Title

“Lost in Translation: Relationships between fields of practice and inquiry among culturally and linguistically diverse researchers working with communities”

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Abstract:

This paper was jointly written by a diverse group of researchers (speaking 13 languages) engaged in collaborative multidisciplinary team with culturally and linguistically diverse and indigenous communities in Western Melbourne. In it we discuss the complexity of identities embedded within and transformed by the experience of researchers working across cultures, languages and disciplines. We argue that the complex experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse researchers exceed existing critical conceptions that ‘fix’ the movements across cultural fields as problems of ‘crossing cultures’ or ‘intersectional’ identity negotiations.

This paper assembles components of discussions held between researchers during the process of collaboratively writing, exploring the ethical dilemmas of representing the complex encounters of cross-disciplinary collaboration within a single research discipline.

This article traces a discursive shift from identity positions to an articulation of an ethology of cross-cultural research praxis, with shared elements across a range of disciplines. It examines the methodological issues of collaborative cross-cultural writing in order to critically articulate the disorienting movements and interchanges that occur across the borderlines of cultural and disciplinary identities in collaborative research.

Paper:

Introduction:

This paper maps a particular process or reflection and exchange that occurred within a group of researchers who worked together from 2009 to 2010 on diabetes prevention among indigenous (ATSI) and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities in western Melbourne.
Diabetes research is not a field readily associated with cultural studies, and critical examination of research practices and social considerations is usually confined to public health journals. However, type 2 diabetes is called a lifestyle disease, where attributed causes and prevention programs are imbricated within the habitus of individuals and communities identified as ‘high risk’. Community education and research operates on a bodily and social level. It concerns eating, shopping, cooking, physical activity, pleasure, sociality, social mobility, mental wellbeing and body image. All of these factors are deeply enmeshed with concerns of class, religion, ethnicity, language, economic status, education level and gender. Compliant or rebellious bodies; deviant or normative bodies, bodies that are marked as mobile or fixed, visible or invisible, healthy or otherwise, are actively produced, performed and contested by all participants within the research field.

The authors were part of a multidisciplinary team of researchers from biochemistry, community psychology, community cultural development, nutrition, anthropology, sociology, women’s studies, cultural studies, nursing and information technology. In fact all of us were multi-disciplinary – with degrees and professional experience across a range of areas. Every researcher on the CALD team was multilingual, and the majority of the team shared a similar ethnicity or language as the communities with whom we were working: south Asian, Eastern European, South East Asian, Horn of Africa. The indigenous research projects were developed and conducted by indigenous researchers in collaboration with local Aboriginal controlled organisations.

This paper examines how researchers in this mixed, contested field negotiated our own cross-cultural and interdisciplinary identities, with each other, and within the various research fields. As researchers working with low-literacy communities we were forced to gesture, to enact, to mime, and to flail between languages, images and ideas in order to communicate with participants. Our own bodies became acutely visible as points of proximity or distance from our audiences and the models of healthy lifestyles we support (Do we eat the same foods? Do we like the same music or sport?) Negotiating these shifts involved a performance of mobility, across cultural barriers of food preferences, social barriers of class and gender, and the physical barriers to gaining and maintaining a ‘healthy’ weight range, as well as many others.
The topic and nature of our research has led us to question how we define what it is we are doing, as interdisciplinary multilingual researchers, working with a variety of communities, within the context of a precariously funded university research centre. How do we define our roles as researchers/community members? How do we articulate the boundaries between research activity and reflection, and how do we map our experiences of border crossings in our personal histories and our research practices? Finally, how can we productively consider the performance of research, whether in the field, or in our university offices as a meaningful relational activity of critical praxis?

This paper was developed through a series of meetings, structured reading groups and email exchanges between participants. The immersion in fieldwork produced habitual bonds of trust and exchange, informed by constant informal discussions about cultural identity and how it is negotiated in our workplace and in the field. However, we wanted to have space to reflect on many of the anecdotes and observations more deeply and critically, in order that we could convey some of the richness of what we have brought to, shared and gained from our work with communities.

The hands that have typed this introduction, and sifted through the transcripts, emails, notes and other information, are white and belong to the first author on this paper. While this paper was a collaborative project, written in the voice of a plurality, the inner voice composing these words is completely at home in English, my first and favoured language. I am unsure how to re-present the words of my colleagues of colour without presenting a highly problematic ethnographic relationship to my colleagues, and a reinscribing of whiteness as the non-place that demarcates other bodies and spaces as those that may be coloured and defined by the invisible hand of white privilege.

Part of me regards ethnography as the most apt disciplinary analogy for how I feel in presenting this paper to a cultural studies audience. The process of editing this paper for publication, feels like a return from the non-place of the undefined precarious multidisciplinary research field to my disciplinary ‘home’ to cultural studies. This movement where I territorialise my collaborative work as ‘the other’, the field, the foreign, and declare the imagined readership of this paper to be my real home is problematic; it reterritorialises and recolours the space of publication as white, and the language as a whitened version of
English, that has the potential to fix the voices of ‘others’, and the movements in the heterogeneous spaces of collaboration within a whitened matrix of representation.

In developing the paper as a collaborative project, between researchers of different disciplines and differing class, ethnic, racial, religious, and social backgrounds I have found it difficult to know how to move beyond representing the familiar and quite delightful frisson of encountering difference which is re-enacted in the multicultural workplace. I am wary of reducing our collaborative reflection to what Ramón Grosfoguel refers to as epistemic populism, and yet, in the spaces between disciplines, it would be false to ascribe interpretations or critical depths that were not articulated in this space of discussion and collaboration. In describing the epistemic spaces within a multidisciplinary team, the ‘inter’ of the ‘interdisciplinary’ encounter, this paper gathers together a series of conversations that illustrate some of the reflexive and dialogical movements across and between researchers.

This paper traces a shift from a focus on cultural identity through disciplinary positionality to an exploration of methodology, and how researchers negotiate our shifting and multiple identities in the variegated spaces of our work. The shift from mapping of identity to the articulation of praxis, suggests exciting possibilities for the development of new relationships of inquiries between researchers who are critically reflecting on our positions within and outside of the communities with whom we work.

**Starting a conversation**

We started reflecting on the issue of cultural identity in July 2010, when Prabhathi Basnayake-Ralale gave a presentation and led a discussion on a research paper by Ruth De Souza concerning maternity care for emigrant Goa women in New Zealand hospitals (De Souza 2004). The article opened with an autobiographical account by the author of her own Goan origins, and practice of midwifery. De Souza’s article provoked considerable discussion of the use of autobiographical narratives in research writing, and the imperative for reflexivity and transparency that this demonstrated. As Prabhathi stated later:

*Why I liked De Souza’s article most was that... she says that you have to be really reflexive, and you have to identify your cultural... you have to expose your cultural identity or whatever identity it is. That really makes sense, because I never thought about it before, but*
you have to actually be frank about your standpoint, and frank about from where you have arrived in this research.

Prabhathi’s presentation prompted a discussion among the researchers of our own ethnic and cultural origins, comparing De Souza’s claims with our own experiences as health consumers, but also as researchers. We discussed whether our own research in diabetes prevention among culturally diverse communities needed a specific research framework, and how this could be described.

Personal cultural identity: what does it mean?

Rizwana Kousar suggested that we also start this paper with a definition of cultural identity, and make it clear so people reading this can understand what we are talking about:

*I think we are trying to address the vibrant issue that how culture is conceptualized and manifests itself in the process of cross-cultural qualitative research. Cultural can be defined in many ways such as it is learned as a system of expressive practices weighed down with feelings, a system of beliefs symbols, premises, rules, forms, and the domains and dimensions of mutual meanings associated with these. The learned beliefs, values, rules, norms, symbols, and traditions that is common to a group of people.*

In an earlier discussion, Rizwana had stated: *Part of this is what is visible as a type of cultural identity. For example, I have lived in New Zealand for many years and also Australia. Now people don’t look at me and see me as a Pakeha. They look at my scarf and see me as a Muslim.* She elaborated on this further, describing how her sense of what constitutes her cultural identity is based on what is perceived by others:

*Personally, cultural identity comes second to my religious identity as people in the community first see me as a Muslim, then as a member of an ethnic minority community. This has been beneficial for me whilst undertaking research, as I’ve been able to communicate with many multicultural people as we all share the same religious identity, and then I’ve also been able to interact with people who only belong to my cultural identity for example, non-Muslim South Asians. Either way, many multicultural people see me as “one of them” and perhaps, my religious identity is indeed my “cultural identity” in the eyes of others.*
Vicky Totikidis described her own stance in relation to a ‘critical whiteness’ with an anecdote:

A Chinese colleague once asked me whether I was white and it stimulated a long conversation. Whiteness consists of many layers aside from colour, including layers of privilege, advantage, denial, arrogance, pride and supremacy. Most people see me as white even though I do not share or possess these layers. Sometimes I experience greater privileges because of my colour but this stops at the skin. When people learn my name they know it is ‘ethnic sounding’ and they can begin to discriminate against me as if I were black or something other. In this respect, I share a layer of the black experience.

Vicky was very keen to clarify her own role in relation to being not-white, but not appropriating the place or experience of indigenous Australians either. To illustrate this, Vicky wrote about a recent experience during a conference workshop on decolonisation:

During this workshop the indigenous presenters of the stream asked participants to turn to the person beside them and ask if they defined themselves as a first person, second person or an ‘other’. I was with a white (Anglo) Australian woman who was planning to do research with indigenous communities. She had a problem with these categories because she saw herself as a first person: as a Native Australian. She said she could not put herself into a category and said “I’m not indigenous but I’m not a ‘second-person’ because we’ve been here for eight generations”. I couldn’t believe that someone could still be so back-dated about this stuff!

Vicky: I told the woman that “I feel like an ‘other’. I’m not a first person, but I feel a lot of sympathy and solidarity for Aboriginal Australians because my parents had suffered under oppressive nationalistic and communist governments”. At the same time, as I was born and raised in Australia, some cultural aspects of the dominant culture have been woven into my identity as well. It should be added that these cultural elements are not something that have been imposed on me by the dominant culture but rather something that has been chosen by free and deliberate choice through reflection on shared values.

I (Margaret) was in the same workshop as Vicky and I found that session really difficult – because I identify as ‘other’. One of the Murri women asked “Are you one of us?” and I said “No, I’m a mongrel bastard I think!” I don’t know what my identity ‘is’. My brother
identified as Wiradjuri, but I feel a very strong connection to my Mum’s white identified family and their ancestry as Anglo-Celtic Australians. In performing my own slippery *outis role*: sliding along the vertiginous shifts of illegitimacy – I’m white but not quite that white, I’m a bastard, maybe a mongrel, as brown shadows flicker across my families’ past - I am intensely aware that there is something incredible seductive about not quite being white. Paradoxically, the privilege of whiteness is linked to this capacity to move (into other territories) and constantly reinvent ourselves as something other. Otherness becomes this costume that we (and I mean I) put on and take off at will. It allows me to enter spaces in a position of privilege: as a tourist (if I travel) and as the adulated *‘Doctura Margarita’* when I work with Melbourne’s Latin-American communities in my heavily accented broken Spanish. Despite my ideals of participant action research, this mobility is strictly unilateral; their heavily accented broken English is a barrier to their mobility, rather than a conduit for the type of cultural tourism frequently exalted in such encounters.

For Aboriginal people, miscegenation is a stain from a deliberate genocidal policy and difficult to negotiate as an identity. This dilemma where the term ‘mongrel’ is an unspeakable insult, insists on the necessity of looking beyond individual identity as a defined point of difference, to the broader contexts of where and how a range of identities come into contact, rubbing against each other, conflicting, affecting and even infecting each other.

**The spaces between identities**

After Prabhathi’s presentation, I distributed a chapter of Sarah Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology* and discussed how I found her ideas of social *motility* extremely helpful in articulating the fluctuating intensities of my personal experiences of queerness and miscegenation (Ahmed 2006). I also shared the introduction to Homi Bhabha’s *the Location of Culture* (Bhabha 1994). In the following discussion Prabhathi said that Homi Bhabha’s discussion of ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’ accorded with her own experience of moving between multiple sites of cultural and professional identities.

Gail Paasse wrote on cultural and social identity for her women’s studies doctorate, and distributed a chapter from Gloria Anzaldua’s, *Borderlands* (Anzaldua 1987). Gail used Anzaldua’s writing on the critical imperatives faced by the “mestiza” to articulate the negotiations of class mobility made by mature age women studying at university and she has
subsequently cited Anzaldua in order to articulate her negotiation of her father’s Pawala identity, largely denied by her white mother (Paasse 2001).

In “Borderlands” Anzaldua writes extensively and poetically of the skills required by people marginalised by colonialism to living on the edges of identified cultures and cultural zones, to speaking bastardised dialects and half languages, and wrestling with multiple identities. Anzaldua provides a more poetic, impassioned and feminist version of the account of the hybrid gap populated by the subaltern nomadic subjects of Homi Bhabha.

Both authors interrogate identity by moving away from the individual subject that may be fixed into a particular description, into describing the liminal spaces between east and west, north and south, coloniser and colonised where identity shifts around and becomes unstuck, where language is hybridised and national spaces are heterogeneous and constantly moving. This focus on heterogenous spaces, allows the question of cultural identity to move away from what an individual ‘is’, to what they ‘do’, or what they could or could not do in a particular cultural, social or economic ‘space’. It works well with the discussion of the phenomenology of miscegenation, and how multiple identities feel and are produced and repressed and submerged across a myriad of sites and zones described by Sara Ahmed:

‘You can feel the categories that you fail to inhabit: they are sources of discomfort. Comfort is a feeling that tends not to be consciously felt, as I suggest above. Instead, you sink. When you don’t sink, when you fidget and move around, then what is in the background becomes in front of you, as a world that is gathered in a specific way. Discomfort, in order words, allows things to move.’ (Ahmed 2006, 154)

Ahmed evokes how imposed cultural identity is ‘felt’, while in the quote below, Homi Bhabha articulates the shift from the imposition of cultural identity to how it may be deployed and negotitated. Starting with the ‘darkness’ of cultural ambiguity, he writes:

‘From that shadow emerges cultural difference as an enunciative category; opposed to relativistic notions of cultural diversity or the exoticism of the ‘diversity’ of cultures (Bhabha 1994, 85). Enunciating an opposition to relativist accounts of cultural diversity involves
moving away from accounts of identity difference and towards a consideration of diversity as *productive*. This approach is reflected in the view articulated by Karen Adams:

*I think first nation/second nation and multiculturalism definitions are limited in that they focus on difference and 'other' rather than commonalities and having skills in working with diversity. They are also very simplistic as there are multiple layers to every person with gender being perhaps an obvious other layer. People who are genuinely good at working with Aboriginal people will have the skill set to work with anyone because they know how to work respectfully with diversity.*

In an email, Karen wrote that she was influenced by optimal theory, which derives from Lynda Myers’ writings on Afrocentric methods in psychology (Myers, 1985). Karen circulated an article written by Myers and others criticising an emergent field of ‘multicultural counselling’ as providing a ‘cookbook’ guide to culturally marked ‘others’ often through the use of racial and cultural stereotypes or by recommending that counsellors should be matched to clients from similar cultural, linguistic, religious and sexual identity backgrounds (Speight et al, 1991). By insisting that identity is complex and multiple and also performed at multiple levels, the authors argued for a focus on moving beyond identity into a more comprehensive development of interpersonal skills.

**From being to doing: cross-cultural research as an ethical epistemology**

Optimal theory is increasingly acknowledged as part of clinical practice in primary health care, and has enormous potential to challenge and inform how researchers and practitioners in other fields work with our own and others’ cultural differences. Optimal theory insists on reflexivity and self-awareness as the basis of attempting to understand and communicate with others, as well as an ethical commitment to clear boundaries, transparency, and the development of an acute open-ended capacity for dynamic observation and empathic listening.

Karen and I (Margaret) both share a visual arts background, and her research approach is very similar to the experience of observational drawing; where we constantly face the limitations of our capacity to represent our subject, and yet are continually opened up to a greater perception of it. This does not lead to a merging or over-identification with
the subject, but the development of a relationship that is productive. The ethics of ‘looking’ as a conscious critical praxis is best articulated by Jay Johnston:

*The look of love is not a passive enamoured gaze, it is a active practice that embraces the discomfort of not knowing, not recognising and not being able to master or control the Other. Looking is an artistry and it is work. The way one looks is an ethical choice: one does just not perceive, one chooses how to perceive (Johnston 2010, 215).*

The emphasis on the ethics of intercultural inquiry, as a relationship requiring the development and practicing of communication skills reflects comments made by some of the researchers. In discussing the relationship of identity to cross cultural work, Gail said: *Raising awareness and questions is more interesting in many ways. We’ll never have a shared understanding... but because we recognise that we can work together. I also learnt in community work that you have to ask. So now what I say when I go into communities is “I’d never do it deliberately, but please tell me if I say something that offends you.”*

Rizwana: *To vision clearly process of understanding we need to have two major components: firstly self-knowledge and self-awareness are needed. Without these, our seemingly normal approaches to meaning-making and communication will never be clear enough that we can see them for what they are: a set of rules that shape what we see, hear, say, understand, and interpret. Secondly, cultural competency is required, meaning familiarity with culture and the ability to act on that familiarity cultural fluency means understanding what culture is, how it works, and the ways culture and communication can happen at successful levels.*

Karen continued: *This we means that we never fully understand another person’s experience and need skills in understanding how to best work in this environment i.e. highly tuned communication skills, self awareness and clear boundaries of respecting identity expression.*

Karen illustrated with the following anecdote: *For instance, recently I heard a researcher present on how they collected data about a culture and then show a diagram they had developed about this. The complaint from the participants was – “They can’t draw our culture that’s up to us to do”. The researcher had limited boundaries about what they could interpret from the data collected. A better process would have been to go back to the*
participants and ask “How would you draw this?” I have also seen people draw a diagram and ask participants- “Does this look right?” The participants didn’t say much and later told me they hadn’t really thought about how it would be drawn and felt the researcher must know more than they did. The researcher had effectively disempowered the participants from expressing who they were. Even when working with Aboriginal people I see data as belonging to the participants and am very careful about boundaries. I like to use quotes of what people say as I feel this truly represents their expression and their data.

The negotiations between cultural, professional and epistemic identities was articulated by Vicky ‘When we decide to do cross cultural research there are some aspects of identity that need to be challenged. We should also ask “What other bodies of knowledge motivate our work?” The way I conduct myself professionally as a researcher and a psychologist is embedded in issues of responsibility and ethics and how to be a good professional. Where I come from (my roots) and my relationships to others in this place, also affects the way I work. There are definite cultural factors involved in my approach to work, part of it comes from my ethnic identity but it also is about human rights, and my ethics as a researcher.

Vicky included the following reflection on her praxis: My parents’ stories of trauma and loss have become part of my own suffering. This poignant aphorism evokes the ideas of ethical witnessing of genocide explored by Kelly Oliver (Oliver 2001). In Witnessing: beyond recognition, Oliver explores phenomenological of bearing witness to trauma and to testimonies of trauma given by survivors of genocide. From this she develops an account of ethical witnessing as an epistemological practice; of being present with the unbelievable, the incomprehensible and the unbearable, and open our selves up to the fundamental difference of the world, without trying to deny, enclose or merge with it.

Quite possibly, the ethical praxis of witnessing offers a useful way in which researchers of disciplinary as well as ethnic and linguistic difference can approach the otherness between researchers and the subjects of our research. Rather than trying to fix cultural differences into particular identities, possibly it is more useful to consider how researchers and subjects of research can productively negotiate the changing borderlands of our professional and personal spaces. Researching in the borderlands (between disciplines,
ethnicities and languages) may be best approached not through trying to map or model cultural difference, but by the deliberate and continual work of trying to listen, observe and respond empathically and ethically to the ‘others’ with whom we work, being mindful of our own identities and privileges and transparent with and respectful of the boundaries between and connections to the communities and colleagues around us.

References


