Journal of Intercultural Communication, **20**(2): 89-101

Intercultural Communication in Research Interviews: Accessing Information from Research Participants from Another Culture

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Abstract: Much research is done across cultural divides and necessarily relies on intercultural communication. However, existing practical guidelines for interviewing generally remain blind to the culture of the interviewer in relation to the interviewees. This affects the quantity and quality of the data collected from research participants who do not share the cultural or socio-economic background of the researcher. I address the implications of doing interviews that cross a cultural gap, showing how the researcher can step into the shoes of the Other and create cross-cutting ties. These practical solutions toward common pitfalls in intercultural research situations form a next step in reaction to a growing body of literature that critically reflects on how interviews are located in social contexts.

Keywords: cross-cultural research, intercultural interviews, communication with informants, social contextuality, data-collection strategies, qualitative methods, fieldwork, Othering.

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1. Introduction

In the social sciences, information gathered largely comes to researchers through their research participants, who describe, explain and otherwise share their views and experiences. Interviews are by far the most widely used method to access this information (Holstein & Gubrium 1995:1). However, there are challenges to collecting and processing this type of data (Briggs 1986, Gubrium & Holstein 2002: ix, Lippke & Tanggaard 2014), and few researchers receive formal training in interviewing (Roulston, deMarrais & Lewis 2016). Nevertheless, "the validity of a great deal of what we believe to be true about human beings and the way they relate to one another hinges on the viability of the interview as a methodological strategy" (Briggs 1986:1). The quality of data gathered through interviews is even more vulnerable in the case of intercultural research situations, which are more prone to misinterpretations, especially when researchers, under the pressure to "publish or perish" (Nair 2018), engage in short-term field visits expecting to quickly grab information and leave again (so-called "shuttle research").

As a social anthropologist and political scientist, I have engaged in years of ethnographic fieldwork, most prominently in the Netherlands, Germany, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe and South Africa (Wijngaarden 2010, 2012, 2016c, 2016a). Spending over two years in some of my fieldwork settings, I relied on a variety of interview approaches and techniques. When I engaged in fieldwork with research groups, including senior researchers and PhD students, I realized that some of the skills and strategies I used during intercultural encounters were fully foreign to them; and I repeatedly saw colleagues returning to camp empty-handed or with low quality data. In this article, I reveal some of the subconscious and seemingly natural processes underlying successful interviewing in intercultural research situations. These are strategies inspired by ethnography, selected to serve a wider body of researchers who wish to improve the quality of their collected data, but who cannot invest large amounts of extra time.

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Clearly, theoretical knowledge about doing interviews does not facilitate for many of the practical situations encountered in interviewing as a social engagement, which – as all other social interactions – is an embodied experience that includes emotions and performance (Goffman 1959, Ezzy 2010, Lippke & Tanggaard 2014). Due to limited resources, it may be impossible to accompany every researcher in the field to learn these skills, but practice can certainly be prepared for by sharing knowledge in writings. There is literature available from experienced researchers that helps to prepare interviewers for the field and improve the quality of the data they gather (Weiss 1995, Seidman 2006). However, these publications generally remain unconcerned with the practical aspects of crossing (sub-)cultural divides, which are present in many social scientific interviews.

Most researchers come from formally institutionalized, academic contexts and engage in highly modern lifestyles, while most research is executed outside this context. For their fieldwork, these researchers often move into (sub-)cultural spaces in which interpersonal interactions are guided by different logics than they are used to. Sometimes the cultural gaps are evident: for example, when an urban European researcher does fieldwork with First Nations people in the South American jungle; but, in our increasingly global world, sometimes part of the cultural or socioeconomic background the researcher is socialized in is shared with the participants, as can be the case when an upper-class Indian academic does research in the US, or research is focused upon minorities or long-term migrants within one's own national boundaries.

I address the implications of doing interviews that cross a cultural gap, taking into account that some of these gaps can be defined as subcultural divides. As I originally come from a relatively urban European environment and most of my research took place in rural African contexts, the contents of this article are most relevant to researchers coming from so-called "Western" backgrounds, or from more industrialized or urban contexts, doing their fieldwork in more "non-Western", rural or informal spaces, including those involving marginalized people, cultural minorities and migrants within their own nation.

Denzin (2001: 25) has noted an "increased resistance from minority groups to the interviews done by white university and governmental officials". What he calls "modern interviews" are resisted by many of the majorities of non-Western territories, too, and interview practices need to be adapted in accordance, to allow a dialogue and productive co-construction of knowledge. A lot of the practices that are taught in university produce asymmetrical and colonial-type situations when applied in intercultural contexts. In a popular academic textbook, Weiss (1995: 79) advises to reveal as little about oneself as possible, at least until the end of the interview: "it is usually enough for the interviewer to give business card information – location and profession – along with the study's aims and sponsorship". Such a modern, individualist approach would be highly counterproductive in many research sites in the non-West, as well as with participants of the marginal subcultures I have worked with in Europe. Moreover, his conclusion that it is largely irrelevant if a researcher has a socioeconomic status that is much higher than the research participant, and that having a white ethnicity does not affect the interview (Weiss 1995:138–140), might be true in certain contexts; but this would be a very naïve assumption when engaging in fieldwork in the contexts that I am familiar with.

The challenge that often arises is that researchers may realize that the research participants whom they are encountering have a certain culture, but they are largely blind to their own culture, which, far from being the norm in the world, is quite specific and has a great influence on their thinking and approaches in the field. In this article, I do make generalizations, but this is not because the variety of (sub-)cultural contexts that researchers encounter in the field are similar. Rather it is because several patterns and commonalities can be found across academic researchers who, whatever their initial (cultural) background, have been successfully socialized in a culture and position that are generally shaped by an extended formal education, a certain level of wealth and connection with (highly) modern cultural spaces – which, although finding varied expressions all over the world, also lead to certain patterns.

This contribution is not meant to provide detailed descriptions of specific situations but condense the practical workshops, briefings, feedback, demonstrations and instructions I have offered, focusing on the main areas of difficulty I observed researchers encountering when dealing with research participants from another (sub-)culture. Although every situation I witnessed has been unique, I aim to provide insight in patterns that I observed during interviews across different cultural contexts and emphasize valuable strategies to deal with these recurring aspects.

First, I explain some insights in how to create a beneficial context for doing interviews and strategies to deal with different types of research participants. Then I provide observations on the interpretation of their answers. My conclusions focus on the fact that intercultural engagements require one to step into the shoes of the Other, resulting in the transformation of Self. My practical approach is guiding researchers how to achieve this in practice.

2. A good interview?

When starting interviews at new field sites, often the answers collected do not reflect much of the sentiments or insights of the research participants and only hit an official first layer of the discourse present. A good example is how I interviewed Emmy (not her real name), a Maasai lady who is slightly older than I, in the first weeks after my arrival in the village in Tanzania where I did research about the imageries of the Other present in cultural tourism. Emmy agreed to the interview, and my local translator and I took her out of the context of her workspace, which is at an NGO that supported setting up a local community tourism enterprise. Away from any colleagues and supervisors, and assuring her confidentiality and anonymity, we asked her about her thoughts and experiences with tourists.

Emmy sat quietly and answered every question politely, looking down at the ground, acknowledging how everything was good, how she was very happy to work at the camp, how it helped her family and how she loved the tourists who are so interested in Maasai culture. We both felt uncomfortable: she did because of all the questions, and I did because I felt like an intruder who forced her into a position she did not want to be in. I tried to engage her in small-talk about other subjects: told her about myself; explained my background and objectives; and even softly pushed against some of her answers, asking for example if the tourists really never did or said anything offensive (as she assured us) – but there was no use. After half an hour of short, socially desirable answers, I gave up and thanked her for her help. Even though my translator said that she answered "as she knows", I was not convinced at all.

Months later, after I had become more integrated in the language and the village, Emmy became a good acquaintance. Using the local language, she often entrusted me with complaints about "white people" (including tourists) even while at work in the NGO's camp, elaborating on their rude behavior, the false believes they held about Maasai people, her underpaid position, etc. My hunch with regard to the first interview turned out to be true. At that time, she had had no idea if I could be trusted with sensitive information and automatically assumed my loyalty, as a white outsider, to the Western tourists and NGO workers who managed the tourism business.

When having only a limited time to do interviews in the field, one may not become aware if the data collected is of low quality and may reach conclusions that do not correspond with the realities in the field, especially in intercultural research settings. When research participants are answering questions, their body position, facial expressions and tones of voice are all indicators if they are speaking from their own points of view or stating answers with other intentions. If answers are short, in line with expectations, lacking detail, and without offering any voluntary information, the researcher should question how far the offered responses reflect the perspective of the research participant. As an ethnographer, I normally consider interviews that mostly contain these kinds of expressions as almost completely useless, because their reliability is doubtful. As in other types of conversations, indicators that "something is going on" can be laughing, switching languages, making eye contact with others, engaging in long silences, or giving answers that come very quickly: all of which possibly indicate a level of discomfort or even lack of sincerity on the part of the participant.

When engaging in interviews, researchers are often so focused upon their own goals that they forget their research participants' objectives with the conversation. Participant's intentions can be varied, and often more goals intersect. They might be interested in helping you, supporting the research goal, and answering your questions, but also in getting money or some other kind of gift/award, getting rid of you, not stirring anything up, expressing themselves, boosting ego, creating a certain kind of relationship with you, and pursuing all sorts of sociopolitical objectives. When interpreting and reacting to what is told, it may be important to scrutinize carefully the person's position within the community and especially his position and relationship with regard to yourself, the organization you might represent, as well as other people within earshot. This is especially important in interviews that cross a (sub-)cultural gap, because here the researcher is unfamiliar with the local context and therefore much more vulnerable.

3. The context of the interview

When one accesses information through research participants, it is often one's goal to understand the world through their eyes. Ethnography is an effective but time-intensive method to access these perspectives by physically engaging oneself in the activities and life(style) of the research participants, whilst recording one's experiences. Another (and complimentary) method to access a people's point of view is through asking them to vocalize their perspectives, which is often done through interviews. Over the past decades, it has become increasingly acknowledged that the activity of interviewing is itself an interactional social practice in which the researcher cannot remain distant and objective (Ezzy 2010). Both researcher and participant actively construct meanings, each partaking in the construction of the process and the resulting data (Holstein & Gubrium 1995, Lippke & Tanggaard 2014). When dealing with research participants, it is important to make an assessment of how we would be perceived through their eyes. Their image of us does often not coincide with our own interpretation of ourselves and may influence their behavior and speech when they are around us, especially when we address each other directly.

3.1 Preparations

There are several preparatory ways in which the researcher can soften a possible (sub-)cultural gap and thus ease interactions. The adaptation of dress is one of the clearest examples, often by modifying one's style to agree with the customs and expectations of the people one is working with, including a sensitivity to age and gender variations. Sometimes this means covering knees, shoulders or head; sometimes it is important to have clothes that are clean and without any holes in them, even if the environmental context means it is difficult to wash clothes or keep them undamaged (for example, in extremely dry areas without roads and with lots of thorn bushes). It may be advisable to dress as simple and sober as possible as to not stand out, unless fancy dress is required to merge easily with the participants. However, it is of importance to feel comfortable and remain true to oneself, not overly mimicking the research participants when their style does not genuinely agree with you. Instead, find a way to be yourself without being offensive or calling too much attention to yourself.

Second, it is advisable to spend as much time in the field as possible. Living as close to the participants as one can during the fieldwork has many advantages. It facilitates people becoming comfortable with your presence more quickly. Moreover, with the researcher experiencing more of the context, it becomes easier to formulate questions in a way that extracts the appropriate information and to interpret answers within their proper context. Shared experiences and cross-cutting ties build trust and can open participants to share more information with the researcher. In addition, they help the researcher to see the research participant in a multifaceted way and prevent Othering, in which the participant is perceived as having a fixed identity.

This means that contact and interactions that take place with participants outside the researcher's prime identity as a researcher are normally beneficial. Always keeping appropriateness and the envisioned positive outcome in mind, this can for example be spurred by borrowing and lending cooking materials, sharing food, going to a place of worship together, sharing a trip to the market or shop, or having talks about issues that easily create recognition and resonance – such as family, shared aspects of spirituality, selected actualities in the news, and issues dealing with work(loads), study(loads), superiors or teachers. For women, experiences with so-called "women's subjects" such as menstruation and pregnancy can enhance acceptance of and familiarity with the researcher. The idea is to think and talk about what one has in common with (some of) the potential research participants, at the same time sharing information about oneself, one's life and one's personality. Showing photos of one's parents, siblings or children, playing or listening together to music that resonates with both parties, and giving attention to symbolic markers such as engagement or wedding rings, symbolic attributes or jewelry, etc., can all foster conversations with potential research participants, so one can become acquainted, leaving the researcher better connected or even sparking the start a friendship.

It is advisable to think over possible cross-cutting ties before leaving for the field and bring items such as photos, musical instruments, audio files, clothes, electronics, sports equipment, needlework, crafts, jewelry, etc., that one would like to share about. Some caution is important because the early stages of contact are fragile, and one has to carefully approach people, especially in ((sub-)cultural) contexts one is unfamiliar with, to prevent offending anyone, disqualifying oneself, or unwillingly associating oneself in a way that builds ties with one group at the expense of another. It is important to remain genuine because, beyond the moral implications, pretending to be someone else is not only uncomfortable but also can be sensed by (potential) participants and hinder evolving relationships and trust.

3.2 Greetings and a thank you

If an extended or close stay is impossible, there are several strategies that require low investment but do pay off. I do advise to always know the basics of the local language one works in; but, if this is impossible, the researcher should learn at least the appropriate way to greet people. This is of importance even if working with a translator, because it is generally beneficial to greet as many people as possible. Greeting is an important aspect of social interaction in many societies, helping to facilitate one's reception by the community and kick-start small conversations that help to inform oneself about the context as well as integrate oneself and find potential research participants. Keep in mind that there may be different greetings and approaches used depending on your gender, age and marital status and those of the person you greet. For example, in Maasai I would greet adults who are not much older than I by calling out to them, even over large distances, using the appropriate address for their age group; and, when they respond, greeting them with *Supai*! (mostly for the men), or

Taekwenye! (mostly for the women), the plural of these terms being used when greeting more than one person. However, elderly people I would greet by walking all the way up to them silently, even if they are far away, and bowing my head so they can lay their hand on me.

Second, it pays off to know the right words in the local language, and also the gestures and body postures, to say “thank you”. Again, in many contexts, age and gender have to be observed. Sometimes eye contact is wanted, sometimes not. Sometimes a sincere word is enough; in other societies, a proper way of saying thank you is to stretch out and lie on the ground with folded hands. Even if the researcher does not pronounce or do everything perfectly, and even if he or she may be laughed at, in my experience, these types of efforts are normally highly appreciated. Even mistakes on the researcher’s part can create a more open atmosphere. Locals will feel more at ease to speak freely with the researcher, as someone who values and honors their (sub-)culture including their language, dialect or slang, trying to learn it instead of being an arrogant outsider.

Be sensitive to the fact that communities often have at least some negative experience with research projects. A lot of research is done by relatively wealthy researchers in relatively poor communities. Although researchers’ studies and careers would not be possible without the aid of local populations, too often researchers leave with the data without ever sending back the resulting reports and conclusions, and do not share copies of the photos and videos they made. Sharing of results and benefits should be as wide as possible, and especially communities in need should be adequately supported by researchers who benefit from them.

The only restriction should be that the research itself should not be obstructed by these compensations. For this reason, I advise researchers to refrain initially from individual gift giving, especially if the research is short and one is not integrated in the fieldwork community, unable to oversee the implications of these gifts. It is often more advisable to make a more substantial contribution that benefits the larger community at the end of the research or fieldwork period, in combination with a sharing of all the (visual) data collected with the people being depicted. If any personal gifts or payments are offered, it is of importance to find out what kind of gifts or amounts are appropriate and what is the right way to give them. In some societies, gifts are always offered with two hands, or with the one hand holding the arm that is offering the gift. In other societies, a gift simply needs to be left behind for the receiver to find it, without mentioning anything.

3.3 Flexibility in setting

A strategy of major importance is to undertake the interviews as much as possible in the relevant local context. Often this will mean visiting people in their homes; but sometimes it can also be at their jobs or by joining other activities, especially when these are relevant for the project: for example, during social gatherings or while engaging in hobbies. Observation of the context will give the researcher lots of background information and help him or her to relate to the participants, formulate questions and interpret answers. When I visit people at their homes, if I think the participant is enough at ease with this, I often ask if I can use the bathroom, because seeing more of their house can help to penetrate the “front stage” people may have put up and provide a wider impression of what people’s circumstances and daily life are like. This adds to the context of your research and can produce leads to ask questions and build cross-cutting ties.

Although they sometimes cannot be avoided, formal interview appointments are generally not the best. They can cause unnecessary formality and tension in participants and compromise an open sharing of thoughts. Unexpectedly dropping in, introducing oneself and asking if it is possible to ask some questions generally works well, except with people who live or work according to rigorous schedules or are deeply concerned about their privacy. Loose agreements to “come by” or visit on a certain day in the morning or afternoon generally function better than working with a stringent calendar, allocating an inflexible half hour or hour for each interview. Although exceptions apply, generally a more social aura around the whole meeting is beneficial. A guideline is to mimic the way in which the people you are working with normally make appointments in their leisure time.

Counterintuitive to what most researchers seem to think, it is often unnecessary and even counterproductive for research participants to stop their other activities and sit down to focus only on the interview. Generally, people are more at ease talking about themselves and sharing their thoughts while they are doing a relatively simple activity. Whereas a blaring television or radio pulls attention away and incoming phone calls, work tasks or conversations with family or neighbors on other subjects can be obstructive, engaging in household tasks or crafts (laundry, cleaning, cooking, gardening, woodcutting, knitting etc.) can be perfect. It is important to make sure that the recording equipment captures all that is spoken clearly, even if some noise and movement is taking place.

Physical movement in the form of doing an activity or taking a walk together can often help to move along the conversation, too. A shared chore – for example, the researcher helping with chopping, planting or washing (when considered appropriate by the research participant) – quickly creates a familiarity that can greatly help the interview process. Moreover, the continuity of daily activities and even added help means that the participant does not lose his or her time because of the interview and can share with a more relaxed attitude. The fact that it is harder to take notes when engaging in shared activities is often worth the higher quantity and quality of the data collected, especially when audio recording.

3.4 Use of objects

The use of objects often proves quite beneficial in creating a more relaxed atmosphere and eliciting more elaborate explanations from the participant. This can range from holding objects such as a pen, stone, or stick when speaking to drawing something on a piece of paper or in the sand – or integrating objects that are purposefully chosen or created in advance by the researcher, to elicit a narrative or response (for example, objects of art, photos, or videos). In certain research contexts, it can be highly beneficial to ask the participant to select a few personal objects that have relevance for the subject discussed, such as clothes, pictures, tools, or foodstuffs, or to decide together to visit a place that is relevant for the project: for example, a village, natural site, grave, landmark, museum, or (not-too-busy) bar, etc., and do the interview there. Be aware that it is very important to determine the cultural appropriateness of visiting the envisioned site beforehand.

Cards are highly efficient in animating responses from participants. These can be used as an alternative to asking questions: for example, asking the participant to speak about the concept written on the card or sort short statements into piles, those that the participant agrees with, those the participant disagrees with, and others the participant is neutral on (a technique described in Spradley1979). Subsequently or simultaneously, the cards are used as a stimulant for participants to explain their views. A more advanced sorting of cards takes place in the Q method (Shinebourne 2009, Watts & Stenner 2012): a mind-mapping technique in which cards with statements (or pictures or even musical fragments) are sorted according to a grid. I have found that even with illiterate participants, the holding and moving of the cards greatly enhances the length of responses and quality of explanations. With literate as well as illiterate participants, the playing of this “game” produces reliable and deeply insightful results, increasing the length of answers sometimes tenfold (Wijngaarden 2016b).

3.5 Audio recording

There is a lot of advantage to sound-recording interviews. Being able to revisit the recordings makes much more exact analysis possible. If translations are necessary, a professional translator can be hired to translate recordings and compare them to the translations obtained "live" through a translator in the field. When a researcher does not need to jot down everything being said, he or she has much more opportunity to create important rapport with the research participant by making eye contact, being attentive, and reacting to what is being said. Whilst recording, the researcher can still take notes regarding the circumstances of the interview, the context in which it is taking place, who is present, facial expressions, who says what, matters that need later discussion with the translator, noting down at what recording time points of high interest are being addressed so that these can be easily traced.

It has to be taken into account that a recording device can be considered invasive and unsettle participants. There may be circumstances in which recording is not possible. Even asking to record can break the fragile confidentiality and willingness to speak with the researcher. In this case, note taking has to be resorted to. However, if the researcher follows the recommendations listed above on how to approach research participants more generally, explains why the recording is requested and that one simply cannot write quick enough – underlining that the information is really of valued importance – this often helps participants over their initial hesitation. Once the recording is running, participants often forget about it and speak freely, so it is important not to place the recorders too obviously nor touch or look at them once they are on, unless necessary.

Experiences in the field have shown me that it still is of importance to underline that academic practice never allows researchers to record without asking permission and that it is important to make sure the participant has really understood what the recorder is and does. If participants ask you to delete or not to use something you have already recorded, it is of importance to listen to the reasons and comply, but when appropriate negotiate. I found that what is important for me to use and what is important for them to remain unmentioned are mostly slightly different things, and an agreement can be found that enhances instead of breaks down the relationship between me and my participants.

4. Approach to different types of research participants

Interviewees are not passive recipients but act upon and react to the researcher. A good example is mentioned by Sands and Krumer-Nevo (2006). They analyzed how interviewees regularly send shocks to researchers in resistance to being Othered, with the goal of negotiating a more equitable interview situation. Mostly, participants react to the researcher more subtly, which makes it even more important for researchers to be sensitive to recognizing this. As social beings, people often tend intuitively to phrase their point of view in a way that the receiver may connect with, understand or even agree with. If the difference in culture, social background, economic or symbolic status or gender is considerable in the eyes of a person, the framing of the message may increasingly move away from his or her personal perspective, to accommodate the receiver.

4.1 Perceived high status of the researcher

When a big gap is perceived between researcher and research participant, after agreeing to the interview, a research participant might find him- or herself unable to express his or her point of view, not being used to sharing his or her opinion in the face of someone who is deemed superior (according to local conceptions about gender, age, or social status). This more often manifests itself with youngsters and women who then behave shyly, simply remaining quiet or giggling, saying they "do not know", or repeatedly referring you to their father or husband.

In these situations, a non-threatening and personal approach to the research participant can be beneficial. This means that the perceived gap in status is being de-emphasized and circumvented through the researcher's behavior and approach. Most fundamentally, it is useful to think about how to phrase the researcher's introduction and the objectives of the research in a way that makes sense to the person who is being interviewed. The use of jargon or heavy terms would be counterproductive when dealing with a research participant who already considers him- or herself to be undereducated in relation to the researcher. The researcher has to try to place himself in the shoes of the research participant and ask in what way the research can be beneficial to this person or to his or her community.

This does not mean that a direct (material) interest to the participant has to be found if not obviously present; it can refer to the solving of a larger problem: for example, with regard to the environment or conflicts between different peoples; or a contribution to a moral goal: for example, intercultural understanding or furthered understanding of a certain phenomenon that can be handled better. Obviously, a genuine explanation has to be found that can be agreed upon and understood by both researcher and participant. Taking participants' questions and concerns seriously can help towards decolonizing and indigenizing research efforts.

Regarding the introduction of the researcher, when working with people from a non-Western background or minority subculture, it is often advantageous to deemphasize formal education and status without being dishonest. This can for example be done by omitting fancy designs of consent forms and shunning status-enhancing titles and expressions – for example, professor, PhD – as often as possible, instead using more general terms such as teacher, student, study and school. These are less intimidating and foster more opportunities to create bonds and understandings because they refer to experiences that are more likely to be shared. If necessary, it can help to reassure people that they will deal with questions that lie within their ability to answer: in other words, that they really are the experts you are looking for. It helps to position oneself as a student or child in the relative subject and locality of investigation, asking the participant to take on the role of teacher.

When constructing questions to be asked in interviews, the researcher has to consider reformulating the questions he or she has to make them understandable, relevant and engaging to the research participants. This often means not only changing the language – making it simple, short, to the point, without jargon or complicated terms – but, most importantly, imagining and immersing oneself as much as possible in the life experience of the research participants, translating the question in such a way that it evokes a response in the participants that is geared to what the researcher is, in fact, interested in. Often this means dividing up the original question in smaller parts and being extra careful that, in the process, the questions do not come to be reformulated in a suggestive way (implying a certain answer). They should remain open questions (not answerable by yes or no) as much as possible, because otherwise participants are likely to follow the lead of the researcher and only answer with single words. Sometimes, to prevent the question from being multifaceted or suggestive, a closed question can be used to initiate a second, open question that invites the participant to explain more. If a good rapport is present, often the second question does not even need to be asked, because the first question already invites a more extensive explanation.

A question such as "what are the socio-economic constraints your ethnic group is facing?" would probably not make sense to someone from a small village who has little formal education. It needs to be reworked into a series of smaller questions. Moreover, the researcher needs to use emic terms, which means words that are used locally, even if these concepts are considered politically incorrect in academic discourse. The goal is that the participant can relate to the question. In this example, the series of questions should be geared to find out what kinds of groups the participants distinguish in their locality, to which group they feel they belong, to which group others feel they belong, how daily livelihoods are secured by all groups, how relations between the different groups are, etc.

Examples of some of the questions could be: does it matter if you come from one group or the other? How do you live together in day-to-day life? In what ways are people from all these groups the same, and in what ways are they different in your eyes? Can you tell something about whether all these peoples are treated equally? Why is that? Can you explain if it is difficult or easy to belong to your group? Can you give examples of things that are difficult? Can you give examples of things that are easy? How do your people generally make a living? Is the life of your children now easier than the life of your parents before, or has it become harder? How so? Are there ways in which you would like to improve your way of life?

4.2 Perceived high status of the participant

When approaching research participants who consider themselves of the same status and especially those who deem themselves higher in status than the researcher, a common challenge is not to get them to express their points of view but rather guide their focus so that the conversation can be beneficial for the research. Although these participants may express their perspectives freely and without constraint, they may also hijack the interview by choosing subjects they wish to speak about and easily divert from what is interesting for the researcher to hear. Although some very interesting information is collected serendipitously, at times redirection is necessary. When an appropriate moment for interrupting can be found, the participant can gently be guided back by asking another question. If he or she keeps drifting off too far, after acknowledging the value of what the person is saying or expressing appreciation for what he or she is sharing with you, it can pay off to stress politely what you have come for.

Even if participants look self-assured, it works best not to criticize them. Rather, connect to something that the participant said or did that is relevant to the researcher. For example, the interviewer could say, "you briefly mentioned… [insert reference to what participant said]. This is so interesting to me! Could you please explain more about this?" or "from your position as a village leader/elder, I am sure you may have a lot of knowledge about… [insert subject]/ encountered situations in which… [insert subject]. I would love to hear your insights/experiences about this."

The higher the relative status of the participant or the greater the researcher's familiarity with a participant, the less the researcher has to worry about contradicting the participant or asking suggestive questions. When the relationship is such that one is sure the participant will express disagreement, interviews that take the form of an exchange of thoughts or a discussion can be fruitful to expose information and considerations that the researcher might have been blind to. These often more advanced stages of doing research, which especially take place when a researcher revisits the field multiple times and shares his or her analysis, facilitate for more of a conversation between researcher and participant and a co-creation of research results that is in line with more of the principles of participatory approaches (Bergold & Thomas 2012).

4.3 Questioning the researcher

Toward the end of my interviews, I normally ask my participants if there is any question I forgot to ask. This is to give them the opportunity to share any information related to the subject that may have remained outside my focus or awareness but that, in the eyes of the participant, could be important with regard to the subject or otherwise of interest to me. Again, this is part of a more participatory approach open to the awareness that analysis of the phenomena being researched is likely to take place, at least to some extent, in cooperation with (insights from) participants.

Another approach that can be very useful is to ask if the participant has any questions he or she may want to ask the researcher. Giving the research participant space to ask questions can help to ensure that the research process is clear to the participant. This can include, for example, the institutional and theoretical background of the research, research clearance, ethical permissions, return to the field for reporting results, and benefits for participants and community. The questions asked by participants can help the researcher to build his or her knowledge concerning the way participants view him or her, which is of importance when interpreting what he or she is told. In addition, turning around the roles can stimulate growth of the relationship between researcher and participant and decrease the gap between them. Finally, in interactions with shy or quiet participants – especially in groups – allowing oneself to be interrogated can put participants more at ease. I have often seen that, after this role switch, the conversation opens up and the researcher gets another chance to ask questions and receive answers relevant for the research. The interview continues, but now more in the form of a conversation. If participants are initially too shy to ask questions, it can help to start by volunteering personal information – for instance about one's country and life – breaking the ice, tickling the trust and curiosity of the participants, before asking what else they would like to know.

Many researchers forget how their own position influences the answers obtained in interviews and assume themselves to be the neutral catalysts of responses. In reality, interviewing is a two-way exchange of information. The more reflexively aware the researcher is of what he or she looks like in the eyes of participants, the better he or she can understand what they communicate. In interviews that involve intercultural communication, this requires extra reflexive and empathic engagement to bridge the (perceived) gaps between researcher and participants and engage in meaningful data collection.

5. Conclusion

Interviewing is a social activity. Engaging in interviews implies having to deal with all the ins and outs of social interactions, including (perceived) gaps between researcher and participants in terms of culture, social status, economic position, gender, age, formal education or language. In this article, I have made researchers sensitive to perceiving these gaps from the perspective of their research participants. I have addressed the implications of doing interviews that cross (sub-)cultural gaps and provided tools to bridge or circumvent these gaps.

A growing body of literature reflects on how interviews are located in social contexts (Sands & Krumer-Nevo 2006:969). I responded by taking a next step, toward advising practically on how to deal with this realization. I adapted my experiences as an interviewer and ethnographer to provide insights that can be applied more widely by researchers from a variety of backgrounds who engage in interviewing across (sub-)cultural boundaries. I offered strategies by which researchers can encourage participants from different backgrounds to "speak their mind" and gently guide the conversation towards the required subjects. Most importantly, I challenged researchers to imagine themselves standing in the context or in the shoes of their research participants when approaching them and formulating questions, and to search for a variety of cross-cutting ties.

Underlying these practical recommendations is an attitude toward fieldwork that has grown from the ways in which being in the field has changed me. In my experience, in every society where you do research, you find a new part of your personality and identity and a new perspective on who you are. This is because through engaging with people from a new (sub-)culture, you become a different social person, and this changes your personality and dealings with people. Often, engaging in fieldwork means more than collecting data. It is exploring a possibly new but always genuine part of yourself: a way of framing, seeing and experiencing yourself that helps you to connect with your research participants, to recognize and understand them and to be recognized and understood by them. Inspired by Benjamin (1988) and Irigaray (2000), Ezzy (2010: 168) formulates it as:

> An understanding of the dependence of Self on the Other for one's sense of self. Such openness to the Other is a gift—It allows Self to be transformed through recognizing and validating the Other.

As a researcher you do not have to be or become the same as your research participants. In fact, often you never can, nor would you want to. However, a deep and honest understanding of the Other and his or her perspectives and experiences resides in the attempt to find that part of yourself that resonates with this person.

The quality of research results is highly dependent upon the quality of data collected. Methodologies can be designed appropriately and rigorously but, if they are not executed in a dedicated and socially adequate way, the data gathered loses depth and reliability, and the resulting analyses confuse the academic discussions rather than furthering them. If the data we build upon is faulty or of low quality, all the work we do on that basis becomes deficient. So much research is done that crosses (sub-)cultural divides without attention to what this implies. With this article, I hope to make a contribution to improving researchers' performance with regard to intercultural communication in the field.

About the author

Dr. Vanessa Wijngaarden holds *cum laude* BA and MA degrees in both political science (international relations) and cultural anthropology (with specialization in sub-Saharan Africa) from the University of Amsterdam. For her PhD in social anthropology, she spent more than a year in the field engaging in a double-sided ethnography on the interplay between imagery and interactions in cultural tourism encounters between tourists and Maasai in Tanzania. She has contributed to innovative methodological and epistemological debates in anthropology and tourism studies. She works as a certified ATLAS.ti professional trainer and Q method consultant. She is currently associated with the University of Johannesburg, engaging in a research project comparing non-verbal human-animal communication in societies in Europe and Africa.

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