

Community based multilingual research in the North East of England: Flexible multilingualism and language shift in the researcher-participant interaction

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This paper aims at providing an insight into multilingual community research, drawing particularly on a direct empirical research experience with women from diverse socio-ethnic and linguistic backgrounds living in the North East of England. Two different CLG (Communities and Local Government) funded projects explored between 2009 and 2011 gender perspectives on issues related to integration, cultural inequalities, coexistence of diverse communities and attitudes to racial and ethnic 'diversity'. The two projects (delivered through a regional charity) focused on the subjective narrations of on one side participants from migrant, refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds and on the other side on the experiences of white English women living in pre-identified deprived estates in the North East.

The multilingual dimension has been a central factor during the whole research implementation. Both the projects involved a complexity of linguistic positions from a researcher and participant point of view where English was displaced as a central and mandatory linguistic choice for data analysis purposes and report writing without being necessarily the first or preferred language for the individuals involved. This paper draws on my personal experience as a non-English mother tongue researcher working with a diverse range of participants exploring sensitive social issues related to attitudes towards 'diversity' and 'foreignness'. I aim at presenting some emergent issues related to the role of multilingualism within the research implementation and reflections on the emotional role of language in the researcher-participant interaction.

Firstly, central in the research implementation with participants from migrant backgrounds has been the role of a flexible multilingualism, as neither me as researcher nor the women themselves were mother tongue English speakers, yet versatile linguistic competences and the possibility of introducing a third language, not necessarily it being our main one, represented an important support and an added value to the research. Exploring the positive role in qualitative research of language choice and shift, this paper aims at presenting a personal account on how a flexible multilingualism plays a key role in engaging participants, creating a comfortable reassuring environment and encouraging individual narrations free of the pressure of a 'compulsory' unique language option, without the introduction of interpreters to provide alternative opportunity of expression.

More controversial from a methodological perspective has been the choice of an interaction between a non-English mother tongue researcher and English participants often speaking a very dialectal form of English. This particular linguistic choice of interaction, despite having been seen as inappropriate and discouraged within the initial research design, resulted into a positive catalyst to explore intimate views on delicate issues. Drawing on

this empirical experience, the paper also argues that researchers not belonging to the socio-cultural and linguistic context of the participants can provide a stimulating input to the research implementation as they are perceived as non judgmental especially when discussing participants' sensitive views.

Finally the paper draws on my personal experience of research within the communities to suggest and stimulate reflections on the desirable linguistic and cultural background or competence for researchers themselves, exploring issues related to the conduct of effective research and communication with participants within different linguistic options.