

A Posture of Active Reflexivity: Learning from Lee Ann Fujii's Approach to Research

Aarie Glas

Northern Illinois University

Jessica Soedirgo

University of Toronto

Although both qualitative and quantitative scholars have begun to recognize that researcher positionality is consequential for social research, many have yet to theorize fully about the practical realities of *doing* reflexivity in the field. Positionality refers to the demographic characteristics and personal backgrounds of a researcher's identity and their impact on interactions with research participants (Fujii 2017, 17). How, then, should scholars go about reflecting on the complexities of positionality during field research? As junior scholars, Lee Ann Fujii's research and mentorship prompted us to confront this question often. Her work on political violence and interpretive methods make clear that positionality is context-specific and fluid. Because positionality is particular to every context, the effects of a researcher's social location are never straightforward or static.

While we attempted to employ these insights during our research, we still confronted moments of surprise resulting from unanticipated effects of positionality in the field, and had challenges processing these occurrences. Lengthy discussions with Lee Ann after our return from the field pushed us to further reflect upon the inherent assumptions we make regarding others' interpretations of our own position, and challenged us to do so continually throughout the research process. We call this particular posture towards research "active reflexivity."

Positionality in Context

Data emerges from the interactions between researcher and participants (see Fujii 2017; Schaffer 2016; Yanow 2014). To generate knowledge, the researcher must interrogate each interaction. However, researchers often assume that the impact of one's gender, racial, or sexual identity on research is both self-evident and straightforward. For example, Berger (2015) assumes that migrant women were more at ease with her because of her accent, and Davis (1997) assumes that African Americans are less forthcoming with white interviewers than black interviewers. While these assumptions are

certainly plausible, both scholars claim that a single dimension of their identity has a similar effect on the responses of a class of interviewees.

Lee Ann's work rejects the imposition of rigid identity categories on both researcher and subject. Her research shows that individuals simultaneously hold multiple identities. These interact in myriad and contextualized ways, and they shape research interactions. Whether it is race, gender, sexuality, age, class, ability, or profession, the dimensions of identity can and do shape interactions between researcher and participant.

The meanings of identities and the privileges they bestow are not fixed. What it means to be black in America, for example, is different from what it means to be black in Canada or in Rwanda. As Lee Ann insightfully observes (2017, 17): "What combination of traits matter depends on what people in the research site find salient." In Lee Ann's (2009) *Killing Neighbors*, for example, she outlines how different elements of her identity—and how people (mis)read her—shaped her interaction with participants. For example, while Rwandans perceived her as a *muzungu* (foreigner), many also mistyped her as half-Rwandan. The impacts of these intersectional identities, however, shifted depending on the identity of the participant or how they typed her. Ignoring the dynamic specificity of positionality and the uncertainty of its recognition may lead to a process of reflexivity that imposes rigid categories on both the researcher and subject, and the relationships between them.

Beyond affecting the generation of knowledge, rigid reflexivity also risks undermining the building of ethical relationships. By contrast, recognizing that reflexivity is active and dynamic allows the researcher to build what Lee Ann (2017, 15) calls a "working relationship," where interviewer and interviewee "arrive...at mutually agreeable terms for interacting, conversing, listening, and talking with one another." Awareness of power dynamics arising from positionality can help researchers be more ethical, shaping strategies for obtaining informed consent

(i.e., taking extra time to go through the consent form), or guide decisions around where an interview should be located (Fujii 2017, 23).

However, the multi-dimensionality of identity makes the appraisal of positionality and its effects a complex endeavor. This was made clear through conversations with Lee Ann, who often asked “How do you know that?” in response to our assertions about positionality and its effects in the field. In an attempt to answer her question, we suggest scholars should adopt a posture of *active reflexivity*.

Active Reflexivity

Active reflexivity is a posture that embraces the sociality and dynamism of positionality. It denotes an attempted awareness of our own positionality, a confrontation of the inherent assumptions we make of the effects regarding our identity, and a concerted effort to do so continually throughout the research process.

The foundation of active reflexivity is humility, a trait Lee Ann stressed in her research and impressed in her mentoring. The particularities of positionality mean that one should avoid uncritically imposing her own understandings of how identity operates in each research interaction. For example, when Jessica was carrying out research on religious intolerance in Indonesia, she assumed that she would have greater rapport with those who shared a religious identity with her than those who did not. Yet this was not always the case, as she experienced when she interviewed Pastor John¹ about religious intolerance in a city in West Java province. Because Pastor John had occupied a similar milieu as her own family, Jessica assumed that the interview would be candid and informative. She even dismissed her Muslim research assistant for the day to get more “insider” information on interreligious tensions. However, despite perceived similarities, Jessica had trouble establishing a working relationship with him. He avoided discussing questions about religious tensions in Bandung city and redirected the conversation to the successes of the religious tolerance movement there. Upon later reflection, Jessica recognized that she had reduced Pastor John to a singular Christian identity, failing to recognize the complexities of his character. As an activist of interreligious harmony, perhaps speaking ill of other religious groups did not align with his professional identity. It was only the obvious misalignment between expectations and reality that forced Jessica to think about the fluidity and complexity of positionality in practice.

Reflection should occur not only at points of perceived disjuncture from expectations, or “revelatory moments” (Trigger et al. 2012). Being actively reflexive requires interrogating assumptions in moments when expectations and practice appear to align. It is, of course, impossible to navigate any situation without preconceived expectations. Recognizing this, active reflexivity demands continual reflection. Many of Jessica’s subsequent reflections on her assumptions about positionality were prompted through conversations with Lee Ann, months after the interviews took place. These discussions not only highlighted the need to interrogate assumptions about positionality, but to do so throughout the research enterprise. Interrogating and learning from the mundane requires continued and conscious effort.

Beyond humility and a dedication to continual reflection, we suggest three strategies for being actively reflexive. First, Lee Ann taught us to interrogate and record our assumptions about positionality and how and why we suspect it will play out at the research design stage. She pushed us to think about how our “working relationships” with interlocutors would unfold and why (Fujii 2017). One’s assumptions will almost certainly be challenged during the course of fieldwork and during the data interpretation stage. However, being explicit with them provides a benchmark for reflexivity. This will aid in the ability to perceive both incongruences *and* congruencies between expectations and outcomes.

Second, and relatedly, we suggest incorporating a pre-interview protocol that explicitly outlines expectations going into the interview and a post-interview protocol that outlines whether or not the interview unfolded in accordance with expectations. Even if the interview unfolded as anticipated, it is useful to consider the reasons why assumptions and expectations were met. Such a protocol compels reflection on the process of generating data and assists with reflection at later stages of interpretation.

A third strategy in the pursuit of an actively reflexive posture is to rely on others. Research assistants, in particular, offer one potential avenue for further reflexivity. As Lee Ann notes, they can “help make sense of what people said during interviews” from their own unique social location (2017, 29). Similarly, asking interlocutors themselves, at a later date, may provide valuable insights. Talking through one’s assumptions and reflections is a means of interrogating those assumptions and the conclusions we draw across all stages of research. These

¹ The name has been changed to protect the anonymity of the participant.

three strategies are not exhaustive, but they may assist researchers in adopting a posture of active reflexivity.

Conclusion

Lee Ann's research and mentorship teaches us to be attentive to positionality in our research and beyond. These lessons are not limited to interpretive research projects alone. All researchers must recognize the

intersectional and context-specific nature of positionality and *actively* confront their assumptions and expectations of its dynamics and effect. Being attuned to dynamics of power by engaging in reflexivity throughout the research process enables us to accord the dignity and respect that all research participants are entitled to (Fujii 2017, 1).

References

- Berger, Roni. 2015. "Now I See It, Now I Don't: Researcher's Position and Reflexivity in Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Research* 15 (2): 219–34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468475>.
- Davis, Darren W. 1997. "The Direction of Race of Interviewer Effects among African-Americans: Donning the Black Mask." *American Journal of Political Science* 41 (1): 309–22. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2111718>.
- Fujii, Lee Ann. 2009. *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- . 2017. *Interviewing in Social Science Research: A Relational Approach*. New York: Routledge.
- Trigger, David, Martin Forsey, and Carla Meurk. 2012. "Revelatory Moments in Fieldwork." *Qualitative Research* 12 (5), 513–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112446049>.
- Schaffer, Frederic Charles. 2016. *Elucidating Social Science Concepts: An Interpretivist Guide*. New York: Routledge.
- Yanow, Dvora. 2014. "Interpretive Analysis and Comparative Research." In *Comparative Policy Studies: Conceptual and Methodological Challenges*, edited by Isabelle Engeli and Christine Rothmayr Allison, 131–59. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.