Destabilizing the privilege of the knower to establish forms of solidarity: Reflections on conducting fieldwork with vulnerable communities in India and Romania

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Abstract
In this article, I interrogate the researcher’s role in conducting ethnographic and qualitative fieldwork with vulnerable communities and argue that increased epistemological reflexiveness is needed to support solidarity ties between researchers and participants. In line with critical feminist literature and methodology, I present the inconsistencies of the power relations I entered as a researcher, as well as the systemic inequalities I found operating in the background. Using several vignettes based on my fieldwork with communities labeled as “Gypsy” in Romania and India, I make the argument that power dynamics encountered in the field reveal the researchers’ simultaneous privilege and their subaltern status, creating an epistemological position grounded in the intersection of gender, race/ethnicity, and class, which in turn could deter from bonds of solidarity. In line with feminist methodologies and intersectionality literature, I argue that the researcher’s gender, race, ethnicity, and class (co)generate epistemological outcomes, and that without critical reflection researchers may reinforce hierarchies of power. Thus, I both adopt and innovate this approach, by showing how as researchers we inhabit concomitantly different and fluctuating positionalities. I end by advocating for reflexiveness on the researchers’ power to create epistemological categories and processes, which may (re)enforce solidarity relations between researchers and communities.

Keywords
ethnography, feminist methodology, gender, class, race, ethnicity, positionality

Epistemology in fieldwork
Intersectionality studies have been arguing that the researchers’ positions are not fixed, but change as they engage with different segments of communities of study (Cho et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1998; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; Hawkesworth, 2006; King, 1998). As an (un)“situated knower” (Anderson, 2016) and reflecting on one’s “subjectivity, experience, and knowledge” (Bracke, 2017), the researchers’ multifaceted identities construct, enable, and sustain what we know and what we do not know, co-generating data (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2014) and creating “systemic ignorance” (Code, 1991). In her work “How Can She Know?,” Lorraine Code (1991) argues that when we take well-known epistemological positions, such as “S knows that P” (“S” being the subject of knowledge and “P” its object), we rarely ask who “S” is. We assume that “S” is a neutral, universal subject, able and willing to produce objective knowledge about “P.” But she goes on to say that we need to acknowledge that “the sex of the knower is one of a cluster of subjective factors (i.e. factors that pertain to the circumstances of cognitive agents) constitutive of received conceptions of knowledge and of what it means to be a knower” (Code, 1991: 4). Thus, by interrogating the knower’s positionality vis-à-vis the field, we can reorganize and evaluate the stories we tell (Aberese-Ako, 2016; Darling-Wolf, 1998; Dean et al., 2017; Giametta, 2017; Milner, 2007; Relles, 2015; Rogers and Ahmed, 2017; Soni-Sinha, 2008; Vanner, 2015).
From my fieldwork with vulnerable communities labeled as “Gypsy” in India and Romania, I learnt that the knower’s gender is important and also that one’s gender does not tell the whole story of epistemological productions. This experience revealed that categories of race/ethnicity and class need to be investigated along gender as mutually constitutive markers of power hierarchies. In this article, I argue that these categories, while analytically distinct, are in practice fluid and rapidly changing, creating ambiguous situations for both participants and researchers, rupturing or creating solidarity ties.

Understanding dynamics of power is important in comparative studies of minorities and vulnerable populations, where hierarchies of power may be reproduced. Thus, in what follows I present several vignettes of my experiences conducting fieldwork in Romania and India. Using these “reflexive moments” (Subramani, 2019), my aim is to expose the epistemological underpinnings of fieldwork by displaying how the “knower’s” gender, race/ethnicity, and class are important factors in accessing the field and in co-generating data.

Gender: being a woman in the field

I am a Romanian woman with dark eyes and hair, often identified as white(ish). When I started this project, I was in my 30s, with a doctoral degree from an American University. I have lived in the American Northeast for over 15 years. I speak Romanian, English (with an accent), and have an uncomfortable grasp of Hungarian. Aware of both my “social background” (Carter et al., 2014) and the “contextual complexities” (Reynolds, 2017) of my field, I paid close attention to solidarity ties based on ethnic, racial, gender, and (I thought) class “commonalities” (Widerhold, 2015) with participants in my research.

Three years into my fieldwork together with Aparna, a middle-age female of Tamil background who was my interpreter, I visited the Narikuravar semi-nomadic community (Dragomir and Zafiu, 2019) in Tamil Nadu, located in Southern India. Only the women in the community met me, as most of the men were out that day. This gave me an opportunity to talk primarily to the women, but after a few interviews, street noise pushed us into one of their homes. The women pulled up chairs and asked Aparna and me to sit, while they sat around us. Aparna conducted the interviews, accompanied by my attentive presence. Soon enough, one of the women handed me her child. I was used to this. I swung the child playfully while paying attention to the interview.

Without warning, the host came up behind me and started combing and braiding my hair with strong, precise gestures. The attention moved from the conversation of my interpreter to my host’s endeavors. I stood quietly smiling as she braided my hair and talked to the other ladies. When she finished, she took a picture with her cellphone. She showed me a beautiful elaborated braid decorated with yellow flowers. Because I had met this with tacit approval, the other women were eager to continue the engagement. After the women talked briefly to each other, the host retrieved from a metal chest of drawers a box containing several nail polishes. One of the younger girls—Veena—chose the black polish. She grabbed my hand and started painting my nails. Puzzled by the commotion behind her, Aparna (the interpreter) turned around. She started laughing. Our host wanted to paint her nails too, but Aparna firmly refused. Everyone was talking pictures of the event. Veena smiled brightly as she meticulously painted my nails. When she finished, she showed my hands to everyone. Our host then grabbed a bottle of bright pink nail polish and sat next to me. She took my hand and started decorating the black nail polish with the pink, inputting her own design. This was received with sounds of admiration by other women, including myself. When she finished, she turned to Aparna—who by now was utterly amused—and grabbed her hand. Without much talk, she painted Aparna’s hand. The conversation sparked up again. All of the women wanted to be a part of the event. They were eager to share with us their lives. As we left, our host wanted to make sure I would return for a forthcoming celebration. Everyone escorted us to the car and sent us off after a long and warm goodbye.

As Code would suggest, my presence in the field was gendered, and as a result, I was able to enter a gendered area and be in intimate spaces with other women, spaces where no male researcher could possibly penetrate. My gender was “productive”; it furthered my understanding of the community and produced gendered rituals of knowledge (Dragomir, 2019). The Narikuravar women I interacted with related to my obviously feminine body in an un-mediated manner and they perceived gender commonalities, which enabled our communication. Sharing the same gender facilitated our horizontal encounter and enabled an epistemological pursuit (Dragomir, 2019).

This experience was not unique, but happened regularly when I conducted fieldwork with communities negatively labeled as “Gypsy” in Romania and India. In the latter field setting, I worked with the Narikuravars, known as the “fox” or “jackal people.” They have been a nomadic tribe for at least 500 years, when they left Northern India and migrated into the southern part of the continent. One group of this community lives about 45 km from in Mettupalayam city in Tamil Nadu. Despite living in a government-organized settlement for about 50 years, they still see themselves as nomadic, able to take off at will (Dragomir and Zafiu, 2019). They are a small community of about 200 (the numbers fluctuate due to their mobility). They mainly live in one-room, asbestos houses with no access to running water. Even though I did not speak their local (Tamil) or traditional (Vagriboli) language, and so worked through interpreters, I got to know the community rather well. I felt at ease every time we were together. While language and culture made me aware of the differences in our backgrounds, they also facilitated my acknowledgment of our commonalities (Mohanty,
and at the same time challenged my preconceived notions of what it means to be “home” or connected with someone (Widerhold, 2015). Qualitative researchers have been claiming their “insider”/“home” status based on sharing the same gender (Taylor, 2011) or ethnicity (Widerhold, 2015) with their participants, but as Widerhold cautions, we should not to confuse general commonalities with more substantial connections with participants. Rather, researchers need to negotiate their multiple identities of both “insider” and “outsider” (Aberese-Ako, 2016) and evaluate how that continuous ambivalence influences the very understanding and analysis of the field.

These instances showed me that familiarity with participants is not a given, but created through activities conducted in common, such as braiding hair. Hence, I experienced that shared activities are more important than establishing superficial commonalities between researchers and participants. In other words, establishing ties with my participants—and therefore furthering knowledge—was not a unilateral, direct, vertical movement from the researcher to the field, but a dynamic, multidirectional process where power was held by my participants (who recognized me) and myself (as the researcher who wanted to be recognized).

Working with the Narikuravar women helped me acknowledge that even though we spoke different languages and lived on different sides of the world, we understood the techniques of beautifying our bodies, the precise beauty standards to which we were held as women, and we knew rather well that expectations of motherhood were a part of our shared commonalities. More than sharing the same gender, engaging in gendered activities created a sense of solidarity that generated knowledge about the community in general and about Narikuravar women in particular.

Similarly, in Romania, I have been working with a Roma community from Transylvania, also often referred to as “Gypsies.” Like the Indian community, they speak the local language, that is, Romanian, which is my native tongue, and Romani (the language of their community)—a language that I do not speak. They are also a small community (about 800 people), living approximately 45 km from the main city (i.e. Brasov).

My research in both settings has been focused on how people placed in “subaltern” (Spivak, 1988) positions often employ different strategies and methods to access social justice. In contrast with previous scholarship where marginalized communities are shown to resist the state and engage in hostile acts to undermine its authority, this work highlights how such communities are willing to become full members of the state and how, through different means—such as protests, sit-ins, and grassroots organizing—they seek the attention of the state, hoping to reach inclusion. Furthermore, starting from the premise that hierarchies internal to a community are at least as important, if not more so, than hierarchies imposed exogenously, my larger project explores the impact of gender, class, and race/ethnicity in acquiring parity. When conducting this work, my own identity revealed our shared subaltern commonalities and implicitly furthered our solidarity.

**Conforming to gender norms**

During the event described above, two aspects might appear as familiar to the researcher accustomed to doing fieldwork. The first one reveals my almost automatic acceptance of “essentialist notions of womanhood” (Wolf, 1996) in gaining access and acceptance. While in my work and daily life I reflect and critically engage with essentializing notions of womanhood, in this instance I dove right into these gendered expectations, which I deemed necessary for me (and my interpreter) to continue. For instance, I intuitively knew that refusing to hold the baby would have been a great offense, probably an unforgettable one, for the mother and the others in the group. In turn, accepting this gendered role, engaging in these gendered practices, brought me closer to the participants. They welcomed my presence and enabled me to conduct fieldwork, generating knowledge.

Women are the primary caregivers in both the Roma and Narikuravar communities. As a result, when I interviewed women, children were often in the room. I quickly realized that I was expected to interact with them. In Romania, if a child was present, it was tacitly assumed that they would be a part of the conversation. If children were absent, I was expected to ask questions about them, like their name or age, and send them my blessing of reaching an old age. If an infant was present, the mother or the caretaker would immediately hand me the child to hold and caress. This close proximity to children of folks I have never met before is a part of my Romanian ethnic heritage. While I am familiar with and enjoy taking part in these social rituals, I also understood that they were gendered ceremonies. My interactions with the children of the community solidified my gender and my possible position as a mother. After the brief encounter with their children, the women thought it was a good time to ask about my own children. I had to explain that I was not married and had no children, and then reassure them that despite that, I was fine.

I found that pressure to conform to gender norms in such research settings is not uncommon. Many female researchers, regardless of race or ethnicity, are more “pressured than men to conform to local gender norms, which may create difficulties and dilemmas for feminist researchers working in highly patriarchal settings” (Wolf, 1996: 8). In my case, while it was easy to slip into some of the assumed gender roles, I also encountered difficulties in negotiating aspects of my identity that did not conform to these roles, such as being unmarried and childless. In turn, these gender negotiations allowed me to enter the community and to further my research. I became a gendered “S,” who was accepted in the field based on her adherence to gender norms, and from that position learned about and analyzed “P.” Being a gendered
subject empowered my access to the field, and it produced a
gendered epistemological approach and data collection.

**Clothing and the female body**

If ethnography is, as Kloß (2017) argues, “a gendered prac-
tice in which gender norms, the (a)sexuality of the field-
worker, and power relations directly influence research and
the researcher’s safety” (p. 396), then it was important that I
acknowledged these norms and conformed to the scripts of
gender even before I entered the field. My gender became a
topic of conversation for the people helping me meet these
communities for the first time.

When I asked colleagues, friends, and other people in
positions of power to coordinate the logistics for my field
research, they said, “Do not go alone. Bring someone with
you, preferably a man.” Well aware of the myths associating
Roma and “Gypsy” with criminality, I wanted to challenge
their views, so “Why,” I asked. Most were annoyed with my
naiveté. “You can’t go there by yourself!” they said, rolling
their eyes. “You are a woman. You never know what could
happen!” Their comments reiterated what I knew even before
coming into the field, namely that my gender was already
assigned, and therefore my behavior was placed and pre-
scribed, with any deviation registered and possibly
castigated.

In India, the evening before I went to the first research
site, I received a phone call from the person facilitating my
encounter with the community. He was an American who
had been living in India for a number of years. He had never
met the Narikuravar “Gypsy” community himself, but some-
how felt the need to check on me:

> “Tomorrow,” he said, “you will go to meet the Narrikurovars,
right?”

I answered yes.

> “You will be met by Sasi upon your arrival,” he said. “You have
his number!” he verified and I confirmed. “What will you
wear?” he asked.

I told him that I was going to wear something comfortable.

He felt compelled to say, “Just make sure you wear something
covering. Do not wear anything tight.”

He did not explain why I should wear something “cover-
ing.” Back then, I simply took it as advice from a fellow
“overseas” in India. When these bits of advice multiplied and
when I received both advice and permission from “overseas”
and Indian folks alike, I understood that warnings about
clothing signaled something else. It was obvious that I
needed to accept and enact a gendered code of behavior.
Similar to other women researchers who have worked in the
Middle East or South Asia (Wolf, 1996), I had to consciously
think “about adopting local dress, wearing a veil.” Like
many, it felt “strange at first, but eventually, it [became] nat-
ural” (Wolf, 1996: 8).

Not only did my acceptance of local clothing become a
symbol of my willingness to respect local behavior, but it
was also symbolic of my willingness to de-sexualize my
body and minimize the impressions my gender would have
in the field. Out of respect for the communities I was work-
ing with, as well as for my own work, I struck a compromise:
I wore long, flowing clothing of my choice—not necessarily
clothing typically worn by women in the community—but
clothing that covered my body nonetheless.

Similarly, when I entered the Roma community in
Romania, I was well aware of the unwritten rules of how a
female researcher’s body must be presented in the field. I
observed the gendered codes of the community, internalized
them, and opted for similar clothing. I did this despite the
fact that the Roma community is not conservative, and the
Romanian Roma I work with often wear “modern” clothing.
As Reinhaz (1992) reveals, refusing to adopt clothing
acceptable in the community I work with, while symbolic,
runs the risk of losing participants. Thus, the way I dressed
my body and the fact that little deviances from accepted gen-
dered dress code could have meaningful impacts made me
continuously aware of how fluid and ever-changing relations
between the researcher and participants are. Hence, I advoc-
ate that accepting and embodying gender norms further
positioned me in the field, empowering and limiting access
to data, accordingly.

**Gendered spaces**

Exposure to gendered assumptions and practices continued
while I was in the field. My male “key informant” Dan and I
were traveling through his village in Romania, when we
came upon the house of his ancestors. We were in the cour-
yard of the old house, a large, two-story building with an
antiquated design, surrounded by tall walls, secluded from
the outside world. His aunt and uncle now lived in the front
part of the house, he explained. I was filming the house when
they opened the door and greeted us, obviously surprised by
my random presence in their courtyard. They were an elderly,
good-looking couple. Dan told them that I was a university
professor from America, conducting research with the Roma.

Immediately, the woman retired to the house. The man
stepped out, eager to tell me his life story. He invited us
inside. His wife rapidly turned to the kitchen and started pre-
paring exquisite Italian-pressed coffee. He invited us into the
newly remodeled living room. We sat on the couch and
chairs, around a brand new coffee table. The aroma of the
coffee filled the high-ceiling room. We started talking. His
wife entered with a tray on which were nicely laid, beautiful
coffee cups, sugar, and milk. She placed the tray on the table.
Then she took a chair by the window, far from us. I felt it was
impolite of me to sit with her nephew and husband around
the table, with my back at her, while she was isolated in the other corner of the room. I stood up and gestured her to my now empty armchair. She smiled at me, but firmly refused. When I insisted, she physically signaled her refusal, while the men urged me to take my seat, as she would not. As we continued with the interview, she came to check on the coffee and took away the empty cups. Then she quietly resumed her seat in the corner.

I wanted to get to know her. She was in her mid-50s, beautiful, with large green eyes and graying hair pulled back in a dignified bun. I asked her a few questions. She monosyllabically answered, but when I tried to engage her further, she gently pointed to her husband. Not all women in the Romanian Roma community I worked with had her gentle and inconspicuous attitude, but once I was introduced as a researcher and my primary relationships to them was defined as such, most women deferred the talk to their husbands, while they simply observed. These instances alerted me to the multiplicity of my roles and of possible within-role perceived hierarchies. While I was perceived as a woman, I was also a researcher, and in these circumstances, my professional identity took priority. My entry in the field and, implicitly, my position of generating data shifted and oscillated between being a researcher and a woman, revealing how I moved and embodied through multiple positions simultaneously.

The primacy of my gender and my social position alternated in India as well. Early on, when I first entered the community, during the weekend on a hot Indian winter day, my male translator, Arjun, accompanied me. The community invited us to sit in their common courtyard. While my translator explained the research objectives, I tacitly observed the dynamics. In a matter of minutes, many of the Narikuravars looked for a place in our vicinity. They swiftly congregated in concentric semi-circles, effortlessly divided by gender, with men sitting in the front and women in the back. The men started talking, simultaneously. The women watched in the back, rapidly making bead chains without even looking down at their work. Even though I was new to the Narikuravar community, I was already familiar with the Tamil culture and language, and I could understand the main idea of their conversation. Hence, when I noticed that the conversation with the interpreter was going astray, I tried to gently refocus it. To my surprise, when I attempted to interrupt Arjun, the men jumped as if touched by fire. Many scolded me, making the international sign of shutting up by putting their fingers to their lips. It became clear that even though I was the researcher, the male interpreter was seen as having the main role. I pulled back so as not to antagonize my hosts and watched the dynamics carefully. None of the men looked at me; they only made eye contact with Arjun.

As the conversations progressed, several women came behind me and started touching my hair, looking to engage me by showing me their babies or the necklaces they were making. As we were new to this site, my attention was much needed in the process of asking questions and ensuring that all the recording devices were working properly. It became clear that engaging “according to my gender” by talking to the women and allowing the man to conduct the work was salient. My gender placed me in a secondary position vis-à-vis the male interpreter and put in the back seat my social-professional identity. I no longer occupied the privileged space I had in the Roma community; now my gender assigned me to a subordinate position.

These encounters divulged hierarchies and power dynamics within the Roma and Narikuravar communities, making me aware of the fact that while I was a woman, I was also a researcher and an “outsider,” and as such I inhabited multiple positions that often allowed me to access predominantly masculine spaces. From this privileged place, I was able to engage in an epistemological pursuit, in a gendered reflection, and to co-generate grounded data and analysis.

Solidarity and conforming to gender roles

By allowing me to access different (both feminine and masculine) spaces, my gender further produced a specific knowledge about the field I was researching. I felt close to the Roma and the Narikuravar women because I was familiar with those hierarchical gendered dynamics. These gendered encounters felt “natural.” They furthered my entry into the communities, establishing trusted relations. It was the priority of gender relations that allowed us to establish a sense of solidarity. The preexistence of this tacit knowledge furthered informal connections and established a solidarity, which—even though short-lived—empowered participatory liaisons and elicited unique knowledge. Accepting gender norms that are typically seen as oppressive allowed me to see what is expected of Roma and “Gypsy” women, and to learn about internal gendered hierarchies, spaces, and practices. But my experience in the field taught me that hierarchies of race/ethnicity and class also mark epistemological spaces, along with undeniable gender dynamics. These multiple hierarchies intersected, placing me as the knower in simultaneous subaltern and power positions, which increased the ambiguity of field research.

Race/ethnicity and class

Although the Narikuravar women were eager to transform me into what they perceived as the ideal of beauty, and despite the immersion that rendered me “feeling underpowered and dependent” (Wolf, 1996: 10), the inequality between participants and myself persisted. These power dynamics made it clear how in the production of knowledge the researcher, that is, “S,” is placed in various and concomitant power relations that both hinder and facilitate access to the object of knowledge, that is, “P.”

Like many feminists conducting fieldwork, I quickly became aware of “the unequal hierarchies or levels of control
that are often maintained, perpetuated, created and re-created during an after-field research” (Wolf, 1996: 2) that were included, but not limited, to my gender. If I had not acknowledged that these hierarchies exist and formulate a certain dynamic in fieldwork, I could have been trapped in illusions of scientific “neutrality” and grandiose “objectivity.” As I will discuss next, my work in the field revealed how not only my gender but also my white skin color, my middle class status, and my Romanian identity often placed me in a fluctuating position of power vis-à-vis the participants of my study.

Ethnicity: being a strange woman

It is often assumed, though the assumption has been challenged (Berik, 1996; Letherby et al., 2014), that an insider in the community will have a better understanding of the community and produce (more) valuable research. It is also assumed that there is a certain line between insider and outsider that one has to cross to produce valuable insights. The anticipation is that this is a one-way street, that one starts as an outsider and slowly becomes an insider, and that once a line is crossed, that person will be seen as an insider. This line of thought leads to the conclusion that outsider status in the field creates insurmountable limitations in the research process and in its outcomes. Proponents of this view argue that being an “insider,” a part of the researched community, comes with the advantage of familiarity, which ensures in-depth understanding of subtleties that otherwise might go unnoticed.

While there are clear advantages to being an “insider,” being an “outsider” might also allow the researcher to “gain more license and flexibility to cross gender boundaries because of their foreign ‘otherness’” (Wolf, 1996: 13). However, as researchers we “do not always identify with respondents and vice versa, even when they share an experience and/or identity, and involvement at any level brings its own challenges and problems within research” (Letherby et al., 2014: 2–11). Both in India and in Romania, I entered the field as a stranger. Even though I had Romanian citizenship, like many of the Roma I worked with, and we had at least one language in common, some of the Romanian Roma addressed me as a “gadje,” a non-Romani person. In India, my strangeness was even more obvious. The lack of common language placed me as a stranger to South India, with the obvious physical differences further highlighting my non-Indian background.

My gender was complicit with my strange ethnicity, which at times empowered me to transgress some internal gendered hierarchies. In Romania my “strangeness” was not so clear: I could blend in with the Roma community, and within the larger Romanian one as well, so my transgression was limited. Counter-intuitively, in India my strangeness was more visible, and as a result I was allowed more freedom in bending social and cultural rules.

During the summer of 2015, I arrived at the Narikuravar settlement, just as the community was preparing for a festival. Everyone was busy, running around. They invited me into the courtyard between their houses, next to the small temple. There, under the shade of an impromptu cover, the men were busy organizing the festivities. There were several goats and chickens tied to poles, the open fire was burning; onions, garlic, and potatoes were lying on the floor, ready to be peeled. I turned to my interpreter—Aparna—and asked where the women were. She asked the men. They told her that only men could take care in the preparation for the festival, including the cooking. As cooking was typically a woman’s chore in the Narikuravar community, I asked, “How come?” One of the elderly men came closer to us and started explaining. They were about to kill the animals, and there would be blood. It was better for the women to be out of that place, so they would not become impure. Aparna and I were already standing on that “impure” ground, so I asked, “Can we be here?” To my naive question, the interpreter smiled. The Narikuravar man said, “Yes, yes.” Aparna, who now became my cultural guide, said, “We are not Narrikurovars. For them we are already impure. We can stand wherever we want.” So we stayed on impure ground, while the Narikuravar women were at the margins, watching everything from afar. The men went ahead and killed the goats and chickens, teaching their male youth the techniques. The red blood soaked the earth beneath our feet; the animals were slowly turning into food, cooking over open fire. We walked around, watching the men cook, chatting with them, and taking pictures, all while the Narikuravar women were peeking at us from far away.

Had I been an “insider,” a Narikuravar in this case, being a woman would have deterred me from entering the space that was reserved exclusively for men. But because I was of a different ethnic background, and in their eyes already “impure,” I could access male-dominated spaces in a way that was not accessible to the Narikuravar women. As a stranger, I could break certain stereotypes. My “strangeness” placed me at the margins of the community, in an ambivalent position, where I could partake in endeavors from which women were “protected.”

The insider/outsider divide rests on the assumption that researchers have monolithic identities which place them on one or another side of an imagined line. However, as the examples above illustrate, one’s identity is anything but monolithic: we inhabit multiple, intersecting, and changing identities, such as being a woman, Eastern European, middle class, and educated. And in this case, while some markers might make me an insider to the group, others make me an outsider, situating me in a privileged position within the local hierarchy. This dynamic further enabled me to create knowledge on a subject that women from the community have limited access. Furthermore, acknowledging my positionality vis-à-vis the field obliterated my illusions of epistemic neutrality. Thus, standing on “impure” ground, I was able to
explore the dynamics of the community and co-generate research data that would have not been possible had I been an insider of the community.

**Intersection of class and race**

Throughout my fieldwork, it became clear that my gender and ethnicity were important, facilitating my entrance in certain spaces and deterring me from accessing others (Milner, 2007). As a woman, I was familiar and could detect with ease patriarchal structures, and I thought that I could navigate with the same ease the racial and class ones. But my work in the field surprised me; it exposed the limits of my research and also empowered horizontal connections with my participants, which ultimately enabled solidarity.

I am from Romania. I grew up in a communist and post-communist society. I moved to the United States during my university years. I became a graduate student, living in New York City. My self-knowledge revolved not only around my gender but also around my ethnicity as a Romanian. Even though within the US academic settings my racial/ethnic background was at times inconspicuous and traveling in Europe I was made acutely aware of my “subaltern” position: from being followed while shopping in Germany by store attendants when they heard me speaking Romanian, to being mistaken as a perpetrator rather than a victim of a burglary I suffered in Spain; from being told that I could not be a Romanian and speak such good French in the United Kingdom, to being pulled out of the line on the site of my passport in the Netherlands. The pain of (re)defining myself within racist eyes was all too familiar. Moreover, living for many years as a graduate student in one of the most expensive cities in the world and holding a precarious faculty position at a poorly funded university, I have always identified with people living with limited means.

Hence, whenever I was in the field, working with the Narikuravars or the Roma, I assumed a common solidarity based on our vulnerability. But that was quickly challenged. In one instance, when I was talking to one of the Roma participants, Vali, about what it means to be a Roma, she told me that whenever she goes into town she dresses particularly nice, so she would not be discriminated against. She felt confident when she was at home, but whenever she entered stores shopkeepers followed her around or even threw her out on suspicion of theft. This was done because, despite her behavior and nice clothes, they focused primarily on her race and identified her as a “Gypsy.” I listened to her story with empathy. I recalled the time a store assistant in a Germany followed my mom and me around as soon as she heard us speaking Romanian. I considered sharing the story with Vali, but then, unexpectedly, she added, “You see how welcomed you are here [i.e. in the Roma community]! Everyone is so happy that you are here,” she continued, referring to the Roma community where I was indeed received well. I nodded and listened to her. “Well,” she continued, “when we go to town [meaning where I come from] people never receive us like that. They throw us out!” Her confession startled me. I was familiar with being discriminated against while I was abroad, but I could not even begin to comprehend how it must feel to be continuously discriminated, even in my own “home country.” And then I realized that while discrimination was part of my life as well, the gap between us was immense. What the Roma people had to go through every moment of their existence, without a break, without the luxury of a safe “home,” was disorienting. My empathy could not compensate for my lack of knowledge. And my illusions of implicit solidarity shattered. I knew that the compass, the one tool that could orient me in the structural discrimination practices, was missing.

Similarly, when I was in India, the Narikuravars immediately saw my class privilege. I was filming and taking pictures with an expensive camera and had an iPhone. I arrived by car and had a driver, or I was with someone who translated for me. They made it clear that class distinction was not a secret, as children asked me for sweets and inebriated adults asked me for money. The funding received for conducting my fieldwork was not even sufficient to cover my basic expenses, so in my view we were operating from the same class standpoint.

But my naïve class assumptions were blown away. In the middle of a conversation about housing, one of the women pulled me toward a small shed on the main street of their settlement, next to which I could see a vacant terrain field with garbage. She explained that the one-room shed was the home of 20 people. I thought I misunderstood, or maybe the translator missed something. I asked for clarification. “Twenty people”? They confirmed. It did not make sense! Twenty people could not fit into that room even when standing. Then the woman explained: “This is the home of twenty people, but most of them sleep outside.” She pointed to the garbage piles. I was horrified by the hardships they faced. “What about monsoon season?” I asked, thinking of the tremendous rains of South India. I recalled walking in red mud up to my ankles during the rainy season, how the windows of my beautiful cottage trembled when the wind blew. I could not begin to comprehend what it must be like to live without a house during the monsoon season. The Narikuravar woman smiled sadly and pointed out to an old and ruffled blue plastic tarp that they pull over the terrain to protect from rain. I was shocked. That blue tarp might work well when it covers a house, but as such it could not protect anyone against the monsoon. My suppositions of sharing the same class status, therefore being in solidarity with the Narikuravars, were shattered. The gap between us was widening at the speed of light. I was humbled by the people who were so generous to me, even when I was obviously so privileged.

I do not mean to imply that their race or class makes the Roma and the Narikuravar continuous victims. Both the Roma and the Narikuravars communities are strong and resilient. But these encounters made clear that illusions of
solidarity need to be treated with caution, and that solidarity needs to be established, not simply assumed. They swiftly and permanently destabilized the notion that my race/ethnicity and class were fixed categories in which I entered, fitted, and dwelled. These categories, I argue, do not simply intersect in an immobile manner, but are fluid and dynamic, creating ambiguous identities that blur the oppressor-subaltern dichotomy. Race/ethnicity and class were proven to be flexible and changed continuously based on the gaze of the other. In this case, my poor economic standing was extravagant when compared with the Narikuravar standard of living. I never experienced sleeping outdoors because of lack of accommodation. While being Romanian placed me in awkward positions while abroad, no person in my “home country” throws me out based on my race/ethnicity. But these are everyday realities for the participants in my study, which made me acutely aware “of racial disparity and racial oppression” (Twine, 2000) and of the fact that “I don’t know how it feels like” (Zampi and Awan, cited by Bracke, 2017: 390).

Destabilizing these categories threw a different light on my position as a researcher. The Roma and the Narikuravar became my mirrors: I could see my racial/ethnic and class advantages in these reflections, and I was challenged to admit privileges that I did not know I had and compelled to understand others differently. I had to face my class and race status, and admit that while I was in a subaltern position in other circumstances, in this case my assumed solidarity with vulnerable people was an illusion. It was clear that they saw me as different from them; I was their mirror as well as I was the reflection of White and class privileges that they did not have. Becoming aware of these differences exposed the economic dynamics that I was not familiar with and compelled me to ask questions that I would have not asked otherwise, such as what does the local government do for the community in case of monsoons? How does one survive the possible flooding and what are the institutions that might be held responsible for ensuring housing?

Conclusion

These instances in the field revealed that although my gender created a certain common ground my participants and I shared, when it came to class and race, I had to be more reflexive, to ask more questions, to pause more often if I were to understand the puzzle that I continuously faced. These encounters exposed that one instance could be not only multifaceted but also ambiguous and fluid, changing at a rapid rhythm, placing me in simultaneously different power positions, which in turn co-generated data. Admitting and reflecting on my ever-shifting role as “S” that related to a changing “P” highlighted the positionality of knowledge and challenged both my neutrality as a universal subject, S, and my capacity to produce objective knowledge about “P.”

While researchers typically discuss the experience being either an insider or outsider of the field they study, what I experienced was more fluctuating, as I was able to relate to the participants both as an insider (i.e. as a woman to other women) and as an outsider (i.e. as a foreigner to the overall community). Thus, my position of outsider–insider allowed me to carve a place from where I could participate, observe, and experience the culture of the Romani and Narikuravar people and to understand their lives and struggle for social justice. These happenstances created experiences of intimacy, an interplay that further trickled into knowledge that opened up and allowed for certain questions and listening to emerge and knowledge to be created. When I was excluded based on my gender, those prohibitions spoke volumes: they gave me an oblique look into the life of the people I was working with, inadvertently exposing hierarchies and dynamics that otherwise I would have taken for granted and which might not have come to my attention.

I advocate that if through research “S knows that P”—as Lorraine Code (1991) argues—then investigating, reflecting, and revealing who is “S” become important when structuring both the process (i.e. “of knowing”) and the object of study (i.e. “P”—the object of knowledge). However, fieldwork destabilized the epistemological order that established independently the existence of both “S” and “P,” now interlinked through the very process of knowing. Fieldwork allowed for the creation of both “S” and “P.” My work in Romania and India destabilized some of my preconceived epistemological categories and the process underling their very creation. Thus, I assert that fieldwork repositioned my subjectivity as the knower in relation to the participants in my study, and by doing so it allowed me to access other epistemological positions.

This methodology exposed the “mircopolitics of context, subjectivity and struggle” (Mohanty, 2003: 501) and unmasked that so-called “neutrality” occults “a bias on favor of institutionalizing stereotypical masculine values into fabric of the discipline—its methods, norms, and contents” (Code, 1991: 26). It brought into view that there is no significant hegemonic epistemology. Furthermore, it disrupted the locus of “white feminism” by creating discomfort within one’s acknowledgment of race/ethnicity and class. The instances detailed above exposed unequal power relations and pointed out differences and particularities while bringing to the fore connections, rendering visible power dynamics at work for both the researcher and the participants. By reflecting upon the “ladder of privilege” (Code, 1991: 511), key knowledge about power and the possibility of equality and justice is revealed.

Thus, I advocate that destabilizing the inherent privilege of the knower has epistemic relevance, and it can also establish “particular forms of solidarity” (Code, 1991: 516) between the researcher and the field. It could highlight commonalities, blur borders, and challenge the dichotomy between insiders-and-outsiders and show how “S” and “P” constitute each other in a game of power, privilege, and agency. It can further disrupt hegemonic masculinities connected with hierarchies of race/ethnicity and class.
My research exposed existing hierarchies, but also their fluidity, showing how my place was dynamic, continuously re-definable, creating both discomfort and knowledge. However, this approach did not necessarily lead to democratic, horizontal relations, and showed that “we need to integrate ourselves into the research process, which admittedly is anxiety provoking in that it increases feelings of vulnerability. … we need to locate ourselves in our work and to reflect on how our location influences the questions we ask, how we conduct research and how we write.” (England, 1994:87) Thus, becoming aware of these dynamics shows that acknowledging that positions of power are not only limiting, but also generative, creating research. Revealing these dynamics increases the researcher/research vulnerability and lessens the chances for academic accolades, but it allows the reader and scholarly community to understand and reflect on the field studied. This is not to say that research hierarchies could be obliterated, but to suggest that exposing them and critically engaging with them would facilitate a different scholarly approach. Thus, reflecting on the acts of power implicit in the research process challenges “systemic ignorance” (Sullivan and Tuana, 2011:4, citing Horkheimer) and renders visible power dynamics. Only by committing to breaking silences about fieldwork and by critically engaging with one’s position within the hierarchy of power, we can begin addressing the “systemic ignorance” and create ties in solidarity.

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