Diverse teams researching diversity: negotiating identity, place and embodiment in qualitative research

Standard Article

Diverse teams researching diversity: Negotiating identity, place and embodiment in qualitative research

Qualitative Research
1–17

DOI: 10.1177/14687941211006004
journals.sagepub.com/home/qrj


Brenda Mathijssen
University of Groningen, Netherlands

Danny McNally
Teesside University, UK

Sufyan Dogra
Bradford Institute for Health Research, UK

Avril Maddrell
University of Reading, UK

Yasminah Beebeejaun
University College London, UK

Katie McClymont
University of the West of England, UK

Abstract

Fieldwork encounters are not only contingent to biographical subjectivities, but are mediated by a confluence of identity, place and embodiment. This paper offers reflexive accounts of researchers with various socio-cultural and disciplinary backgrounds, who collaborated as a team to examine the varied funerary experiences and needs of established minorities and recent migrants in England and Wales. Focusing on the researchers' varied personal experiences with death and bereavement and on their performances of minority and majority ethnic and migrant identities, the paper highlights the mediated and embodied nature of fieldwork. It argues that reflection on the

Corresponding author:
Brenda Mathijssen, University of Groningen, Oude Boteringestraat 38, Groningen, 9712 GK, Netherlands.
Email: brenda.mathijssen@rug.nl

various aspects of intersectional researcher identity is necessary for a rigorous fieldwork practice that takes transparency and politics into account. This facilitates a deeper understanding of the positionality of both researchers and interlocutors, and the situated co-production of knowledge. In doing so, the paper illustrates that conducting research with a diverse team of researchers contributes to better understanding the complexity and multifacetedness of social phenomena.

Keywords
Team research, embodiment, identity, diversity, minority ethnic, migration, death studies

Introduction

This paper draws on experiences of undertaking participant-centred research on the differing funerary needs and experiences of established minorities and recent migrants in England and Wales, focusing specifically on fieldwork encounters. We frame this by positioning informal meetings, observations, interviews and focus groups as sites of encounter and emotional labour in which researcher and research participant's relations were negotiated, including shifting power relations. Drawing on the reflexive and dialogic fieldwork accounts of the six collaborating researchers, the paper illustrates the value of conducting qualitative research as a diverse team. All researchers embodied varied intersectional identities and biographies, which shaped their personal fieldwork encounters and inflected the stages of the research cycle: the planning, the gathering and analysis of data, the level of participation of interlocutors, and the research outcomes. Specifically, the diversity within the team offered multiple lenses to unpack the complexity and multifacetedness of the research and revealed the importance of continuous critical reflection on how the researchers and participants' identity, place and embodiment shape the planning, practice and outcomes of qualitative research. We illustrate this by discussing two specific aspects of the diversity within the team: the researchers' varied personal experiences with death and bereavement, and their minority and majority ethnic and recent migrant statuses. By doing so, we raise important issues for an ethical fieldwork practice in studies of sensitive subjects, and more widely across all qualitative research encounters.

The research project explored the needs and desires of a range of minority ethnic and migrant groups regarding death, and how these issues were perceived by policymakers, service providers, community stakeholders and service users, including religious leaders and activists. As a result, our work centred on the sensitive topics of death, bereavement and religion, overlaid and interwoven with questions around ethnicity, inequality, belonging, and minority and migrant experiences and rights. Moreover, as the project progressed, we found ourselves increasingly entangled in a complex network of local power relations in the case study towns. While using the same research methods across multiple case studies, as members of the research team, we ourselves occupied diverse cross-cutting positionalities in relation to the research themes, including multiple religious, secular and ethnic identities, some multilingual, as well as some with direct experience of migration, close family bereavement, and work with funerary service providers. Reflecting on the processes and practices of fieldwork in the light of these positionalities within the team, we realised there were both meaningful similarities and differences in how each of us experienced and negotiated these power relations and sensitive topics.

In the following discussion, we explore the crucial role of embodiment, place and identity in our fieldwork experiences, in order to offer insight into the potential advantages, challenges and tensions of conducting qualitative research as a diverse team. The paper first provides an overview of the research project in order to contextualise the fieldwork, and a short review of literature into qualitative research, focusing specifically on identity, place and embodiment. Subsequently, we focus on the reflexive and dialogic accounts of the researchers themselves on two topics. First, we shed light on the researchers' varied personal experiences with death and bereavement and the ways in which this impacted our understandings of the research project and our relations with interlocutors. Second, we offer reflections on how the researchers' different minority and majority ethnic and recent migrant statuses impacted the fieldwork. The paper concludes that qualitative research benefits from explicit and ongoing reflection on researcher and participant identity, place and embodiment from the perspective of diverse researchers.

Research background

The Deathscapes and Diversity research project investigated the ways in which established minorities and recent migrants experience, understand and define their funerary needs with particular reference to cemetery and crematoria services in four towns in England and Wales (Maddrell et al., 2018). Whereas research has focused on many of the practical and political concerns of living together in difference within the UK, such as education, housing, employment and leisure (Keith, 2005; Phillimore, 2017; Phillips, 2006; Wilson 2014), the burial, cremation and remembrance needs of minorities and migrants have been under researched. Yet, these needs are of deep significance to those concerned. Being able to respond to the death of a significant other in an appropriate way, including fulfilling their funerary rites according to personal, social, cultural and religious needs, has a positive impact on the well-being of the living (van der Pijl, 2017). Furthermore, depending on one's specific religious and cultural background, it can be understood to impact the well-being and fate of the deceased (Venbrux, 2007; Venhorst, 2013). Also, decisions about the place of burial or ash dispersal can be perceived as expressions of ultimate belonging, recognition and inclusion (Hunter, 2016; Olwig, 2009; Portes et al., 1999). At the same time, as local authorities are the main cemetery and crematoria providers in England and Wales, funerary services can be read as a form of governmentality, an expression of governmental strategies towards multicultural society, diversity, social cohesion and immigration more generally (Maddrell et al., 2021).

To study this, extensive fieldwork was conducted in four large towns in England and Wales (2017–2018): Huddersfield, Newport, Northampton and Swindon. Each town has a broadly similar population (approximately 100,000–150,000), including ethnically and religiously diverse groups with varying countries of origin or heritage (Census, 2011). These include long-standing established ethnic minority communities, as well as clusters of recent migrants from within the European Union (EU) and non-EU Third Country Nationals (TCNs). By focusing on towns, we were able to study all local provisions and the ways in which they are interconnected. Moreover, as minority services tend to be most developed in large cities, research tends to overlook diversity in towns.

After mapping existing cemetery and crematorium provision in each case study town, we conducted 21 interviews with stakeholders and funerary professionals, 16 biographical interviews with users with a minority or migrant background and 15 focus groups with 122 participants with minority/migrant backgrounds/heritage. Interviews took place at cemeteries, crematoria, homes, cafes, community centres, gurdwaras, mandirs, churches, mosques and varying places of work. We contacted stakeholders and funeral service providers directly, and used snowball sampling to contact other participants. We also joined community groups, community events and local activities, such as craft groups, lunch meetings and Iftar meals during the Ramadan fast.

Reflexive labour and the 'betweenness' of fieldwork encounters

Our article is positioned within the rich array of work that has addressed the need for thoughtful reflexive practice in qualitative research (Denzing and Lincoln, 2017). Such work has brought to attention the need to critically reflect on the dialogic engagement between researcher and researched, and the ways in which this impacts the research 'data'. As 'socially located persons [we] inevitably bring our biographies and our subjectivities to every stage of the research process' (Cameron et al., 1992: 5), which, in turn, 'influences the questions we ask and the ways in which we try to find answers' (1992: 5). This is important given the turn towards quantifying qualitative research to reduce 'bias', for instance through tools like Q-methodology (Mills, 2018). Here we take the position that research is co-produced between researchers and participants and that critical reflection on that process facilitates maximum transparency regarding the qualities and quality of qualitative research – that is, a form of 'strong objectivity' (Harding, 1995). Rather than an acknowledgement that researcher personalities may result in differing outcomes from the application of the same research method, or even the same interview schedule (Barbour, 2019), this research is informed by an understanding and appreciation of how 'we unavoidably co-create or co-construct the events that take place' (King et al., 2018: 183). Sharing these analyses reflects the importance of directing the same labour of reflexivity to the benefit of others, as we do to the benefit of self (Madison, 2012). Focusing on the relational nature of fieldwork and the effects of difference can enhance a critical fieldwork practice (Haraway, 1992; Spry, 2017); as England (1994) articulates regarding insights into the 'betweenness' of the researcher and researched:

> There exists a continuum between the researcher and the researched. We do not conduct fieldwork on the unmediated world of the researched, but the world *between* ourselves and the researched. At the same time this 'betweenness' is shaped by the researcher's biography, which filters the 'data' and our perceptions and interpretations of the fieldwork experience. (86)

This draws careful attention to the *necessarily mediated* space of the research process, whereby the research gathered is always contingent to the subjectivity of the researcher and interlocutor. We contend that this space of betweenness, and the 'partiality' it creates (England, 1994: 86), is not just shaped by biographical subjectivity, but is instead a space

mediated by a contingent and shifting confluence of identity, place and embodiment. In doing so, we aim to provide a deeper understanding of how specific encounters emerge during fieldwork on sensitive issues which, we suggest, facilitates a deeper understanding of the co-production of knowledge and role that identities of researchers and interlocutors play in those encounters.

The following sections outline work that has focused on the role of identity, place and embodiment in qualitative research. These are then brought together as a framework to reflect on our fieldwork encounters, and to support a more nuanced understanding of the varied privileges and power relations present during sensitive qualitative research.

Constructing and performing identity

One of the key ways we, as researchers, felt we negotiated interview encounters throughout the project was through a performance of specific (selected) aspects of our identity. Akin to Thomson and Gunter's (2011, after Bauman, 2004) argument that researcher identity should be understood as fluid during the research process, rather than a fixed insider/outsider binary, we noted that to varying degrees we were able – or required – to make visible and present certain elements of our respective identities in response to particular interview or other fieldwork encounters (e.g. as migrant, man, woman, parent, etc.), as well as ways in which our participants *positioned us* (e.g. as researchers, privileged, 'like them'). This notion of 'identity work' in qualitative research is highlighted by Coffey (1999: 1) who illustrates that fieldwork research implicates selves, social relationships and personal identities. However, as Lavis (2010) stresses, these identities can be multiple and therefore tensions can emerge when multiple researcher identities are constructed and performed. This can challenge the integrity of the researcher, who must negotiate the sense of disingenuity that can result from adopting multiple research identities across different settings and participants (Lavis, 2010: 318). Therefore, it is crucial to reflect on the role of identity in research, both in terms of what we research and how we research it. Giampapa suggests that reflection can help understand the ways in which researchers and 'participants exercised power, pushed forward their agendas, and reconstructed, debated, and assigned identities' (2011: 133). This offers insight in not only how the research encounter takes shape in the process of research but also how it is performed at particular sites of research (MacDonald, 2019: 5).

Placing interviews

To examine the emotional-affective geographies of death, diverse society and planning, we employed a dynamic fieldwork practice. Working individually and as sub-teams, we gathered research materials primarily through focus groups and semi-structured interviews that occurred at diverse places. The agency of these places proved an important factor in how the researcher–participant interaction was negotiated.

Inspired by feminist scholarship, many geographers have addressed how power relations between researchers and participants are shaped by the location of their encounter (Goss and Leinbach, 1996; Larsen and Johnson, 2016; Longhurst and Savage, 1997).

Indeed, human geography has a history of attending to the power relations present within place (Massey, 1994; Tuan 1977), and this has informed approaches that address the 'micro-geographies' of the sites of interviews (Elwood and Martin, 2000: 651; see also Abu-Lughod, 1993; Behar and Gordon, 1995; Kondo, 1990). Such a focus helps in identifying how the interview site is intertwined with the power and positionality of researchers and interlocutors, and subsequently how fieldwork sites themselves can be agential and 'can be a source of information about the geographies of people and place in the research' (Elwood and Martin, 2000: 649). Thus, it is important not simply to attend to the information that emerges from interview/focus group questions, answers and non-verbal interaction, but also how the *place* of the interview works to animate and construct a particular narrative (Amin, 2015). Knowledge is dynamically produced through space and negotiated in tandem with other people (Beebeejaun, 2017; Edwards and Brannelly, 2017).

Embodied and situated researchers

The embodied experience was identified as another important way in which our fieldwork encounters were negotiated. Many scholars have illustrated that fieldwork is an embodied and emotional practice, and that good qualitative research is supported by a careful reflexive awareness of this (Berger, 2010; Ellingson, 2006; Ezzy, 2010; Gillian, 1997; Hickey and Smith, 2020; Rose, 1997; Spry, 2017; Valentine, 2002). Particularly, they have demonstrated the importance of acknowledging and reflecting upon the negotiation of 'sameness and difference' of researchers through the whole research process (Hopkins 2007; Jackson 1993; Rose 1997; Skelton, 2008; Valentine, 2002: 116). Yet, focusing on reflexivity alone risks an emphasis on disembodied ideas, instead of focusing on what it means to bring your body into the research. Bodies shape, and are shaped by, discourses, and different bodies do so in different ways (Butler, 1999). Vacchelli (2018) therefore suggests that we should pay attention to our bodies in the research process and to the ways they affect the knowledge gathered. This is significant as bodies are not 'inert object[s]', but things with specific 'agency and materiality' that contribute 'to the active narration of the participants' stories' (Vacchelli, 2018: 173). Yet, as Knibbe (2021) has shown, the agency of our bodies is limited. In our fieldwork, especially in religious communities and ritual contexts, we were not only invited to participate in activities, but bodily participation was *expected* to varying degrees; especially in relation to the sharing of food, the appropriate (gendered) management of dress and interpersonal interactions, as well as scripted comportment at places of worship. In this context, personal experiences of (dis)comfort or the desire to/ not to participate are especially revealing (c.f. Valentine, 2008), and negotiating these represents part of the emotional labour, and emotional geographies, of doing research. Moreover, the element of active, experiential and sensorial participation, Knibbe (2021) suggests, might be especially challenging as senses, things, realms or experiences are addressed that one may not usually address. Therefore, the body during qualitative research needs to be understood relationally, as 'a site where individual and collective experiences are entangled in power relations' (Vacchelli, 2018: 174), and must be made visible in conducting and writing qualitative research (Ellingson, 2006).

Identity, place and embodiment in sensitive qualitative research

The following reflexive and dialogic accounts of conducting qualitative research illustrate how intersectional identities, place and embodiment impacted our fieldwork encounters, and shaped unanticipated emotional-affective outcomes from the research. We focus on two topics: (i) the researchers' varied personal experiences with death and bereavement and (ii) their situational performances of minority and majority ethnic and recent migrant identities. By doing so, we demonstrate how reflexive accounts can aid a rigorous fieldwork practice, and highlight the value of conducting fieldwork with multiple researchers of diverse backgrounds in order to understand complex social phenomena.

Whilst this paper is very much written collaboratively across authors, the vignette sections are presented in the relevant researcher's voice as this is integral to unpicking the specific dynamics and power relations negotiated in each selected research encounter. The accounts were written specifically for this paper, yet are based on transcripts as well as the fieldnotes and fieldwork diaries that were written and discussed during fieldwork. During the writing process, the individual accounts were discussed with co-researchers in the team to explore the differences and similarities of the vignettes and the research experiences. These accounts were edited further by the individual researchers.

Researching death and bereavement: personal experience as context

Researching death and bereavement can evoke one's biographical experiences with loss, as well as the need to reflect upon human mortality. Moreover, it requires engagement with personal and often emotional-affective narratives, and places an extra responsibility upon the researcher to not harm interlocutors. The two accounts below reflect on some of the challenges associated with this.

Navigating research into death: feeling vulnerable and sharing vulnerabilities

Working on this project was the first time I had conducted research on death-related issues. Part of the methodology was to conduct biographical interviews with people from a wide range of cultural and religious beliefs, and to discuss significant experiences related to death within this context. Nine months into the project, I conducted one of these interviews with a Baha'i male, at their home. This was the first biographical interview I conducted for the project, and so was the first time talking in-depth about death with a research participant. Due to this I was quite apprehensive. The interview went well; however, there was a point when the participant spoke specifically about the death of a sibling where I felt out of my depth. This death was understandably a difficult thing to manage, and this was evident in how the participant spoke about it. He began to speak in more hushed tones, and being confronted with this issue – in their home – the atmosphere became much more solemn. Whilst I could understand why this had happened, reflecting back on the interview I could not – at first – quite place why I had such a profound emotional-affectual response to it. However, after discussing and reflecting on the experience of this interview with the rest of the research team, I began to understand my reaction better. Other members of the research team, who had much more experience of researching death and bereavement, reminded me this was the first time I had discussed the

topic with a participant, and as such would have been quite overwhelming. I think that, as the participant told me about the death of their sibling when they were both very young and how this shaped their own funeral and burial wishes, the gravity of the project's topic hit me. It became grounded in this participant's story and this helped me make emotional sense of what the project was trying to do and why it was important. Further, the place of the interview – the participant's living room – worked to ground our discussion and to add an implicit contextualisation to the narrative I was being told (Elwood and Martin, 2000). However, as my concerns with mediating the topic of death emerged through the interview, the site of the living room actually enhanced this due to feeling I was intruding in their home. I was surrounded by photographs and objects of personal and everyday meaning to the participant, and whilst this helped to bring our interview to life, it also exposed my anxieties of dealing with a sensitive research topic. Reflecting on this with the research team helped make these connections, which gave me a deeper understanding of my reaction and how I could anticipate my reactions for future interviews. (Male, White British, Christian/secular heritage)

Using research team meetings as a space for personal fieldwork reflections helped process the sensitive and sometimes upsetting findings. It also helped with anticipating how we might react in upcoming participant interviews, thus facilitating some mental preparation. This process was initiated at the outset of the project where we held an informal researcher 'Death Café', where we each shared reflections on death-related topics and associated experiences such as life-planning, will-writing and personal bereavement. This helped us understand something of each other's biographies and sensitivities, to be open about the challenges that we might face dealing with death-related research, and to cultivate a practice of mutual support and care within the project team. It also served to underscore some of the sensitivities and vulnerabilities our participants might bring to our encounters with them, as well as their insights, knowledge and expertise. Finally, the experience described above highlights the important role of place and how this can bring out underlying anxieties for both participant *and researcher* when conducting interviews on sensitive issues.

Personal experiences of bereavement and the importance of 'more-than-research'

When researching death and bereavement, I situate myself as someone with experience of bereavement. Acknowledgement of my own experience can engender trust and enhance the research encounter, but requires a degree of personal vulnerability which could also threaten the research, for instance if the encounter were to become shaped by my experience rather than that of participants.

A particular focus group highlighted where personal experience and empathy contribute to an encounter which can be described as 'more-than-research', i.e. one that generated wider impetus or experience beyond the remit of the research objectives. This particular focus group was an Asian women's weekly lunch group, which on this occasion included five Hindus and one Muslim, all of whom were over 50 years of age and had migrated in their youth from India and Bangladesh. After introductions and a recap of the group's existing ground rules, my co-researcher and I explained what we hoped to learn from the group, and, as usual, related my interest in such matters, in part, to my own experience of bereavement.

The women had been providing practical support to one another at times of bereavement, but they had not discussed matters of death and loss at their meetings. Sharing an informal 'bring and share' buffet, we sat around a table to discuss cemeteries and crematoria needs. In keeping

with the rules of the group, everyone around the table took a turn to respond to our core questions about their experiences, some reflecting the norms of their religious traditions, others being quite *avante garde* in their plans for their own post-mortal disposition. Then one woman shared how she had been plagued by guilt for 20 years after the death of a close relative, but had been unable to speak about it outside of her immediate family. Her tearful account prompted words of support, reassurance and absolution from group members and the meeting ended with me holding her hand while she shed tears.

I think this openness was a result of the confluence of factors: the excellent rapport my co-researcher had established with the group chair, the pre-existing regulated environment of mutual trust and respect within the group, a willingness to assist us in our work, but also their willingness to see us as other women with shared experience. We were allowed to be simultaneously part of their circle, as well as being professional researchers from beyond that circle.

Subsequently, the group devoted another meeting (without us present) to discuss death and bereavement. When my co-researcher met with members of the group at another community event, she was greeted warmly by the husband of the woman so affected during the focus group; he credited the discussion with having released his wife from her 20-year burden, transforming her sense of well-being. (Female, White, Established Migrant, Christian).

Undoubtedly, the embodied gender of us as two female researchers helped facilitate the group's openness, and, in turn, our emotional labour and willingness to share personal vulnerabilities facilitated openness, but ultimately it was the long-grounded peer-to-peer support from within the group which made a difference – their co-production – of which we were the catalyst. The focus group provided rich material and valued participants, but, more than that, it was a privilege to be part of a conversation which facilitated an unanticipated personal life-shifting moment for that participant.

Migrant and minority identities

We investigated the funerary needs of established minorities and recent migrants with a diverse team of researchers. In this section, we will reflect on the challenges of being a recent European migrant and a more established South Asian migrant respectively, drawing attention to both similar and distinct fieldwork experiences.

Performances of self and heritage: understanding identity as a research tool

As I was born and raised in the Netherlands, English is not my first language. During fieldwork most interlocutors could tell immediately and would enquire about my country of origin. Although I don't explicitly understand myself as Dutch or non-British in my everyday life, which partially is the result of belonging to the privileged white-ethnic majority, I began to develop an explicit Dutch, European and migrant identity during fieldwork. On the one hand I emphasised this myself, for example by sharing stories about my country of origin or by bringing traditional treats along, like stroopwafels. On the other hand, my identity was framed by others and being Dutch or non-native was simply unconcealable.

Reflecting on the varied ways in which my embodied identity impacted my fieldwork, I learnt that questions and remarks about my origin were not simple reminders of otherness, nor were

they mere jokes or expressions of genuine interest. Instead they revealed the political and performative character of research. It is through performance that we come to understand and shape ourselves as adored or insignificant Other (Madison, 2012: 166), and specific situations can evoke the need to perform a particular sense of self. Through the eyes of my interlocutors, I began to see my own performed being-in-the-world, my own habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), and how this shaped my research.

When I started to understand my identity as a situational research tool, it became necessary to make more explicit how it shaped my fieldwork. In terms of advantages, my migration journey brought a novel perspective to understanding funerary culture in England, Wales and the Netherlands. I encountered many differences in terms of governance and customs, which made visible national and regional variation as well as some of my own, my colleagues and my interlocutors blind spots. Second, when my interlocutors heard my foreign accent and subsequently asked about my heritage, a mediated space emerged in which the migrant and minority aspect of the research could enter the conversation in an informal and (often) desensitised way. Third, my status as a recent migrant typically allowed the interlocutor to be an expert, offering tips and advice. Simultaneously, it allowed me to be or play the role of novice, inviting interlocutors to make explicit what is typically taken for granted or assumed to be shared knowledge. Fourth, and in relation hereto, my own migration journey helped to establish common ground and rapport. It evoked conversations about shared and different experiences, reduced insecurities and opened space for both humour and critique. Sharing stories in interviews made visible how both the interlocutors and I were involved in knowledge construction.

Whereas my migration background often aided the fieldwork, it also evoked challenges. I sometimes misunderstood phrases, was unaware of customs or made assumptions from a different socio-cultural perspective. During a focus group, for example, one of the interlocutors told my co-researcher and me about a community meeting that was held in the afternoon to practice hymns for the funeral of a group member. Whereas I had interpreted this as a general remark, or even as an invitation to join, my colleague, with an English background, noted that this meant that we had to leave. Furthermore – in specific places and often intersecting with gender dynamics – being an outsider and/or migrant challenged my sense of comfort and my academic expertise. My positionality, including my questions and interpretations, simultaneously could threat the well-being of others, evoking the need to critical reflect upon my norms and values, along with my (ethnocentric) understandings of the 'good' death, religion and secularity, and gender and emancipation, and the ways in which these impacted the fieldwork. (Female, White, European migrant, Christian/ secular heritage)

Despite being attentive to positionalities and to the cues of research participants, different socio-cultural backgrounds and politics will result in different fieldwork encounters and in varied interpretations. Rather than a weakness, this vignette shows that experiences of diversity enable researchers to capture the complexity of social phenomena and the production of knowledge. Doing so, we argue, not only requires critical reflection, but also benefits from collaborative fieldwork in diverse teams of researchers.

Belonging to an established minority group: mutual trust or managing expectations?

I interviewed 'fellow British Muslim' research participants as a Sunni Muslim, Pakistani, native Punjabi and Urdu speaking male, and a highly educated migrant researcher. My identity and heritage governed the norms during the interviews and focus group discussions, as it placed

me into a set of traditional South Asian hierarchical power relations, social expectations, religious obligations, fears and insecurities and differences in migrant/settled status. The embodiment of these identities and differences dictated the terms of my positionality and perceived role during the interviews. I here will reflect upon the social obligations that I experienced in the field, and the role of multilingualism.

Research is a social encounter (Nowicka and Ryan, 2015), and social disciplining within a group of British Muslims played a significant role in determining the course of interview conversations. I was understood as an insider, an 'apna', and the Imams, community leaders and volunteers that we encountered during data collection had a shared expectation that I would perform my 'duty' as a fellow Muslim to 'safeguard' British Muslims' interests. This is something that is often expected from upwardly mobile British Muslims like me by the community members and religious leaders (Dogra, 2019). This was a challenging position, as some interlocutors expected me to take their side in their internal and local conflicts. For example, I encountered an Imam who was unhappy about the conduct of a local Pakistani doctor over his delaying in the issuing of death certificates. After our interview, he provided me the address of the Pakistani doctor's surgery and asked me to complain to the relevant authorities against his uncooperative behaviour on behalf of the local Muslim community. Although my English colleague and I interviewed him together, the Imam made it my 'responsibility' to take action. As a researcher, I thus was perceived as an insider offering space to the interlocutors to further their own agenda of local influence (c.f. Giampapa, 2011).

During our fieldwork, I spoke fluent Urdu and Punjabi, and English in Pakistani accent. My multilingual researcher identity provided a 'comfort zone' for those research participants who felt at ease in conversing in Urdu or Punjabi about sensitive topics like death and burial, as well as politics and inequality. They had informal conversations with me after the interview and focus groups, and often expressed frustration over lack of understanding among public servants or local councils for the cultural and religious needs for funerals, burials and cremation. Speaking in Punjabi or Urdu invited participants to make comparisons on 'good death' in Pakistan, where everything is seen as 'naturally' sorted, and Britain, where things are deemed complicated and uncomfortable.

In addition to speaking, I took notes in my notebook in Urdu as a rapport-building strategy during interviews with Pakistani-origin or British Muslim participants. An advantage of writing notes and jotting in Urdu in front of Pakistani research participants was to keep data collection a transparent process for the research participants, as we were recording the interviews at the same time. While it was 'normal' for me to go to mosques and other community spaces of British Pakistanis and to speak Urdu, I didn't speak Urdu or English on purpose when I visited a Sikh Gurdwara and chose to speak Punjabi with Sikh research participants. I also used elements of my heritage and biography to build trust and a narrative of shared belonging, for instance by talking about my place of birth, Nankana Sahib in Pakistan, which is the second holiest religious site for Sikhs. I also shared my childhood memories of growing up in a Punjabi village with them. Such positioning facilitate a shared narrative during qualitative research, but also evoked the need for transparency and reflection upon one's positionality and the associated power dynamics. (Male, South-Asian, Established Migrant, Muslim heritage)

Undoubtedly, the researcher's identity, heritage and linguistic (in)competencies gave privileged and sometimes accidental advantages during fieldwork, but also generated assumptions and expectations. This was particularly the case when the researcher

was positioned as 'one of us' by participants, who attempted to mobilise this 'sameness' to represent their interests (Valentine, 2002: 116). Co-production of knowledge thus comes with the challenge of managing expectations, and negotiating with the interlocutors about the remit of the role of the researcher. Researchers capitalise upon and perform certain aspects of their identity for rapport building with participants to facilitate data collection. The leverage of different aspects of identity during fieldwork requires a careful assessment of risks before utilising them in order to manage prejudicial social relations (Valentine and Sadgrove, 2012).

These four fieldwork vignettes illustrate a number of intersecting points. They speak to personal vulnerabilities and derived insights, highlighting the need for self-reflexive awareness of the emotional labour required to conduct fieldwork. Furthermore, they emphasise the value of an ethics of care within research teams dealing with sensitive subjects, as well as training and ongoing support throughout the research process, especially, but not exclusively, during fieldwork. They also illustrate the value of embodying diverse perspectives within one research team and within fieldwork pairs, which result in 'light bulb' moments for researchers and participants during focus groups or interviews, and whereby personal insights may extend beyond the remit of the research, creating a clearly defined more-than-research experience. In addition, the accounts highlight the role of embodiment – literal and metaphorical. They illustrate something of the shifting cultural politics of researcher-research participant in the co-production of knowledge. Also, they indicate that researchers are being privileged or disadvantaged (or both, in complex entanglements) according to embodied gendered norms, linguistic (in)competencies and ethno-religious identity in particular contexts or places. Thus, when the variety of the researcher's experiences and fieldwork encounters is recognised within qualitative research, and when such variety is critically engaged with in the research process rather than being dismissed as subjective or invalid, we can also better understand the multi-layeredness of the researched.

Conclusion

Drawing on the reflexive accounts of researchers studying established minority and recent migrant experiences with death and bereavement, this paper has shed light on the ways in which biographical subjectivities intersect with dynamics of identity, place and embodiment in the necessarily mediated space between researcher and research participant in qualitative research. It has evidenced that conducting qualitative research as a diverse team of researchers contributes to a better understanding of the complexity and the multifacetedness of the social phenomena under research, granting that the diversity within the team is critically engaged with and employed as a research tool. Further, it has highlighted the need to explicitly reflect upon the dynamics of the intersectional identities of researchers to create a rigorous fieldwork practice that takes transparency and politics into account. This has four aspects as follows.

First, the paper has identified a need to make visible and reflect upon the varied spatial, social, political and emotional-affective positionalities as they are experienced, perceived and performed by researchers and research participants. The vignettes in this paper have illustrated how such positionalities inflected not only the research process,

but also on sense of self, competence, varied gender roles, being in/out of place, and status as expert or novice. When researchers immerse themselves in contexts that are unfamiliar to them, they may find themselves embodying a position that offers insight to what if feels like to be a minority or outsider in each context, unsure of the social rules and protocols. Yet, such insightful experiences remain difficult to share. Although scholarship acknowledges that researchers might feel uncomfortable or overlook cultural cues, such experiences are also understood to speak of *in*expertise or doing something wrong or problematic. Even in a supportive team, it may be difficult to share those vulnerabilities and concerns of failure (Harrowell et al., 2018). The risks of sharing vulnerabilities with other researchers in a team, department or discipline are overlooked in current research, and whilst the literature that we draw on unpacks some of these issues, there is a tendency to reformulate unfamiliarity and inexpertise during fieldwork into expertise. By staging expertise, stories of research encounters are inserted within dominant academic discourses that overlook the subjectivities of research and the bodies of researchers and research participants. We argue that qualitative research would benefit from researchers who reflect more upon their embodied and biographical positions in relation to experiences of inexpertise and inability, and the ways in which this shapes the fieldwork and outcomes of research.

Second, this paper has argued that reflection upon researchers' intersectional identities can benefit our understanding of knowledge production and contribute to a form of strong objectivity. Knowledge is co-produced in the necessarily mediated space between the researcher and research participants, but this does not happen in equal ways. Although the researcher depends on the participation of the interlocutor, s/he often holds a position of privilege – for example, the privilege of having a university status, white privilege, the privilege of being a man or a woman, socio-economic privilege or the privilege of being 'one of us'. However, in some contexts, participants exerted their authority – as professionals, as religious scholars, as socio-economically empowered businesspeople, as local power-brokers, as hosts, as men versus female or younger male researchers. There were times it was appropriate and team members were willing to share personal viewpoints and experiences, and other times it was necessary to resist in the face of commentaries on team members' dress, bodies, relationship and parental status. The team wanted the research to make a difference to local communities, but had to resist the research process being co-opted by initiatives which would be seen as partisan by other participant groups. These positionalities shaped the ways in which questions were asked and answered in various circumstances. Ethical research considers the politics of inclusion and exclusion between and among diverse interlocutors and researcher(s), and the complexities when boundaries between insider and outsider, and between different positionalities, become fluid.

Third, in addition to gaining insight in the politics of knowledge-production, reflection on the process of identity work can be deployed to facilitate and strengthen the research. As researchers inevitably perform part of their identity, this can be used not as duplicitous manipulation but as human empathetic response in the fieldwork encounter, contributing to more-than-research. Identifying something in the narrative of the interlocutor that you experience not only as a researcher, but as a migrant, minority, parent, child or mourner may deepen the shared narrative and contribute to mutual understanding. While one must be cautious not to appropriate the biography or emotions of the

interviewee, aspects of the researcher identity can be expressed to gain a better understanding of people's emotional-affective experiences, for instance in relation to migration and bereavement.

Finally, this paper has highlighted the value of conducting fieldwork, in this case into social and cultural differentiation, as a team of researchers. Working together with others of different backgrounds creates room for mutual support and shared reflections, and it enables one to draw on the expertise of others. Moreover, working in teams and pairs enables colleagues to step in, to see and hear things differently, and to be trusted with different sorts of knowledge, improving our comprehension of complex social phenomena. Through teamwork, we gain a better understanding of the value of triangulating knowledge, of sharing experiences of comfort and discomfort, and of the agency of team members and interlocutors, as they gave access and were given access to deeply personal experiences.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the AHRC and ESRC for funding the Deathscapes and Diversity project on which this paper is based (AH/N010205/1). We also acknowledge the contribution of all participants and the RTPI and ICCM for their support for the project. Our thanks also extend to the reviewers and the Editors for their constructive comments on this paper.

Disclosure

The authors report no conflict of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of the paper.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The authors received financial support for the research of this article from Research Councils UK, Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/N010205/1) and Economic and Social Research Council.

ORCID iDs

Brenda Mathijssen https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0461-829X

Sufyan Dogra https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9896-9503

References

Abu-Lughod L (1993) *Writing Women's Worlds*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Amin A (2015) Animated space. *Public Culture* 27(2): 239-258. DOI: 10.1215/08992363-2841844.

Barbour R (2019) *Introducing Qualitative Research: A Student's Guide*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

Bauman Z (2004) *Identity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Beebeejaun Y (2017) Gender, urban space, and the right to everyday life. *Journal of Urban Affairs* 39(3): 323–334. DOI: 10.1080/07352166.2016.1255526.

Behar R and Gordon D (1995) *Women Writing Culture*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Berger P (2010) Assessing the relevance and effects of 'Key Emotional Episodes' for the fieldwork process. In: Spencer D and Davies J (eds) *Anthropological Fieldwork: A Relational Process*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 119–143.

Berger R (2015) Now I see it, now I don't: researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research* 15(2): 219–234. DOI: 10.1177/1468794112468475.

Bourdieu P (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Praxis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Butler J (1999) Revisiting bodies and pleasures. *Theory, Culture & Society* 16(2): 11–20. DOI: 10.1177/02632769922050520.

Cameron D, Frazer E, Harvey P, et al. (1992) *Researching Language: Issues of Power and Method*. New York: Routledge.

Coffey A (1999) *The Ethnographic Self: Fieldwork and the Representation of Identity*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

Dogra S (2019) Living a piety-led life beyond Muharram: becoming or being a South Asian Shia Muslim in the UK. *Contemporary Islam* 13(3): 307–324. DOI: 10.1007/s11562-019-00437-8.

Denzing N and Lincoln Y (eds) (2017) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (5th edn.). Los Angeles: SAGE.

Edwards R and Brannelly T (2017) Approaches to democratising qualitative research methods. *Qualitative Research* 17(3): 271-277. DOI: 10.1177/1468794117706869.

Ellingson L (2006) Embodied knowledge: writing researchers' bodies into qualitative health research. *Qualitative Health Research* 16(2): 298–310. DOI: 10.1177/1049732305281944.

Elwood S and Martin D (2000) "Placing" interviews: location and scales of power in qualitative research. *Professional Geographer* 52(4): 649–657. DOI: 10.1111/0033-0124.00253.

England K (1994) Getting personal: reflexivity, positionality, and feminist research. *Professional Geographer* 46(1): 80-89. DOI: 10.1111/j.0033-0124.1994.00080.x.

Ezzy D (2010) Qualitative interviewing as an embodied emotional performance. *Qualitative Inquiry* 16(3):163–170. DOI: 10.1177/1077800409351970.

Fedele A (2013) *Looking for Mary Magdalene: Alternative Pilgrimage and Ritual Creativity at Catholic Shrines in France*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Giampapa F (2011) The politics of "being and becoming" a researcher: identity, power, and negotiating the field. *Journal of Language, Identity and Education* 10(3): 132–144. DOI: 10.1080/15348458.2011.585304.

Gillian G (1997) Situating knowledge: positionality, reflexivities and other tactics. *Progress in Human Geography* 21(3): 305–320.

Goss J and Leinbach T (1996) Focus groups as alternative research practice: experience with transmigrants in Indonesia. *Area* 28(2): 115–123. DOI: 10.2307/20003647.

Grimes R (2014) *The Craft of Ritual Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Haraway D (1992) The promises of monsters: a regenerative politics for inappropriate/d Others. In: Grossberg L, Nelson C and Treichler P (eds) *Cultural Studies*. New York: Routledge, 295–336.

Harding S (1995) "Strong objectivity": a response to the new objectivity question. *Synthese* 104: 331–349. DOI: 10.1007/BF01064504.

Harrowell H, Davies T and Disney T (2018) Making space for failure in geographic research. *The Professional Geographer* 70(2): 230–238. DOI: 10.1080/00330124.2017.1347799.

Hickey A and Smith C (2020) Working the aporia: ethnography, embodiment and the ethnographic self. *Qualitative Research*. DOI: 10.1177/1468794120906012.

Hopkins P (2007) Positionalities and knowledge: negotiating ethics in practice. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 6(3): 386–394.

Hunter A (2016) Deathscapes in diaspora: contesting space and negotiating home in contexts of post-migration diversity. *Social & Cultural Geography* 17(2): 247–261. DOI: 10.1080/14649365.2015.1059472.

Jackson P (1993) Changing ourselves: a geography of position. In: Johnston RJ (ed.), *The Challenge for Geography, A Changing World: A Changing Discipline*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 198–214.

Keith M (2005) *After the Cosmopolitan? Multicultural Cities and the Future of Racism*. London and New York: Routledge.

King N, Horrocks C and Brooks J (2018) *Interviews in Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

Knibbe K (2021) Dilemmas in participant observation in religious contexts. In: Berger P, Knibbe K and Buitelaar M (eds) *Religion as Relation: Studying Religion in Context*. Sheffield: Equinox, Chapter 10.

Kondo D (1990) *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Larsen S and Johnson J (2016) The agency of place: toward a more-than-human geographical self. *GeoHumanities* 2(1): 149–166. DOI: 10.1080/2373566x.2016.1157003.

Lavis V (2010) Multiple researcher identities: Highlighting tensions and implications for ethical practice in qualitative interviewing. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 7(4): 316–331. DOI: 10.1080/14780880902929506.

Longhurst B and Savage M (1997) Social class, consumption and the influence of Bourdieu: some critical issues. *The Sociological Review* 44(1): 274–301. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-954x.1996.tb03445.x.

MacDonald K (2019) Toward a transnational feminist methodology of encounter. *Qualitative Research*. DOI: 10.1177/1468794119847578.

Maddrell A, Beebeejaun Y, McClymont K, et al. (2018) Deathscapes and diversity in England and Wales: setting an agenda. *Revista d'Etnologia de Catalunya* 43: 38–53.

Maddrell A, McNally D, Beebeejaun Y, et al. (2021) Intersections of (infra)structural violence and cultural inclusion: the geopolitics of minority cemeteries and crematoria provision. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*. Epub ahead of print 5 March 2021. DOI: 10.1111/tran.12437.

Madison D (2012) *Critical Ethnography* (2nd edn). Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

Mills K (2018) What are the threats and potentials of big data for qualitative research? *Qualitative Research* 18(6): 591–603. DOI: 10.1177/1468794117743465.

Nowicka M and Ryan L (2015) Beyond insiders and outsiders in migration research: rejecting a priori commonalities. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung* 16(2): 1–15. DOI: 10.17169/fqs-16.2.2342.

Olwig K (2009) A proper funeral: contextualizing community among Caribbean migrants. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15(3): 520–537. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9655.2009.01571.x.

Phillimore J (2017) Embedded integration and organisational change in housing providers in the UK. *Social Policy and Society* 16(1): 1–14. DOI: 10.1017/S1474746415000639.

Phillips D (2006) Parallel lives? Challenging discourses of British Muslim self-segregation. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24(1): 25-40. DOI: 10.1068/d60j

Portes A, Guarnizo L and Landolt P (1999) The study of transnationalism: pitfalls and promise of an emergent research field. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22(2): 217–237. DOI: 10.1080/014198799329468.

Skelton T (2008) Research with children and young people: exploring the tensions between ethics, competence and participation, *Children's Geographies* 6(1): 21–36, DOI: 10.1080/14733280701791876

Spry T (2017) Autoethnography and the other: performative embodiment and a bid for Utopia. In: Denzing N and Lincoln Y (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (5th edn). Los Angeles: SAGE, 1090–1128.

Thomson P and Gunter H (2011) Inside, outside, upside down: the fluidity of academic researcher "identity" in working with/in school. *International Journal of Research and Method in Education* 34(1): 17–30. DOI: 10.1080/1743727X.2011.552309.

Vacchelli E (2018) Embodiment in qualitative research: collage making with migrant, refugee and asylum seeking women. *Qualitative Research* 18(2): 171–190. DOI: 10.1177/1468794117708008.

Valentine G (2002) People like us: negotiating sameness and difference in the research process. In: Moss P (ed.), *Feminist Geography in Practice: Research and Methods*. Oxford: Blackwell, 116–126.

Valentine G (2008) Living with difference: reflections on geographies of encounter. *Progress in Human Geography* 32(3): 323-337. DOI: 10.1177/0309133308089372.

Valentine G and Sadgrove J (2012) Lived difference: a narrative account of spatiotemporal processes of social differentiation. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*. 44(9): 2049–2063. DOI:10.1068/a44491

Van der Pijl Y (2017) The birth of a multicultural funeral home. *Death Studies* 41(1): 42–50. DOI: 10.1080/07481187.2016.1257884.

Venbrux E (2007) Robert Hertz's seminal essay and mortuary rites in the Pacific region. *Journal de La Société Des Océanistes* 124: 5–10. DOI: 10.4000/jso.712.

Venhorst C (2013) *Muslims Ritualising Death in the Netherlands. Death Rites in a Small Town Context*. Munster: Lit Verlag.

Wilson H (2014) Multicultural learning: parent encounters with difference in a Birmingham primary school. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 39(1): 102–114. DOI: 10.1111/tran.12015.

Author biographies

Brenda Mathijssen, a religious studies scholar, is Assistant Professor of Psychology, Culture and Religion and Director of the Centre for Religion, Health and Wellbeing at the University of Groningen. Her research focuses on human experiences, practices and attitudes in relation to death and bereavement in contemporary Europe.

Danny McNally is a human geographer with specialisms across cultural and social geography. His current research has three focuses: geographies of contemporary art; deathscapes; and geographies of comfort. He is Lecturer in Geography at Teesside University.

Sufyan Dogra is an anthropologist and Senior Research Fellow at the Bradford Institute for Health Research. His work focuses on exploring the role of Islamic religious settings in preventing childhood obesity among South Asian children living in the UK.

Avril Maddrell is Professor of Social and Cultural Geography at the University of Reading. She is a feminist geographer whose research focuses on inclusive spaces, landscapes and practices of death, mourning and remembrance; sacred mobilities; and gender. She has served as Editor of *Social and Cultural Geography and Gender, Place and Culture*. Also, she is author/co-author/co-editor of numerous books, including *Deathscapes* (Ashgate, 2010), *Consolationscapes* (Routledge 2019) and *Contemporary Encounters in Gender and Religion* (Palgrave 2017).

Yasminah Beebeejaun is an Associate Professor at the Bartlett School of Planning, University College London. Her research interests encompass ethnic and racial diversity in planning, postcolonial and feminist planning debates, and community engagement and empowerment.

Katie McClymont is a Senior Lecturer in Urban Planning at UWE, Bristol. Her teaching and research interests focus around planning theory, considering questions about ethics and decision-making in urban policy, with particular attention given to notions of postsecularism, community spaces and participation.