared for. These principles are based on the moral theory developed by Carol Gilligan (1982) and Nel Noddings (2003). Ethic of care means the capacity for empathy and openness to the storytelling of another as well as to affective and cognitive abilities. Although the ethic of care provides a good model for engagement with participants, it does not eliminate ethical dilemmas because there are always situation-specific interactions (Preissle & Han, 2012).

The study process

Data

Our study is a part of a large research project. The entirety of the data consists of the photographs, the ethnographical notes and the interviews we collected in a workshop held in 2016 in Khwattu. The workshop focused on discussions of education, study curriculum, life skills and work exposure. The photographs taken during the workshop in Khwattu are used as the data in this paper.

Analysis

We examine our data in both a reflective and a situated manner, which means that we interpret photographs by looking at the positions of the researchers and the participants. Feminist researchers pay attention to reflexivity, which indicates understanding and illustrating questions regarding how the researchers' social background, assumptions and feelings influence the research processes (Hesse-Biber, 2012). As feminist researchers, we focus our positionality and reflect our approaches, feelings and expectations when analysing the data. During the analyses, we shift between insider and outsider roles and scrutinise the power relations between the researchers and the participants. For example, when we questioned our own authority and attempted to fix ourselves into the position of the participants.

Photographs tell visual stories and our focus is to explore what types of ethical challenges are seen in the photographs and then determine how the researcher could answer those challenges. Our analytical tool is to make different types of questions for the photographs. These questions are: What kind of knowledge does the photographs produce about intimacy, scientific integrity, carefulness and the quality of the study processes? What does academic freedom mean in our study project? How do democratic values and public accountability influence the actions of the researchers, such as in interpreting the data and writing results? How can we understand the Sun culture, which is the 'other' for us? With these considerations, the rationale for our analysis is to consider the data with the 'critical friend and voice' who can help us to see profundity (Scott-Baumann, 2006).

Results

The first question in this paper is: What kinds of ethical questions should we ask when researching otherness and indigenous cultures? In analysing the photographs, we found that the researcher had been located as an authority. Since this place is familiar for both the researchers and the participants, both could have the feeling of being in a safe position and place. Nonetheless, it is not easy, the place changes when you do not know each other well.

Even if the participants feel safe and the researcher is familiar with them, the otherness is always present. This is because identities such as race, gender and class influence the study process and insider-outsider positionalities turn out to be complicated (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012). For example, 'we come from another culture and from another side of the

world than participants, so...’ Consequently, as researchers, we have both authoritative and occupational positions.

Even if you learn to know each other and you reflect on your position, the power relations are still present. The researcher should understand that she/he might make presumptions and even false assumptions by being blind and deaf to important insights and voices (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012). Thus, the researcher should remember that she/he can never fully be an insider or an outsider in the study process (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012).

Reflecting the researchers’ positions and paying attention to how they encounter the participants is a significant concern. When we distance ourselves, it helps to negotiate the positionality of the researcher and to recognise the shifting nature of the power relations (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012). Therefore, it would be valuable to consider the research subjects’ right of self-determination – we could, for instance, give the camera to the informants so they could decide what to photograph and think about what kinds of self-representation they want to produce.

One feminist strategy and ethic of care is encompassed in the idea of respect for the participants. Specifically, using a feminist ethic of care opens up possibilities for both collaborative and egalitarian relations between the researchers and the participants (Burgess-Proctor, 2015). Numerous researchers are taking part in this study. Therefore, the participants meet different people and intimate interactions are relatively difficult to build. Although this is a tremendous challenge for the researchers, it is even more so because the researchers and the participants come from different cultures.

Even if you succeed with the ethical questions and the encounters with otherness during the study process, an inevitable othering is present during the writing; who writes whom and how does the researcher write about the other (Preissle & Han, 2012). The analytical process should additionally include presenting the data in a respectful manner in research publications.

Researchers and persons who holds the camera to record and collect the data in a study process should carefully consider how to represent certain situations and people. Therefore, it would be useful to consider how the pictures will be used; specifically, it requires an understanding of how the pictures (still photographs and moving images) will be used in the

research. The picture makers, the researchers and the research subjects might all have different ideas on how and why the pictures are produced.

We also should consider how to use the images as data or as data generators. It would be fascinating to work together to develop the visual ethnography from the perspective of how the informants and the researchers collaborate and analyze the meanings attached to the visual data. It might be beneficial to carefully plan the methodological strategies, explain them to the informants and view the data together with the participants/informants after the data has been recorded. The aim could be to analyze the data in the context of both the informants and the researchers and their shared meanings and knowledge. Knowledge produced together in the workshop can be defined as a possibility for talking about and sharing experiences, participating in collective creation and including young people in shaping the meanings attached to society. In the best possible way, the workshops could develop and involve consciousness-raising activities and raise the epistemological questions: Who can be a knower and whose voices are heard?

Discussion

Even though the ethical perspectives were designed before and during the study project, it still concerns us as researchers. It is not enough that the ethical principles are written down; they need to be discussed as to what they mean in practice and how we can succeed in following ethical guidelines. A research team should discuss ethical issues and questions regularly as well as when something emerges from the meetings with the participants. A reflective manner should encompass the study project.

In this project, the intimate meeting and dialog discussions did not actually occur and this was frustrating for us as feminist researchers. One reason for this was the lack of time to meet with the Sun people. The workshop time was too short to develop a warm relationship. Indeed, if it is possible to build an intimate engagement with participants, it can evoke a new understanding of life situations for the researchers and the participants alike (Eide & Kahn, 2008) and, of course, for the readers who read a research report.

Although we try to build a trustworthy and safe space for conversation, we have to ask whether we hear all of the voices; using terms like safe and trust forces us to question the meaning of these terms in our research processes. The voices heard in the workshop were pervasive, multiple and diverse.

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Photographs:











