INTRODUCTION

The Critical Methodologies Collective

In qualitative research, the research process is often filled with moments of discomfort. These discomforts can appear at any stage of the research: when choosing the subject of research, during fieldwork, in the process of analysis and when presenting research findings to different audiences. In this edited volume, we take these moments of discomfort seriously and use them as sites of knowledge production for reflecting on the politics and ethics of the qualitative research process. By locating our experiences in implementing nine different PhD projects carried out in different disciplines and research contexts in social sciences, we argue that these moments of discomfort help us to gain important insights into the methodological, theoretical, ethical and political issues that are crucial for the fields we engage with. Drawing on feminist and other critical discussions (Mulinari and Sandell 1999, Gunaratnam 2003, Back 2007, Gunaratnam and Hamilton 2017), we deal with questions such as: What does it mean to write about the lives of others? What are the ethical modes and conundrums of producing representations? In research projects that are located in the tradition of critical or engaged scholarship, how are ethics and politics of representation intertwined, and when are they distinct? How are politics of representation linked to the practice of solidarity in research? What are the im/possibilities of hope and care in research?
Introduction

Representation, solidarity and accountability in qualitative research

Qualitative research is a representational practice, in the sense that it is concerned with making sense of the world, by understanding and interpreting the meanings of different practices, phenomena and processes. This is done by constructing representations of those who are being analyzed. Representational practices in research, like any other representational practices, always involve a process of translation (Hall 1997). Such a process carries in it an inherent violence of transformation, reduction or obliteration (cf. Hastrup 1992). In this sense, it opens up space for dilemmas of ethics of representation. Such general questions of research ethics should, however, not be divorced from questions concerning research politics. As we have learned from conceptualizations of, as well as debates on, the working of representation in feminist, critical and post-colonial fields (Foucault 1970[2002], Said 1978[2003], Hall 1997, hooks 1999, Ahmed 2000), these processes are not innocent, but deeply implicated in power relations of societies that the research concerns. In this sense, to create a representation is always a political endeavour. It is also the case in critical research that aims at producing knowledge that is concerned with issues of justice. While structuralist and semiotic traditions teach us how representational practices operate, critical, feminist and post-colonial traditions encourage us to contextualize these practices in particular historical moments in order to explore their implications for imposing and maintaining, but also resisting, unjust social structures.

A basic condition in qualitative research is that it is impossible as a researcher to fully understand every aspect of people or communities we conduct research with, with the resultant conundrum in representation. It is impossible to acquire ‘full representation on the one hand, and full comprehension on the other’, which
can be seen as an inherent failure (Visweswaran 1994, p. 100). This inherent failure should be recognized by the researcher, something that would allow to ‘question the authority of the investigating subject without paralyzing him’ (Spivak 1998, p. 276). This means carefully reflecting on the practice of creating representations of other people, while not letting these critical reflections lead to a state of not being able to do any representations at all.

In this volume, politics and ethics of representational practices in research are considered in relation to the question of accountability. Based on Haraway’s discussions of accountability as part of feminist objectivity, Bhavnani (1993) holds that anyone who claims to undertake feminist research must carefully avoid reproducing dominant representations which reinforce inequality. Accountability, then, she argues, is both about being accountable towards individuals (research subjects) as well as being accountable to the ‘overall project of feminism’ (1993, p. 98). In many of the research projects discussed in this book, this question is complicated by the fact that researchers often face competing or even conflicting accountabilities. Most importantly, tensions might occur between accountability towards the research participants and accountability towards political struggles in which the research project is situated (see the chapter by Tove Lundberg and the chapter by Vanna Nordling in this volume). Some key questions that we pose to ourselves in this context are: What modes of representation are both ethically accountable to those represented in the study and politically accountable in the context of contentious justice struggles? And what if these two types of accountabilities not only diverge, but even remain in tension? It is when asking these questions that we might find it productive to distinguish between the ethics and the politics of research. All our studies are politically committed to different struggles of social justice: from queer recognition of non-binary sex characteristics, through asylum rights and migrants’ rights, to antiracist critique, we recognize and adhere to a particular ideal of knowledge production in academia – one that understands the role and significance of social science in reproducing, supporting and opposing power structures.

This type of critical research often builds on an epistemology where partial perspectives coming from ‘below’ are seen to have the potential of creating more valid situated knowledges, as these positions will render visible the structures of power in our society, as well as structures present in the production of knowledge (Haraway 1988; also see Harding 2004, p. 128). Importantly, these positions at the margin, creating partial perspectives from below, are not static or universal. Oppression is produced through social relations and played out differently in regard to time and context (Mohanty 1988). The positions of social movements with which researchers claim to stand in solidarity, as well as the positions of researchers, need to be subjected to a thorough reflexive engagement (Harding 2004). Simultaneously, the knowledge produced by and in collaboration with social movements should be acknowledged as creating relevant and grounded analyses (Mulinari and Sandell 1999). Striving to research in solidarity brings to the fore a range of ethical as well as political challenges. Scholars who have worked in sensitive and precarious
settings often emphasize the importance of recognizing challenges of asymmetric power relations, representation, trust and suspicion, risks, agency and human rights (Mackenzie et al. 2007). An important aspect of this is that the precarious situation for people and/or communities who have been subject to research has led researchers to conclude that we must formulate research projects that contribute something back to the communities and individuals, and that research participants need to be involved in the production of research (Huisman 2008, Düvell et al. 2010). These are examples where the ethical dilemmas related to power asymmetries also led to researchers formulating and carrying out their research in modified ways. Although these are honourable ambitions of handling power asymmetries in a constructive way, it does diminish the fact that researchers gain academically from the interaction, whilst the benefits for the participants might be less clear (Sinha and Back 2014; see discussion in Pankhuri Agarwal’s chapter in this volume).

Solidarity in a context of critical research can hence be actualized in the meeting between the researchers and the subjects of the enquiry: what can a solidary position as a researcher entail within a relation many times characterized by power asymmetries? What stories are we to tell, how do we tell them, and how to ‘get hold of them’? Matters of accountability and representation are hence brought (back) to the fore. We do not claim to ‘solve’ these issues – doing research in solidarity with movements and struggles will always bring about tensions and ambivalence – but we find it crucial to address and scrutinize them to bring to light how to address, engage with and embrace the discomforts in each case of research.
Overview of the book

The chapters that make up this volume draw on experiences from research processes in nine projects. They all engage with issues of ethics and politics of representation in different ways. In some chapters, ethical and political dilemmas related to representational practices are analyzed as experienced in the fieldwork. In others, the focus is on production of representation at the stage of writing the text. Still others draw parallels between these stages. While the moments of discomfort that open up for different dilemmas are specific to the particular research process, we hope that they will resonate with similar dilemmas in other fields and contexts as well as disciplines.

In a dialogical piece opening this volume, Tove Lundberg captures how the choice of terms and definitions – both in conversations with the research participants and in the text produced by the researcher – might entail politically infected dilemmas that go beyond conceptualization of the object of her study. She articulates how, in the research project on variations in sex characteristics, usually referred to as ‘intersex’ or ‘disorders of sex development’, she was struggling when choosing how to talk about her research and address her participants. Lundberg shows how this choice had to do with particular politics of representation and how using certain terminology not only entailed a commitment to a particular scientific explanation of the phenomenon she was studying, but also situated her work politically in relation to different justice struggles. Lundberg shows how this dilemma reflected something at the very core of her study: the ways in which sex characteristics are constructed in a binary system where there are clear options and no in-betweens allowed, and explores whether it is possible to navigate in less categorical ways the conceptual, theoretical and political choices she has been confronted with.

The issue of ethics of representation arises at the very beginning of the fieldwork, by being related to living up to such central ethical requirements as informed consent. When we engage with other people’s lives with an aim of producing a representation of them, how can we be sure that those represented consent to this? Johanna Sixtensson describes in her chapter how giving consent or ‘saying no’ to being represented in a research project is a complicated practice that should not be reduced to a single act or signature on an official consent form. Her account of an exchange with one of her young research participants, both at the time of the fieldwork and after her thesis had been published, discloses complexities and ambivalences of asking for and giving consent.

In another way, the issues of representation are at the heart of Emma Söderman’s chapter. Söderman explores the work around the No Border Musical, in which she herself performed. In her thesis, she analyzes not only the ways in which a representation of the experience of borders was created in the musical by a group of activists that included irregular migrants, but also how working on the musical opened up for practices of commoning. There are two levels of representational practice in her work: the theatrical representation of the musical and the representation produced
as a result of research. In her chapter, Söderman explores what we as researchers can learn about representation from the method of community theatre, in which people with and without the experience of irregular migration work together. She shows how on the stage irregular migrants are confronted by what she conceptualizes as faceness – an expectation of embodying the representation of the other. Söderman’s chapter illustrates how issues of aesthetic representation – be it through performative arts or in text – are closely related to issues of representation in the political sense of the term. The question thus is not only where the source of frames of reference for representation is located, but also who is expected to represent or stand for the other.

A commonality of experiences in the field – and more exactly of the experience of waiting – is used as a point of departure in the chapter by Pankhuri Agarwal. Describing her fieldwork in the research on internal migrant workers in Delhi, who are struggling for their rights through legal proceedings, she shows how her waiting in the field became a site of knowledge in itself. By waiting for some research participants and waiting together with others, she learns not only about the workings of legal institutions in India, but also about how particular hierarchies and power relations are produced through temporal and spatial aspects of waiting. While experiencing waiting, with all its frustration and discomfort, which becomes for Agarwal a methodological tool in itself and a way of connecting with her research participants, she also shows how her experience of waiting is fundamentally different from that of the workers’. In a way, the very act of representing the experience of waiting transforms this experience and thereby creates a distance from the participants, suggesting the limits of commonality in the field.

In yet another way, the issues of representation – both in the field and in text – are present in the chapter by Katrine Scott. In ethnographic work, being in the field also involves a self-representational practice, when the ethnographer represents themselves to the research participants. Scott describes her search for finding a common ground with university students in Iraqi Kurdistan. She explores her performance of middle-class respectability in the field using concepts of ‘studying sideways’ and ‘matching’ and shows how these strategies open up for certain possibilities, while at the same time they bear risks of obliterating differences and power relations in the research process. In the second part of her chapter, Scott illustrates how the question of self-representation is not limited to the fieldwork, but continues in the process of writing: she explains how she used auto-ethnographic accounts as entry points to analysis, and discusses what such a stylistic choice means for representational practice of the other in relation to the ethnographic self.

Another contribution, written by Vanna Nordling, deals with the politics of representation in relation to expectations of inscribing one’s research into a particular field. In her chapter, Nordling analyzes the dilemma of representing her research on social workers supporting migrants whose application for asylum has been rejected. She writes about how her framing of the topic would shift when presenting to different audiences, in different research fields and in a changing political climate: making visible diverse, often conflicting, expectations of how social workers should
be portrayed and their practices understood. In a way, the chapter illustrates how representation created in the research is always a product of available frames co-created by other scholars, disciplines, institutions and political contexts in which the research is produced. Nordling’s chapter, in a somewhat similar way to Söderman’s, touches upon the issue of visibility of representation and its use for the political struggles, when such visibility might actually transpire to carry very concrete risks.

Another chapter addressing issues of representation in relation to the writing process is by Marta Kolankiewicz. It describes the process of anonymization in research on anti-Muslim racism in courts of law in Sweden. Kolankiewicz explores representational practices in relation to the significance of proper names of those depicted in the research. She analyzes the working of different anonymization procedures – from erasing original names, through substituting them by numbers or symbols, to giving pseudonyms – in order to ask questions about the politics and ethics of such operations. By situating these practices in the context of research on racism, Kolankiewicz shows how names are significant markers of difference in racist discourses and practices, but at the same time meaningful signs that carry with them diverse histories of racialization that should not be obliterated if we want to understand different experiences of racism. Finally, she poses the question of the role of the proper name for the possibility of attending to the singularity of the stories represented in the research.

The final chapter builds on a conversation between Pouran Djumpour and Eda Hatice Farsakoglu and deals with the practice of care in the field and in research more broadly. Djumpour and Farsakoglu set out from their observations from doing research with young people with experience of migrating to Sweden and with Iranian LGBTQ refugees in Turkey waiting for resettlement to a third country, respectively. They analyze caring encounters in the field through a reflexive lens. They argue that creating knowledge together with, and learning from, research participants involves making oneself vulnerable. They also show how caring encounters and relationships between researcher and research participants may alter both the research process and the content of ethnographic material, with an awareness of the challenges, limitations, multiplicities and contradictions inherent in ethnographic research. Djumpour and Farsakoglu close the chapter by addressing the reader and proposing that the practice of sharing – a practice that started through the given encounters with the research participants – instantiates the practice of care itself. In a way, this final point relates to all the chapters of this volume, which have been written with the intention of sharing moments of discomfort.

References


