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Reflecting on the ethics of PhD research in the Global South: reciprocity, reflexivity and situatedness

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This paper explores ethical issues of reciprocity, reflexivity and situatedness in conducting ethnographic fieldwork in the Global South as part of PhD research projects. Against the backdrop of increasingly bureaucratised doctoral processes, we argue that PhD students occupy a particular terrain that involves continuous navigation of tensions between institutionally-required ethical procedures and 'situational' ethical processes in the field. We illustrate these tensions by analysing reflections on our experiences of conducting fieldwork in Indonesia, India and the Philippines. Guided by decolonial and feminist thought highlighting the politics of knowledge (co)production, this paper unpacks the problems of insider-outsider binaries and standardised ethical procedures, and explores the possibilities of ethics as visible, collaborative negotiation.

Keywords: research ethics, ethnography, doctoral research, decoloniality, feminism

Introduction: the ethical terrain of PhD research

In this paper, we seek to make visible the ‘uncomfortable’ processes in ethical decision-making involved in doctoral research particularly in projects that employ ethnographic fieldwork in the Global South. As ‘novice’ researchers we are entangled in power relations specific to our positionalities: having to navigate the ethical requirements of our institutions, enter into a university-specific research ‘culture’ and find a research niche and voice. As PhD students in the UK and Germany conducting research in the Philippines, India and Indonesia, we are in the process of creating and maintaining varied research relationships, in awareness of their colonial continuities, while having to abide by institutional requirements. These requirements are part of a bureaucratised higher education space that frames the PhD thesis as a ‘product’ of a knowledge production process guided by neoliberal logics of efficiency, speed and value for money (see Berg, Huijbens and Larsen 2016; van Veelen, Lane and Tozer 2019). PhD students seem to be positioned as competitive entrepreneurs, ready to *produce* knowledge in the market of policy and ideas. In the UK, for example, institutions have long implemented managerialist approaches to ensure PhDs are completed within 3–4 years (see Wright and Cochrane 2000) with funding schemes often limited to the same time frame. Therefore, what it means to do research ethically is, to some extent, being conditioned by discourses and practices put forward by institutional research ethics frameworks and are limited to the boundaries imposed by funding bodies and timelines.

Ethical reviews of PhD research often draw on conventional conceptions of research ethics, which Katz (2006) and others argue (see also Atkinson 2009; Sikes and Goodson 2003; Tolich and Fitzgerald 2006), have limitations in capturing the complexity of ethical decisions during fieldwork. For instance, Halse and Honey (2005) argue that meeting the requirements of ethical review boards (e.g. of universities and funding bodies), can inscribe into the methodology particular value-systems and normative notions of culturally-contingent concepts such as respect and consent. Highlighting the “anthropological failure” of ethical regulations in institutions, Atkinson (2009:18) further points to how some requirements do not capture the real-life decisions and time required for relationship-building. When addressing ethical concerns is reduced to a ‘stage’ in the PhD process, ethics seems to be considered by these institutions as an item on a check-list that is then “approved, filed away, and largely forgotten” (Zavisca 2007:131). This relates to what Sikes and Goodson (2003) call the convenient reduction of research’s ‘moral concerns’ to the procedural – whereby satisfaction of institutional ethical canons would automatically categorise a research project as moral. In other words, these practices have the tendency to dilute and/or ‘make simple’, ethnographic ethical decisions that are innately complex.

In this paper, we ‘make sense’ of our first-hand reflections using the lens of decolonial and feminist theory. These conceptual stances allow us to explore whether and how these institutional ethical guidelines may reproduce colonial logics of ‘discovery’ and extraction — the disembodied search for objective truths through a reduction of complexity (see Smith 2005). We also use the term ‘ethicalities’, drawing upon Puig de la Bellacasa’s (2017) work, to frame research ethics within processes of relationality — disrupting the idea of ethics as a static, tick-box process. The fieldwork process is fraught with social and political implications, which become particularly salient when researchers from Global North institutions conduct research in the Global South. Aside from the biases and values of the researcher, geopolitical power asymmetries potentially lead to the transplanting of assumptions, norms and practices from northern institutions — through ethical requirements — into southern communities where these may not be applicable and even offensive (see Robinson-Pant and Singal 2013). Using decolonial and feminist conceptual lenses allows us to move towards an understanding of relational ethics in research that acknowledges and negotiates reciprocity within research relationships; and confronts uncomfortable positionalities that while always fluid, must also be understood as being part of broader and historically (re)produced power dynamics.

The rest of the paper is divided into four sections. First, we introduce the research projects and motivations (including how and why we came to work together on this piece) to make visible our positionalities and the particular experiences that have shaped our thinking. We then explore the limits of polarising researchers’ roles as ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’ by drawing attention to the fluidity of identities that complicate dichotomous ways of seeing. Next, we reflect on the ways that cultivating situated knowledge as research practice helps us to think through ethical dilemmas such as consent. This leads us to reorientate fieldwork as an embodied process beyond data collection, highlighting the possibilities for reciprocity. Finally, we draw attention to the practice of reflexivity and its limits and seek potential avenues to navigate these complexities.

Situating self, research and reflection

We – the authors of this article – are three of many doctoral students who conduct fieldwork in so-called Global South contexts and are based in Global North institutions. Enid Still, a Scottish scholar, is researching in India, Siti Maimunah (Mai) and Chris Millora, who are Indonesian and Filipino scholars respectively, are researching in their home countries. Enid and Mai are based in a German institution funded through the European Commission as Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellows and Chris is based in and funded by a UK institution.

Chris conducted an 11-month ethnographic study of the learning dimension of volunteering among 'vulnerable' youths and adults in a city in the Philippines where he grew up and worked for several years. He conducted research with an HIV/AIDS youth organisation – working chiefly with gay men and transgender women – and an informal settlers' association fighting for land tenure.

Although currently in the middle of her PhD research, Enid draws on reflections from an eight-month ethnographic study on the politics of hope in urban development practice in Pune, Maharashtra, India. The advocacy-orientated project was part of her MPhil in Anthropology at Savitribai Phule Pune University and was in collaboration with a local NGO concerned about the impact of the nationwide Smart Cities Mission. These reflections fuel her unease with the colonial continuities of her positionality and current PhD research but also assist in thinking through situated ethicalities in research.

As an Environmental Justice activist in Indonesia, Mai's reflections follow her work with communities affected by mining. She particularly focuses on her collaboration with Tracy Glynn¹, a PhD student who used the photovoice method in her research on a mining town near the biggest nickel mine in Indonesia between 2013-2015. In 2015, Mai was co-facilitating the photovoice project in Sorowako, South Sulawesi province. This participatory research project invited women representatives from two communities across different ages, education, employment, religion and marital status. She also reflects on how her positionality shifts in her current PhD research with communities in central Kalimantan.

At the time of writing, we are currently in – and reflecting on – different stages of our PhD process. Chris draws from his fieldwork completed in 2018 and is now writing up his thesis. Mai and Enid are reflecting upon past fieldwork experiences in relation to their current PhD process. Although coming from different perspectives, we all saw the need to be continuously aware and accountable to the colonial continuities that animate the uneven geographies of research practice. It was our mutual unease with the power dynamics inherent in our research that brought us together in January 2019. At the Convivial Thinking workshop that evolved into the collaborative writing project for this Special Focus, we explored our sense of being 'boxed in' or conditioned by institutional norms and practices and the implications of this upon our research practice.

1 Tracy Glynn gave her permission to share her name and details about her and Mai's collaborative research experience in this paper.

Problematising insider–outsider research roles

Influential to our ethical decision-making were the ways we positioned ourselves – and often, how ‘others’ positioned us – within the wider network of relationships within and among various actors in the field. As we built these relationships, we realised that we sought to become members of groups with inherent power asymmetries. Our research aims and methodologies as ethnographers required an analysis of how these power structures and positionalities influenced and were influenced by these power dynamics.

As signalled earlier, we come to the field with multiple, intersecting ‘identities’. Our ethnicities and institutional memberships seem to position us neatly within the popular yet simplistic bifurcation of research membership roles: as insider and outsider researchers. Enid is a Scottish researcher currently enrolled in a German institution and conducting research in South India. She might be considered an ‘outsider’ researcher because she researches in a context where she does not speak the language well and may, to some extent, be unfamiliar with the culture which has many differences with her ‘home’ culture. However, although based in German and UK institutions, Mai, an Indonesian conducting research in Indonesia, and Chris, a Filipino conducting research in the Philippines, may be considered insiders because they are researching ‘home’. However, we follow a long line of scholars who have challenged how the insider-outsider dichotomy fails to capture the multiplicity and ongoing negotiation of roles we embody, moment by moment during the fieldwork (see the edited collection on this topic by McNess, Arthur and Crossley 2013; also see Dwyer and Buckle 2009; Helawell 2006). As Mai, reflects:

As an outsider, although I am Indonesian, I enter the field, surrounded by rivers in Central Kalimantan, a province that is claimed by indigenous people of Dayak province, with multiple identities: I am not an indigenous person, I have a different ethnicity and religion, I do not speak the same language, I live far from the river, I am a woman and am single. I need to fit into the fieldwork realities which sometimes are opposite with culture as well as beliefs, and there is no easy way to do that. I need to understand the power dynamics and be conscious of asymmetrical power relations between researcher and participants.

– Personal notes, 20 June 2019

In this account, Mai points to how being ‘Indonesian’ does not make her an insider of a particular community. She made visible the multiplicity of her identities influenced by her ethnicity, religion, language, gender and marital status. Collectively, we feel that the ethical constraints we navigated were

influenced by our particular positionalities – ‘researchers from UK and Germany’, ‘women’, ‘activists’, ‘Scottish’, ‘Filipino’, ‘Indonesian’ ‘PhD students’. Mai’s reflections also point to the existence of an unfamiliar ‘subculture’ within a bigger, seemingly essentialised, view of an ‘Indonesian culture’. Chris also had a similar experience while scoping for possible field sites in the Philippines. Chris conducted his fieldwork in the same city where he grew up and lived prior to relocating to Europe. He reflects:

...although I am familiar with many development projects in the city, my month-long scoping period introduced me to NGOs and local grassroots organisations that were completely unknown to me – like a slum-tour organisation just a few meters away from my house, a youth-led HIV/AIDS organisation and a group of volunteer parole officers! To a large extent, it felt like I was traversing an ‘unknown’ field. Then, of course, when I began to research within my chosen organisations, I faced both familiar and unfamiliar practices – which then affected my ethical decision making.

– Personal notes, 21 June 2019

Chris’s experience here mirrors some of Mai’s concerns. In a sense, they felt ‘foreign’ even in spaces with which they thought they were familiar. Chris’s metaphor – *traversing an ‘unknown’ field* – aptly reflects the sense of newness that PhD students may encounter even in their home countries. Partly, these experiences highlight the importance of time – and how Chris familiarising himself with new cultural practices may be engendered by constant and extended interaction with research participants. Furthermore Chris also realised that the process went beyond ‘understanding’ the research site, but it was also necessary to strive towards establishing a sense of belonging within the communities (an important, ongoing process in ethnography).

Taken together, our experiences echo other scholars’ earlier arguments that the distinction between insider-outsider researchers is not rigid. Every researcher, to some extent, takes on one of the positions in certain moments of the research. It seems to be more helpful to think of the hyphen that separates and connects the two concepts not as an arrow that indicates a path but as a “dwelling place for people” (Dwyer and Buckle 2009:60). Mai’s and Chris’s experiences also point to how the process of negotiating research roles in the field was not only about teasing out differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’ but also by creating and maintaining relationships with their participants.

These negotiations are also relevant to issues of knowledge production. Sharing in what McNess, Arthur and Crossley, 2013 – drawing from Bhabha –

call the 'thirdspace', Chris's and Mai's examples seem to illustrate how meaning-making can be a shared, collaborative 'process' of communication, mediation and relationship-building. Partly, we think that bifurcations between insider and outsider seem to be influenced by an essentialised view of 'culture' (see Robinson-Pant 2016): an assumption that since one comes from the Philippines, one already has an unproblematic understanding of so-called Filipino culture. But, in reality, the many different Filipino, Indonesian, British communities operate and intersect in various ways, despite being located in the same city or region (for instance, see Baumann 1996). Researchers — in relation to the individuals and communities with whom they work — therefore come from both a place of sameness and a place of difference which compels us to reflect on the assumptions we hold on how a particular 'culture' operates — whether or not it's our own.

Cultivating situated knowledge as ethical research practice

The power dynamics inherent in our research processes manifested in multiple ways, particularly in relation to issues such as consent, where standardised practices had the potential to obscure complexities and silence those less privileged in a particular group. Mai's experience using the photovoice illustrates this:

Some of the participants could not read and were not confident to sign the consent paper. One participant decided to ask her husband to do it for her. We understand their situation, as usually in the meeting with a mixed group, the men are always dominant. If we meet the women in the home, there is often a husband or other elder man who dominates the discussion and often decides what the woman needs. It seems that the 'sign the consent paper' model continues those kinds of dominant power relations in the community. We discussed with the participants and agreed to participate in the research by raising their hand as a sign to give consent. They did not want to give consent individually or when they are at home.

– Personal notes, 21 June 2019

These situated gender and power dynamics made the practice of obtaining written consent problematic. Mai had to reflect upon how consent could be secured ethically from the participants, taking into account their various literacies and (gendered) positions. If Mai followed institutional norms of gaining written consent, this may have silenced certain members of the group and privileged others — reinforcing the perspectives of the dominant group, in this case in relation to gender hierarchies. These power imbalances also relate to the negotiations around what constitutes valid knowledge in the PhD research process. As Chris

experienced, the decision of whether to include personal conversations was not simply about securing consent but also a question of what interactions could become 'data'.

...one of my participants shared a piece of personal information with me that was extremely sensitive (and may potentially place the participant in a negative light) but would possibly be useful in my research. When I asked her if it is okay that I record, she agreed, saying that she believes I will not name her anyway. If I only base my decision on institutional ethics guidelines, all I needed to do was ensure anonymity. However, at this moment, I felt like she related to me as a friend and not as a researcher and therefore I had to think again whether I would want information like this included in my thesis – and therefore in the public domain. In the end, I told her I did not take any notes of her words. For me, that was the ethical thing to do.

– Personal reflection, 28 June 2019

Chris's experience shows how institutional ethical processes do not always allow for the blurring of personal and professional boundaries in the ethnographic encounter. 'Data collection' is assumed only to occur within specific groups, places and times (Katz 2006). Chris's decision not to include that conversation arguably came from a commitment to the community he works with and a recognition that making 'data boundaries' – what he includes and what he does not include – has implications beyond him and his PhD research.

Similarly, Enid found the boundaries between the 'field' and conversations with friends often became blurred:

When in conversations with a friend (who was also a collaborator and participant in my research) whilst cooking and enjoying meals together, we shared many insightful and poignant moments that gave me clarity and a deeper understanding of my concerns and questions. And yet there was always an unease in relation to consent and in turning every conversation into 'data'. Openly reflecting and discussing these quandaries with my friend allowed space for negotiation and discussion. In this particular research the insights discussed were in relation to urban development practice and norms - the challenges faced and the extent to which Smart City narratives were influencing local urban development practice. In the perspective of my friend and collaborator, the insights shared were not sensitive nor would they create a problem for her or her work. The feelings she expressed and the insights she gave in these intimate moments

did therefore inform my understanding of hope and directly contributed to my findings.

– Personal Reflection, May 2018 (re-written for the purposes of this article 20 June 2020)

Consent and the problems of blurred boundaries were continuously discussed and negotiated as different conversations occurred. This MPhil research was not evaluated through formal institutional ethical guidelines or a review board, although ethical considerations were addressed in the research design and discussed with supervisors. Therefore, ethics became, to some extent, an individual navigation of research ethics in-situ. This undoubtedly raises concerns about the ‘unchecked’ ethical decision-making that occurs in any research project without institutional ethical review. Nevertheless, by remaining open and thinking critically about ethical quandaries *with* participants, Enid was to some extent held accountable by participants themselves.

In arguing for “the view from a body...versus the view from above” (Haraway 1988:589), situated knowledge as research praxis is a commitment to an embodied, situated approach to knowledge production. This approach has encouraged us to think through and acknowledge the ways in which our research is political: how the very questions we ask are embedded in ethico-political intent. To assume innocence, we argue, would be to maintain the structures of epistemological violence that positivist and colonial ways of knowing have produced (Mohanty 2003).

For Harcourt and Nelson (2015), continuously negotiating research relationships is often a messy and uncomfortable space of contestation where ethical questions of positionality and reflexivity are embedded in research practice. These questions become particularly salient in the PhD experience, when such ideals can be constrained by institutional agendas and power hierarchies. Our experiences of ethical dilemmas in relation to consent, the politics of representation and who decides what is valid research, demonstrate both the possibilities and challenges of thinking with a situated knowledge approach to ethical negotiations in the PhD process. Building research relationships beyond conventional notions and practices of data collection is a response to confronting considerable ethical dilemmas in the field that do not always have standard solutions. The lack of a solution is not what worries us, rather it is the lack of acknowledgement of these complexities in certain institutional systems that have the power to confine and/or support our efforts, as PhD students guided by these systems, to build situated, reciprocal research relationships.

Acknowledging the particular politics of place that underpin conducting situated research also entails an acceptance that moral and ethical positions

are always in flux and are therefore difficult to 'standardise'. Nevertheless, we recognise the need for a form of ethical norms and policies in social science research to ensure the dignity and safety of participants. This is perhaps especially salient in social science research where, as Shah (2012) demonstrates, ambiguities in key methodologies such as participant observation, can lead to a lack of ethical preparation, mediation and questioning. However, the current practices and attitudes that standardise and bureaucratise ethics in research arguably reflect the structural embeddedness of positivist research norms that continue to understand research as the gathering of 'data' and not as processes of working, standing and caring with human and non-human communities.

Reciprocity: fieldwork as beyond data collection?

As we continued with our fieldwork, we became increasingly aware that securing access to the research sites was a privilege given to us by the community members and various actors that we worked with. As Stake (1995:103, emphasis ours) argues, as qualitative researchers we are only ever "*guests* in the private spaces in the world". Stake's insights helped us reframe the kinds of relationships we built during fieldwork. The use of the term 'guests' seems to evoke the need for an invitation (read: access). The phrase "private spaces" seems to indicate a sense of intimacy and privilege – spaces which are otherwise inaccessible without an invitation (such as the private, online groups of gay men and transwomen that Chris was invited to participate in). As PhD researchers with limited time and funding, we appealed to these communities' generosity. As Stake (1998:58) has also pointed out, "the researcher may be a delightful company but hosting a delightful company is a burden," especially during long-term fieldwork.

The stories and narratives of participants and their 'private spaces' we enter as 'guests' will then become the basis of PhD projects which, to a certain extent, may contribute to our career prospects. In what ways do the participants (who have become our friends) benefit – if at all – from our research partnership? We feel that these questions are essential even though our collective experience points to how these are questions that we, as researchers, ask but were not verbalised by the communities with whom we were conducting research. How can we, as PhD researchers – limited both by time and resources – counter what Bridges (2001:378) terms the "imbalance of benefit"? As we look into institutional ethics for answers, we did find that spelling out the benefits of research is seen as a fundamental principle in ethical research practice. The British Educational Research Association (BERA), for instance, drawing from the Academy of Social Sciences, states the following as one of the five principles underpinning their ethical guidelines: "All social science should aim to maximise benefit and

minimise harm.” The Research Excellence Framework, which evaluates research performance of UK universities, has an Impact component where ‘impact’ is “defined as an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia”. Still, questions around the operationalisation of these ethical guidelines remain: what sorts of benefits are we expected to ensure, and for whom?

For Mai, it was about employing methods that could better capture the insights of the participants:

We, I and Tracy, were working with two groups of women affected by nickel mining from Karonsie Dongi and Sorowako community in South Sulawesi province who resisted and were divided since the giant nickel mine is extracting the mountains and operating the smelter in the 70s. We used the photovoice method that allows the participants to take the images of important moments of their lives, the value of life and nature, and their future dreams. We then offered a space for the participants to express what the stories meant and the value behind the photo images. We were facilitating the groups to meet, and share a journey in conversation about their photos. As neighbouring communities, they never had a conversation about their life around the nickel mine for more than 20 years. The photovoice method opened space to analyse how the power of intersectionality plays a role in the community in the context of gender, ethnicity, migration and age.

-Personal Reflection, 20 August 2019

This method allowed Mai and her colleagues to engage participants in the analysis of their own situation. This enabled the researchers to understand how the Sorowako and Karonsie Dongie communities – through their own words/stories/insights – had become divided since the giant nickel project began operation, and how people’s everyday activities, such as storytelling, false-compliance and tapping electricity, are forms of resistance (Glynn and Maimunah 2018). Mai’s experience and ‘strategy’ shows how opening up the practice of ‘making sense’ to the participants allows for an analysis of a situation across different perspectives, which, to a certain extent, can redistribute the ownership of the knowledge produced. According to Swartz (2011:49), “the purpose of such an ethics of reciprocation is to give back both ownership of knowledge and material benefit to those participating in research”. She points to two critical strategies for giving back. First, is on the ownership of knowledge and secondly, how we can expand the boundaries of research analysis to include the lenses of those we

researched. Under this strategy, diversifying the methods of data collection and analysis, such as Mai's attempt above, may prove helpful.

Mai's reflection also brought us back to issues around how 'fieldwork' maps out in the wider research process. 'Doing fieldwork' is often considered as the stage – spatially and temporally – for 'data collection'. For us, as PhD researchers, fieldwork involves the weeks and months when, as novice ethnographers, we venture into the site of our research, navigate access, conduct interviews and engage in participant observation. Collectively, however, we thought that 'giving back' is also part of this process. For Chris, his desire to give back this way was challenged by limited resources on his part and his institution. So, he looked into other opportunities:

I successfully secured funding for two projects of the organisations' choice. The volunteers were free to decide how to use the funds with very little restrictions and expectations. In doing this, the funding was not only framed as a material benefit (i.e. a token) – which may be patronising – but also a tool for participation as the volunteers were given the freedom to use the resources on their *own terms*. The HIV/AIDS group used the money to organise a workshop on mental health for the youth volunteers. Unlike other topic-specific training conducted by NGOs and government agencies, this workshop followed no predefined module. Youth volunteers and staff designed the day. Following a community meeting, the informal settlers' association decided to use their budget in two ways. They installed two mechanical water pumps that eased water access following their house demolitions and the rest of the budget was used for leadership training and teambuilding activities.

– Personal Reflections, 23 March 2019

Chris's approach relates to Swartz's (2011) second strategy to give back some 'material benefit' to those participating in the research. While in agreement with Bridges (2001), who pressed that reciprocity should not be considered as a transactional exchange, we also think that it is essential to take into consideration what Nama and Swartz (2002: 295) described as the 'local ethics of immediate need'. Being with communities for extended periods, we see and experience first-hand the challenges and vulnerabilities they face. For instance, Mai writes "my background as an activist who works in environmental justice allows me to work directly with the communities in the resource extraction conflict" (Personal reflection, 20/06/2019) and Chris expressed "observing first-hand the various 'vulnerabilities' the volunteers experience, I was sensitive with transportation and food costs that the volunteers might incur in participating in my research..."

(Personal reflection, 29/12/2018). Our experience in navigating these issues once again points to relationship building and our shifting roles within the community with whom we work. Chris writes:

...while I was on my way home from the organisation, I chanced upon a young volunteer who was also about to leave. He then told me that he did not have any money for transportation because his allowance ran out. Having worked with this volunteer many times and knowing his family's situation, I did not hesitate to lend him some money for a ride back home. Institutional ethical guidelines might discourage the practice of giving money to participants, but, in these particular moments, I felt that I was doing this as a member of a community – something I'd do as a friend or a neighbour – and not necessarily as a transactional exchange between a researcher and participant.

– Personal Reflection, 28 June 2019

Chris's experience here seems to expand reciprocity as transactional, exchange of goods but also as a practice and value that is rooted within community practices, which Chris became part of. To a certain extent, reciprocity is both a methodological and an ethical concern that goes beyond institutional requirements and (potentially) limits. This shift, according to Powell and Takayoshi (2003: 397-398), illuminates several issues: "the influence of our presence on the research site and in the participants' lives, the relationship we build with participants, the type of person we want to be in working with others". Our roles and relationships during and after the fieldwork process have continued to evolve: we were confidantes, friends, advisers, co-activists – each role providing a myriad of opportunities for a reciprocal relationship tempered by power-dynamics that make us accountable. These notions bring us back to the ever-changing and negotiated positionalities we assume, create and maintain in the process of fieldwork.

Limits of reflexivity

When thinking through the ethical implications of doing research in the Global South, the practice of reflexivity formed a core part of our methodology. Nevertheless, we felt uneasy about it. While reflections on research practice are important in acknowledging and questioning the processes involved in a particular project (as we endeavor to do through this very writing project), is it possible, as Hildyard (2019) muses, that they also have the potential to become empty, an easy dismissal of 'the problems raised by this kind of relationship,'

where the politics of representation and knowledge are fraught? Isn't there a risk of reflective practice becoming subsumed into the toolbox of the entrepreneurial researcher? Just another tick box exercise rather than a form of engagement that seeks to build different research relationships? These questions arise from our sense that reflexivity as a method of self-interrogation is not enough to attend to the messy, unpredictable realities of fieldwork (see also Sultana 2007). So perhaps the question is not how to be reflective or why reflection should be part of an ethical research approach but where are the limits of reflexivity as a method towards cultivating situated research? Enid's experiences of fieldwork in Pune raised these tensions and a sense that reflexivity was simply not enough.

... it was when investigating potential field sites for my MPhil research in Pune, that I was confronted by the power asymmetries that existed between me and the potential participants in different communities across the city. Compounded by lack of time and very little knowledge of the language, the potential power imbalances felt so stark, almost insurmountable, that I stopped to rethink and eventually re-orientated the whole analytical lens. Instead of looking at the experience of hope and urban development programmes in the everyday life of citizens, I decided to try to understand the politics of hope in the everyday working life of NGOs, with whom I had already developed a relationship. Looking back, I guess I avoided the tricky politics of representation that arose but I was also influenced by a sense that reflection on these dynamics would not help me to mitigate the power imbalances to the extent I felt necessary. This compelled me to rethink and seek a way of working collaboratively over a sustained period of time. My decision didn't necessarily solve the issues of power imbalances that inevitably arose but it enabled me to adopt a collaborative approach, embedded in applied anthropology methods, and access to a space within which I could attempt to mitigate the power asymmetries in the researcher-participant relationship.

– Personal reflection, 5 January 2019

The decision made by Enid was problematic in its avoidance of the difficult power dynamics that arose, but it was also a refusal to rely on reflection alone and to engage in potentially extractive research. Some of these ethical considerations could have been addressed earlier in the research design but others were only visible through interactions with NGOs, compelling Enid to address ethical issues on-the-ground. The example demonstrates the potential role of reflexivity as *part of* a relational research ethics, happening in-situ and in response to shifting power dynamics.

In thinking about reflexivity as a relational, in-situ process, we take inspiration from approaches that seek to 'think with' rather than 'about' those with whom we work. Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) notion of 'thinking with' draws on Tronto's (2015) call to 'care with' as a radical reorientation of caring relations, that she argues can and must also extend to academe. This requires a shift in power relations that characterise conventional research but also requires making processes of reflexivity visible and open to contestation. Existing participatory research methods offer ways through which to explore this process such as post-fieldwork evaluation or workshops with participants. For example, after conducting research with youths and NGOs in the Philippines, Chris presented his findings and analysis to those with whom he had worked.

Before returning to the UK, I organised a feedback session with the volunteers. I prepared some food and drinks, making it very informal but also told them that I want their feedback on my work. I presented some early analysis – some they disagreed with, others they concurred and some they helped me sharpen. It was a humbling and fruitful experience and truly, my analysis of their experience isn't the only way.

– Personal reflection, 29 December 2018

Seeking their thoughts and responses opened up a process of reflexive dialogue between Chris and the participants. Giving an opportunity to contest his analysis not only added analytical value and nuance to the findings but offered a challenge to ideals of objectivity, demonstrating the necessity of situated research that enables accountability and 'validity' *through* epistemological and ontological plurality.

As an integral part of collaborative, situated research praxis, our experience taught us that reflexivity enables researchers to critically address their own positionality in the field and the ways in which their research has an impact on the lives of others beyond the research. It serves as a method to critically analyse the power structures inherent in and evolving out of research dynamics and as Kunze and Padmanabhan (2014) articulate, can build an understanding of the ways in which social differences combine, overlap and intertwine. These webs of relationality become increasingly complex as researchers develop a situated approach that engages with people, places and non-human beings for extended periods of time, potentially a lifetime.

However, as with all methodologies, there are limits to their applicability. The scale with which one adopts collaborative processes, as described above, depends on aspects such as time, willingness of fellow researchers and participants, and the space to explore reflections. As PhD researchers, we feel

these limits keenly, due to the power dynamics in academic institutions and the constraints imposed by funding bodies. We do not claim to have a solution to these 'limitations', especially since they will materialise differently in particular times, places and scales. Nevertheless, if we acknowledge the *limits of reflexivity* as an individualistic and solitary practice, something happening in the academe and at a distance, re-orientating it as a process of thinking *with* rather than *about*, reflexivity becomes infused with a wider, collective process of ethical becoming within research collaborations and relationships. Not part of a tick-box exercise or confined to the critical analysis of positionality by the researcher alone but as a process that holds us as researchers, as well as others involved in the process, ethically accountable in a wider process of *ethics as negotiation*.

Conclusion: decolonisation and invitation for life project

Through this paper we made visible the complexity of ethical decision-making and shifting positionalities in the field. Although we are grappling with the need for tangible solutions and practical 'tips' to navigate and, to a certain extent, resolve these issues, in this paper we offer more questions and dilemmas than when we started. The invitation therefore is for fellow PhD students and other concerned researchers to engage with and continue conversations with colleagues, supervisors and 'critical' friends to unpack these situated issues and debate potential solutions *together*. This collaborative piece of work was, in part, our attempt to think together about these issues – learning from our shared unease but also about how tensions vary in different contexts.

With this in mind, we have offered alternative lenses through which to view ethics in research. We signal the framing of 'ethicalities' to refocus attention beyond institutional review boards and into ongoing, negotiated *relationships* in the field. As our experiences have pointed out, the relationships we create and maintain can influence what counts as ethical or unethical in a given moment. Related to this, in reframing research roles and identities from the polarising insider-outsider dichotomy to within the fluidity of coming from difference and sameness, we emphasise the situatedness of research ethics. There is both strength and accountability in this ambiguity. Accountability is interwoven with processes of cultivating situated ethical practices that are in constant dialogue with shifting positionalities, where consideration is given to what is meant by 'consent' and what counts as data, as both relational and political. The notion of reciprocity within this frame re-orientates 'fieldwork' as more than collecting data but also as an opportunity to research with and stand with communities. Troubling the limits of reflexivity, we question its purpose and explore the possibilities for more collaborative ways of *thinking with*. By making visible the

politics of knowledge co-production as a continuous ethics in negotiation, we invite researchers to sit with us in the discomfort of asking difficult questions of ourselves and others that join us within fluid ethnographic encounters.

We have tried to highlight the importance of decolonising knowledge production processes that shape research. Our experiences of 'doing' research in the Global South challenged us to think through the multi-layered power relations in research dynamics, 'staying with the trouble' of doing ethical research (Haraway 2016). This requires recognition and exploration of 'discomforting questions' raised by intertwined multiple identities and realities in research (Harcourt and Nelson 2015:9). This becomes especially significant when conducting research in parts of the world with histories of colonial entanglements such as the Philippines, India, and Indonesia, within which we are enmeshed. These spaces have been historically constructed through notions of one 'Truth', the universality of Euro-American-centric thought, religious fundamentalism, colonialism and nationalism. A decolonial critique, when understood as the critique "of Eurocentrism from subalternized and silenced knowledges" (Grosfoguel 2007: 211) therefore becomes central to recognising the limitations of institutional research ethics that do not see the multiplicity of shifting positionalities, the multiple forms of knowledge and practice at play and the dynamism of ethnographic encounters, as we discussed above. Remaining in conversation with decolonial critique and praxis offers pathways to navigate the tricky ethicalities inherent in cultivating research relationships (see Tallbear 2014).

In this attempt to further disrupt the power-laden researcher-participant dynamic, we hope to contribute to decolonial and feminist thinking that seeks to give value to situated knowledge(s) and an ethical situated position that sees and feels through a plurality of perspectives (Haraway 1988, Nightingale 2003; Escobar 2016). Contestation and negotiation, in this logic, are therefore a necessary part of research that aims to be a non-extractive, co-production of knowledge, though as we have demonstrated, actualising these commitments comes up against institutional constraints that we continually navigate.

In doing research within an ethic of relationality, situatedness and reciprocity, we are looking to cultivate research relationships that are inspired by the Yshiro-Ebitoso people's discourse and practice of a 'life project' (Barras 2004:47). Yshiro people of Paraguay give different meanings to daily struggles that force them to engage with various development projects. Instead of conforming to developmentalist time-scales the Yshiro people understand their engagement with development projects as a life project through a process of "defining the direction to take in life, based on their awareness and knowledge of their own place in the world" (Blaser 2004:30-31). This way of knowing the world can inspire PhD researchers to challenge the same

‘hegemonic threads of coloniality and modernity’ that characterises academic research – for instance, how Mai navigated informed consent, how Enid developed a collaborative approach and how Chris worked towards a reciprocal research relationship.

Ethical and politically situated questions such as “how do we (as researchers) know the world” and “how do we (as scholars and activists) produce knowledge” are not new. Asking these questions again here is part of our effort to contribute towards the ongoing, collaborative processes of decolonising knowledge, which always remains in debate and contestation. Adopting a decolonial, feminist research praxis however, seems to sit uncomfortably with institutional requirements, time-bound contracts and limited funding since they constrain both time in the field and our ability to conduct situated ethical research, as our personal fieldwork reflections highlighted. As academics and critical scholar-activists we understand research as part of our existence as humans-in-the-world, challenging conceptions of PhD research beyond simply a matter of ‘data collection’. This involves understanding research as a continuous process of ethical engagement with communities and places of research, and treating research as a process of relationship-building, negotiating difference and sameness, cultivating conversation and of sharing knowledge and struggle.

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