

## Multiple Perspectives on 'Researching Difference'

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### Introduction

It almost goes without saying at the start of the second decade of the twenty-first century, that social differences *matter*, and researchers are called upon to address the challenges to which they give rise within the research process (Heath et al., 2009:39). The motivation for producing this Special Issue on 'researching difference' came out of the authors' shared view that, like any other social interaction, research interactions are important sites for the production, shaping and negotiation of categories of difference.

The Special Issue presents seven articles which together form a panoply of perspectives on the theme of 'researching difference'. The articles address this theme in a number of ways: firstly, they discuss research focusing on different types of differences, including class, gender, race, ethnicity, citizenship status, and sexuality. Secondly, the authors themselves, and the research projects they discuss, are located in different geographical locations, just as several articles reflect explicitly on the role of the researcher's own positionality in carrying out the research. Thirdly, the contributing authors apply a variety, and sometimes a combination, of methods in their research, and the usefulness and suitability of these methods to researching difference are discussed. The methods include biographical narrative interviewing, feminist memory work, semi-structured interviewing and participant observation. Combined, the articles presented here offer insights into 'the difference that difference makes' in research settings, interactions and findings.

The idea for the theme of this Special Issue came out of an initial conversation between a black and a white researcher, who discussed their experiences of interviewing 'across differences' with each other, and found that their respective research experiences revealed many similarities, but also many important differences. Although the articles were authored or co-authored as separate entities, all of the authors actively engaged in a collective process over a year, during which we discussed our ideas, challenges and experiences in relation to 'researching difference', as well as reading and commenting extensively on each other's work in progress. Some of the questions we took up in these debates were: Who defines 'difference'? Does it need defining? How is it/can it/should it be defined? How do we study difference without creating difference? The collective engagement with the issues relating to 'researching difference' and with each other's work, has been extremely helpful for the progress of this Special Issue. A special thanks is, however, also very much due to the 14 anonymous reviewers whose comments provided the impetus for final revisions and refinements of the articles' arguments.

### Researching difference

There are no innocent categorisations to be made in research. Gunaratnam speaks about 'race' and 'ethnicity' as "dangerous categories" (2003: 19), but, as the joint articles in this issue attest, most other categorisations seem equally dangerous or risky. One point which also emerges

from the articles is that, not only are categories dangerous and risky, they are also very often contested. As researchers, we may contest and problematize the categories we and others employ, but the articles in this Special Issue also provide a number of examples of *respondents* contesting the categorisations they are implicitly or explicitly labelled or associated with by the researcher(s). Researchers are dependent on the ability to categorise and delimit: Our research fields as well as our objects and subjects of research. Despite all care not to label, pathologise or stigmatise anyone or anything, we recognise that this may not always be easily avoided. We find ourselves in a 'catch 22' since very often we are, almost by definition, interested in our research participants precisely because they 'belong' to a particular category. Hence, the aim in this issue is not to make an argument for dispensing with categories, (although there are those who would do exactly that with categories viewed as especially pernicious, such as race – see Nayak, 2006), but to reflect on how we use, speak, and write about them. A clear message that emerges from the articles is the need to pay close attention to categorisations.

Another important aspect of researching difference, which we took up in our discussions, revolves around the issue of when researchers should highlight the complex ways in which categories intersect with each other to produce specific material and discursive effects (see Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Phoenix & Brah, 2004; McCall, 2005; Gans, 2008; Choo & Ferree 2010), or when a single category focus is most salient. Several of the articles discuss intersecting categories, while others focus on one category; in our collective discussions, we defended the view that researchers should be open to applying both approaches in their work. In some research contexts, paying in-depth attention to the production of only one category may be perfectly adequate, and may provide new and valuable evidence, for example, about the role of class in contemporary society. A single category focus, however, does not mean that we should dismiss the insights stemming from intersectional theory or methodology, but merely that it may be relevant to choose to leave those insights in brackets for a while, while paying attention to the production of a specific axis of 'difference' in specific ways, at a given time, and in a particular place.

Our focus on the complexities of using categories of difference extend to what we came to speak of as 'the effects and affects of researching difference'. In terms of effects, we spoke about the 'real' (ontological) effect of the categorization in the research relation – which covers anything from taking up the respondents' time, to perhaps bringing to the fore otherwise unheard of viewpoints, even potentially exposing illegal or socially subversive practices, or causing respondents to change behaviour. We also discussed at length the question of whether we produce 'difference' by researching 'difference'. Some researchers have previously argued that academics 'write difference' through the texts they produce (Nayak 2006; Rosenblum and Travis, 2008). As the first article in this issue suggests, there is a decided risk that researchers could end up 'sampling on the dependent' if not sufficiently aware of the methodological flaws that might sneak into one's research through the categories one has defined.

We were equally interested in debating the *affects* of researching difference – raising questions such as: "How does our research affect us and our respondents?", "What reactions do we meet, and how should we respond to them?" Although we were all in agreement that we wished to avoid stigmatizing, stereotyping or exercising 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu, 1999) through our research, finding ways to avoid our research taking place in "an arena of othering" as Krumer-Nevo (2002) puts it, seemed extremely difficult. Othering can be defined as the process of subordinate groups being defined into existence in a reductionist way (Spivak, 1985; Riggins, 1997). In one sense, the very definition of our research subjects, such as the "female Thai

migrants selling sexual services”, “Polish labour migrants in Denmark” or “marginalized ethnic minority men in Denmark”, discussed in some of the articles in this issue, could be seen as reductionist labels; at least insofar as the labels focus on only one or a few aspects of the respondents’ identities. Although we clearly recognize the risk of othering, or presuming authenticity of subject positions when researching and eventually representing others, we agree with Alcoff (1991-92) that retreat from representation is not a satisfactory solution. Following Spivak (1988), Alcoff concludes that the best option is to ‘speak to’, rather than ‘speak for’ or ‘listen to’, although both options retain an essentialising approach to the subject positions of the less powerful. The notion of ‘speaking to’ allows for the possibility that the researched subject will produce a ‘counter sentence’. It is only through addressing others that we create opportunities for counter sentences to appear. Refraining from ‘researching difference’ dismantles no stereotypes.

A central issue for several authors was the shared experience that our own bodily appearance mattered in the research situation. This was the case in relation to visible signs of difference (such as skin colour) potentially eliciting responses from respondents, and, thereby, impacting on our research outcomes. Race is one key aspect of visible difference, which researchers are by now almost conventionally called on to acknowledge and consider (Frankenberg, 1993; Ware, 1992; Back and Ware, 2002; Alexander and Alleyne, 2002). However, as several authors in this Special Issue found, other visible signs of difference can also play an important role in the research encounter: hair texture and its relationship to standards of beauty and gendered bodies, as discussed in one article. Physical objects signalling class position, for example, such as the glasses worn by a researcher or the car she drives, might also be noted and reflected on during research encounters – this is also taken up in one of the articles. An upsurge in literature within critical whiteness studies (including Alcoff, 2006; Ahmed, 2007) has called on white researchers to reflect on the role of their racialisation both within and outside of research situations. An additional argument, which emanates jointly from the seven articles in this special issue, is that such reflections should not be limited to white researchers only, nor only to reflections about race. There are those attributes which you might quite literally ‘park somewhere else’ during an interview and there are those which you cannot. Carefully considering why one would wish to conceal or downplay any element of one’s appearance during an interview or field work, for example, is an important aspect of analysing research interactions. It also calls for a consideration of what our research participants might or might not wish to disclose about *their* appearance during the research encounter.

Another issue which authors shared in their experiences of researching difference was the issue of accessing research participants. Access is of course already a well described methodological problem, particularly within literature from ethnographic traditions (Van Maanen, 1988; De Laine, 2000; Fielding, 2001). However, we took the view that researching difference complicates the problem of access. This is because when researchers wish to research difference, the very act of creating access underscores the distance between the researcher and the researched. As the articles demonstrate, various tactics may be applied to lessen this gap. Another challenge is getting access to studying differences that people find ‘of no importance’ or ‘not relevant’ – for example gender in modern work-life or classed differences in contemporary societies. Strategies for handling such complexities are also discussed in the articles of the Special Issue.

There has been some discussion in the methodological literature about whether or not researchers should share the same characteristics as those they research, with respect to such markers as race, gender, ethnicity, class or sexual orientation (for example, Hey, 1997; Mac an

Ghail, 1993; Phoenix, 1994; Gunaratnam, 2003). Theorists often argue that researcher/researched sameness will not automatically produce the best research: Nairn et al. (2005) suggest that an insistence that researchers and those they research should share identities or particular characteristic, could lead to ignoring other important, non-shared, characteristics that could be salient in the research interaction. It could also provide an excuse for majority researchers, positioned as 'the norm' in relation to any category (for example, an able-bodied researcher) to avoid researching people positioned or perceived as 'different' from that norm (such as disabled people) (see Nairn et al., 2005:336). For Carter, a deliberate mismatch between the researcher/researched could have the positive effect of encouraging researchers to not take anything for granted while they conduct research (Carter, 2004:348). Taft concurs with these arguments against assuming that researcher/researched sameness is inherently beneficial, and she urges researchers to be reflexive and alert to the effects that researcher/researched similarity or dissimilarity will have on the research (Taft, 2007). The articles here draw on studies where both 'similarities' and 'dissimilarities' characterise the research relation. Some also include examples of how 'difference' or 'sameness' was in fact *created* during the research encounter, as either researcher or researched were positioned or positioned themselves as belonging to certain categories. While the approach in all articles concur with Taft's idea that it is important to be reflexive about the effects of the characteristics that the researcher brings into the research interaction, several of the articles in this Special Issue take this point further, and argue that new and unexpected identifications and dis-identifications may be produced during the research encounter.

Ramazanoglu and Holland (2000) argue that critical (self) reflection about one's research practices and the categories one employs is a goal to strive for, but not for its own sake, as it may easily end in endless regression of interrogating the interrogation: "Reflections on how feminists know what they know and how they are constituted as 'knowers' can be productive, but cannot *replace* investigation of social life" (2000: 210). Given that we consider the investigation of social life important – this is why we do research in the first place – we *need* to research difference with all of its ramifications, and this implies the use of categorisations, delimitations and definitions. If the aim is to 'tell it like it is', we have to both "produce knowledge of social existence *and* question how knowledge and knowing selves are produced and made authoritative" (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2000: 208, our emphasis). Therefore, we would defend our 'bottom line': that challenges notwithstanding, researching difference in combination with a critical engagement with categorisations, is by far the more appealing option than refraining from dealing with difference. Categorisations – dangerous as they may be – are *also* a means of identifying problems and social inequalities.

### **The articles in this Special Issue**

The seven articles presented in this special issue cover a variety of research fields and approaches. Six of the articles draw on empirical material stemming from one or multiple research projects undertaken by the author(s), in which the object of investigation and/or the research field itself has been riddled with categorizations, often assigning research participants to specific groups and potentially distinguishing the researcher him/herself as belonging or not belonging to the group. Examples of such groups or identities within the articles include "Thai female migrant sex workers", "male manager recently turned father" and "white middle/working class women from Aalborg". All of these articles share the ambition of discussing what such categorizations mean, what happens when they are employed, and also what sometimes happens when our expectations of how such categories should be 'filled' are not met. Hence, several of the articles also deal with what goes on in research situations where

the categories or identities become puzzling or even troublesome for the researcher, who may sometimes be designated as a “Thai-speaking white male researcher in night club”, a “pregnant interviewer asking questions about plans for parental leave”, or a “Volvo-owner asking questions about class”. Combined, the articles offer insights into how we may understand and make sense of categories of ‘difference’ and ‘sameness’ in research, how we may ask about difference without creating or accentuating difference within our research fields, and how research may sometimes be experienced as an ‘othering’ process certainly for the research participants, and sometimes perhaps also for the researcher.

The first article by Martin Bak Jørgensen about ‘Categories of difference in science and policy’ sets the tone for the entire issue by taking up the question of how researchers understand and work with categories of difference. As he argues, categorization is a crucial, indeed an indispensable, element in social science, which serves important fundamental functions not only in quantitative, but also in qualitative research. However, as his examples about the usages of ‘race’ and ‘Islam’ as categories in research underscore, such categorisations may easily lead to a ‘sampling on the dependent’, where the presumed relevance of certain groupings lead to a confirmation of their relevance. Calling for greater methodological and theoretical reflexivity about the usage of categorisations, he ends by pointing to seven examples of research which specifically tackle this challenge, and which may point to new strategies for qualitative research in particular.

The second article by Trine Lund Thomsen about ‘Irregular Migration’ takes up the line of argumentation from Jørgensen’s article that researchers need to stay alert to how categories and categorisations may play (sometimes inadvertent) roles in our research. Based on the author’s own experiences with researching ‘irregular’ migration experienced by Polish migrant workers in Denmark, she develops an argument for rethinking the concept of ‘irregular’ in terms of ‘irregularised’, which in many ways better fits the lived experiences of the people her research was about. Adding a social dimension of licit/illicit to the state regulated dimension of legal/illegal migration, opens up for a deeper understanding of the life stories and trajectories of such people, who may at times have experienced their position as having become irregularised through no action of their own. Thomsen further demonstrates how the biographical narrative interview method is particularly well-suited for uncovering these processes, which sometimes take place in the grey zones of legality/illegality and social acceptability or lack thereof. Hence, Thomsen’s contribution to the debate about researching difference is that employing the method of biographical narrative interviewing is a concrete way of re-opening understandings of categories such as ‘irregular’ or ‘illegal’ migrants, and providing a possibility for obtaining insight into how the research subjects themselves understand their own positioning.

In the third article by Sune Qvotrup Jensen, the author takes up the concept of intersectionality, and demonstrates through the use of examples from two different research projects how the understanding of relations between researcher and researched may be enhanced by analysing these as relations between intersectional social positions. The article combines the concept of intersectionality with the concept of typifications, and uses memos and interview excerpts to analyse how research interactions constitute meetings between complex intersectional configurations of social categories. Drawing on a wide array of research encounters, the author reflects on how, where, when and why different social categories are brought into play in these situations, the categories spanning everything from gender, ethnicity, race, and class, to locality, political affiliation and more. The article highlights the interactional and intersectional aspects of research encounters, and argues that these aspects of the research process is a valuable source

of information in its own right, contributing with knowledge and insights about social positionalities.

The fourth article by Madeleine Kennedy-Macfoy and Helene Pristed Nielsen is experimental in attempting to practice what it preaches, namely 'talking about what race *feels* like'. The article is based on a dialogue between the two authors about the production of race and ethnicity in research encounters. Inspired by feminist memory work, Kennedy-Macfoy and Pristed Nielsen develop the argument that ex post comparative and contrastive memory work undertaken in dialogue with differently positioned research colleagues is a useful way to learn more about the production of race and ethnicity in research encounters. While not dismissing 'the difference that difference makes', the authors suggest that such deliberate attempts to 'get lost' in the 'headwork and textwork' of research processes is a useful approach to broaching the challenges of researching racialised difference. The overall argument of the article is that more attention ought to be paid to how ethnicity and race are sometimes produced in research encounters, and that a useful way of doing so is to talk to other researchers about what race and ethnicity *feel* like in the research encounter.

Based on interviews with, and participant observation among, female-born and transgendered Thai migrants selling sexual services in Denmark, the fifth article by Marlene Spanger focuses on how looks and bodily practices, of both researcher and researched, impact on the research setting and results. Using illustrative examples from her field work, Spanger describes how research encounters can become a site of struggle in the ongoing negotiation of identities, based on gender, sexuality, nationality and race. As part of the research interaction, different gendered and racialized positions are established, generating moments of inferiority and superiority for the researcher, and disrupting the dichotomy of 'the victimized' versus 'the empowered' subject often assigned to the group of female Thai migrants selling sexual services.

The sixth article by Lotte Bloksgaard discusses challenges and strategies for researching gender as a category of difference and as producing inequalities in modern work organisations. Modern work life is often understood as gender-neutral, which makes it difficult for researchers to access gender in work organisations, where gender differences are typically seen as being 'of no importance'. Furthermore, gender may be understood as produced in different organisational processes and 'levels', why it is important to carefully consider the methods used in researching gender in modern work-life. The article unfolds and discusses these complexities, illustrates and argues for the usefulness of applying a longitudinal research design, and combining different methods when studying gender and negotiations in work organisations.

In the seventh and last article by Stine Thidemann Faber, the author recounts and reflects on how to access class through interviews. The goal of the article is threefold: to discuss dilemmas and concerns when conducting the interviews, to discuss power relations and social belonging/positionality in interview encounters (in terms of gender, race, class, sexuality and other axes of social difference), and to explore some of the challenges involved in representing other peoples' experiences in such a setting. Despite claims about the 'death' of class in Denmark, the different experiences and understandings displayed by the research participants highlight the persistence of class as a relevant sociological research topic. Yet, as Faber illustrates, the process of undertaking interviews about class tends to be marked by elusiveness, suggesting that attention needs to be paid to the detail of the classed discourses produced in interviews.

The articles may of course be read individually, but, as we hope to have conveyed in this introduction, the entire Special Issue may also be read as one coherent argument for applying multiple perspectives when researching difference. We hope the Issue in its entirety will help to 'spice up' a debate which we feel needs to spread across *all* research traditions of the social sciences and humanities. While not pointing a finger at any traditions in particular, it has been a thought provoking journey for all of us, coming from different research traditions as we do<sup>1</sup>, to observe that, firstly, we do not feel that there is a sufficiently widespread debate about 'researching difference' within any of our research traditions. Secondly, although we are essentially debating the same thing – how categories and categorisations are problematic yet present, unavoidable and important in research – we draw on different examples, different literatures, and different disciplinary conventions for how to speak and write about researching difference. The potential for further development of these debates, and not least the potential for further cross-disciplinary fertilization, is significant, as this Special Issue attests.

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<sup>1</sup> The contributing authors are originally trained within the fields of sociology, politics, philosophy, gender studies, development studies, English, law and religion.

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