

SHORT STORY

A reflection on positionality and knowledge processes in transdisciplinary research

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The Stigma Assessment and Reduction of Impact (SARI) project aims to reduce stigma and improve the lives of people affected by leprosy in Cirebon District, Indonesia. The project team includes staff from different scientific disciplines from universities in the global North and South. Members of society participate in several ways in the project. The SARI project is transdisciplinary in the sense that frames, approaches, and methods from different disciplines and local knowledge are combined to co-create knowledge on the reduction of leprosy-related stigma. In this short story, the author reflects on her own positionality: her ‘baggage’ and position in the research. She shares her understanding of the path she has travelled to where she is today – a researcher in the SARI project – which could be relevant for others. This short story highlights that understanding one’s own positionality should be encouraged in transdisciplinary research as it can help break down barriers for knowledge processes.

Keywords: positionality; transdisciplinary research; reflectivity; development studies; disability; Indonesia; Cirebon

Introduction

The voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes. Marcel Proust

The path to where I stand today – a researcher in a transdisciplinary study named the Stigma Assessment and Reduction of Impact (SARI) project – is marked by realisations regarding positionality and knowledge processes I believe could be relevant for others. These realisations were a result of frequent reflections. My aim is to exemplify a reflection on positionality and to illustrate why understanding one’s own positionality should be encouraged in transdisciplinary research.

Although this short story is not about the concept of positionality, its history, definitions and uses within scientific traditions as sociology and anthropology I would like to explain how I, coming from development studies, understand the concept. As Sumner and Tribe wrote:

It is not possible to conduct research about developing countries without carrying a lot of what is probably best referred to as 'baggage'. (2008: 43)

Besides defining what this baggage is and reflecting upon it, positionality embodies to me situating the researcher in the research (see also Sumner and Tribe 2008). Reflexivity is thus needed. Eyben described reflexivity as 'the ability to step out of your identity and interrogate how that identity shapes your understanding' (2006: 5). Before starting my own interrogation about my baggage and position in the research, let me start by introducing the SARI project.

Introducing SARI

In 2010, the SARI project was initiated to address stigma and improve the lives of people affected by leprosy through three interventions in Cirebon, Indonesia. In total about 600 persons affected by leprosy are currently enrolled in the project. Key activities facilitated by the SARI project are the development of a micro-credit system, providing lay and peer counselling, the development of a participatory video, and events in villages that aim to bring into contact people affected by leprosy and community members. The project team includes staff from different scientific disciplines (public health, medicine, disability studies, psychology and development studies) from universities in the global North and South. Members of society participate in several ways in the project, for example through a disability-inclusive team, partnerships with local actors and participation of people affected by leprosy.

The SARI project is transdisciplinary in the sense that frames, approaches, and methods from different disciplines and local knowledge are combined to co-create knowledge on the reduction of leprosy-related stigma. Within a knowledge co-creating process "different perspectives on the issue come together in a learning process, whereby in the course of the interaction implicit knowledge is made explicit, and new knowledge is construed, shared and tested" (Regeer 2009: 14). The learning process in the SARI project is facilitated by the Interactive Learning and Action approach (Bunders 1991). During the first phases, also referred to as the reconnaissance, among others, a broad view of the issue under concern and its characteristics is obtained. In the SARI project this was done through an exploratory study in which the often implicit and sometimes hidden experiences of people with leprosy and other actors were captured. A first stigma-reduction plan was made based on these findings and implemented. This first plan and subsequent plans were followed by observation and reflection of the team leading to new knowledge, and hence new plans and action. Along the way SARI has broken down barriers to knowledge co-creation by dealing with feelings of powerlessness of some participants, getting everybody to the discussion table and creating a real commitment to listen to and understand each other.

My baggage

I will share my baggage or in other words, where I am from, who shaped me, where I was educated and some other key events in my life before elaborating on the implications of this for the SARI project:

I was born and raised in the city Arnhem, the Netherlands and grew up in a white middle-class family with two younger brothers. Our neighbourhood was predominantly white, although some of my best friends came from ethnically mixed families. My parents are nurses and exciting stories about their work were discussed at the dining table. My parents dreamt of working in a developing country and my father's five week holiday to Thailand when I was 8 years old are just two examples from my childhood that stirred my interests in other countries and cultures.

After secondary school, I studied physiotherapy. At that time action learning was the new method of teaching that stimulated reflection upon daily practice during my internships in a hospital and private practice in the Netherlands and abroad in Mumias, Kenya. After graduation I went to Nigeria for a couple of months and worked with children, persons affected by leprosy and disabled young adults.

A few years later I obtained a Master of Science in Public Health Research. I gained most of my scientific education at the Athena Institute, VU University. Athena's scope is transdisciplinary research to solve persistent and complex problems in society and this is reflected in their teaching and internship positions. I was particularly interested in participatory methods and used these during my internships in Bangladesh and Vietnam.

Awarded with several grants, I chose the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex, in Brighton to obtain a second master and continued focusing during this Master of Arts on topics such as participation, power, gender, reflection and learning. I also explored the Dutch development cooperation and the tight links with the former colonisation of Indonesia.

A few years ago, my mother developed a hernia in her spinal cord and suffered a stroke. As a result, she is now a wheelchair user.

Why is this personal testimony important? Would my contribution to the SARI project and also the findings have been different if I would have been a man instead of a woman? I believe so. Would it make a difference if my parents were historians, accountants, retailers instead of the nurses that they are? Yes, it would. My gender, race, family history, nationality, sexuality, class, disease history all have a part to play in shaping my positionality – they make a difference. Describing what exactly constitutes this difference and especially the magnitude of this difference is a difficult endeavour. What follows are some initial reflections on how my background shapes our research.

I feel more connected to the topic disability, because my mother is disabled and because we as a family occasionally come across mistreatment of society. Related to this connection are the approaches I favour; a rights-based approach. I am, however, not disabled myself as many of my colleagues, nor do I have any personal experience with disability in a development context what would have created an even stronger and profounder connection.

I am aware of the Dutch colonial history in Indonesia. Hence, I had to learn how to deal with the personal struggles I experienced due to felt inherited 'mea culpa' of being a colonizer when overseeing and managing the fieldwork. It made me cautious and I chose a non-authoritarian management style. At some point SARIs research

assistants, also for other reasons, asked for more structure and coordination of their superiors.

For transdisciplinary research, one's professional discipline probably matters most as it determines who one knows (Barnes, Brand, Charlton, Snow, Father Damien, Chambers, Goffman¹), what one reads (I remember well my struggles with anthropologic text at the start of my studies at IDS and that of some of my peers with economics or graphs), how one thinks and frames (in boxes, feedback loops, percentages, chaos, concepts, models, arguments), and how one analyses and writes. Differences between disciplines can be vast. How vast became clear to me during a lecture 'medical anthropology' at IDS:

I was looking forward to this lecture: medical anthropology. After classes on colonialism, economy and politics I welcomed a more familiar subject. I thought. The lecturer decided to compare medical anthropology with public health and she did not conceal her dislike about the latter field. She stereotyped and presented public health as bad, very bad.

Getting familiar with aversion towards my field of interest was a great lesson I realise now, but at that time I felt offended.

Situating the researcher (me) in the research

This section describes my position and some of my roles in the research.

Within the SARI project, first and foremost, I am a PhD student straddling two disciplines. My journey through academia entails that I search for frameworks and theories, collect empirical data to describe or explain the phenomena stigma, its possible reduction and the process that was required. The journey is also one of personal development in many fields other than academia. I have several 'practitioners' tasks as I am responsible for the implementation of one of SARI's interventions. For me personally, being a 'researcher', with some 'practitioner' tasks is delightful.

I am also an outsider. I differ in economic, social and cultural status from the 'researched' and all of my Indonesian colleagues. Although I speak basic Bahasa Indonesia, wear batik when appropriate and spend about forty per cent of my time in the project area, I remain an outsider.

All these positions and roles matter because they have their strengths and shortcomings. I overlap disciplines (public health and development studies – in itself a multi-disciplinary field) and thus can establish linkages, but it also causes internal conflicts especially when I am pushed or push myself to choose (for example to answer the question: Can we measure stigma? Yes or no). As an outsider I have to accept that I will not fully comprehend many aspects such as the culture, history and identity of the project participants, however, I also shed new light on issues by asking different questions and by thinking in unconventional ways. I am closely involved with the implementation of interventions and want them to be successful; since this would mean that the participants (several who I got to know personally) are having a better life and that the SARI team might have a paper in a journal like *The Lancet*. Does this make me biased? Yes, it does. Yet, I am content with being biased towards

this cause. It does not, however, make me want to present the results of the SARI project in a partial manner. It makes me a driven but not an insincere researcher.

Positionality and knowledge processes

Generating new academic knowledge, for instance, on new methods for assessment and new ideas around key concepts has been a very challenging process. At times in the SARI project I have wondered whether the differences between disciplines are surmountable. As the co-creation of knowledge does not happen naturally, a strong (perhaps extraordinary) commitment of the team is needed also to continuously make the time and resources - that are often scarce - available. There also seem to be more invisible limitations, such as, disciplines being hegemonic or perceived so by other disciplines.

A thorough understanding of one's baggage and own discipline, its strengths and weaknesses - also as perceived by others - has been vital for me. It helped me to give meaning to internal conflicts and make productive use of it. It also helps me to put into context the different perspectives on an issue, and although I believe I do not establish linkages in the project, I facilitate the interaction now and then. It also made me more conscious towards my own - sometimes limited - perspective on a problem, issue or phenomena. As I believe in the foundations of transdisciplinary research, this automatically triggers and motivates me to understand other perspectives. I also recognize more easily a 'default' type of response when I come across a conflict. Instead of 'protecting' my own fields again I try to listen more sincerely to others and do a genuine attempt to understand other perspectives.

Conclusion

Reflection in this case on positionality might, as Shutt writes, 'appear an act of vanity'; the experience is, as she also writes, instead 'deeply discomfoting' (2006:79). After submitting the abstract for this short story I wondered why on earth I have put myself up to this challenge. Of course I know it: I believe in openness and reflexivity within academia and in 'walking your talk'. Inner discomfort is part of the first stage of reflection, and for myself, exploring areas of discomfort have in retrospect been worthwhile endeavours. However discomfoting, I had to do it.

I hope to have illustrated that reflection on positionality in transdisciplinary research is valuable and as result members of transdisciplinary teams will ask themselves more often: What baggage do I bring to the project? How does my background influence the research? Where I am situated in our research? How can this make a difference? And then make productive use of these insights and share their realisations with their team members. This is in particular important in transdisciplinary research where the nature of involving different academic disciplines and stakeholders could result in more and more complicated conflicts and where the ultimate goal of knowledge co-creation is perhaps more demanding. I believe that a thorough understanding of one's baggage and scientific discipline, and being aware of the strengths and shortcomings of one's position in the research can help break down barriers for knowledge processes and help us seeing things differently.

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¹ These are all key persons to the different disciplines of the SARI project (disability studies, public health, development studies, medicine)